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# The Representation of Iranian People in Ben Affleck's *Argo* 2012

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## Abstract

This study examines the Othering process of Iranian people as represented in *Argo* film. The film tells about the conflict among Iranian people and American staffs in the era of turbulence in Tehran-Iran in 1970s. The conflict made a CIA staff came to Iran to save six American Ambassador's staffs who successfully run away from the turbulence. In the process of escaping six American Ambassador's staffs from Iran, there were many Othering process represented toward Iranian people on this film. Thus, this study explores the Othering process that is delivered in *Argo* film by applying theory of Said's Orientalism. In analysing the Othering process by applying Orientalism, this study uses narrative and non-narrative aspects of the film. Therefore, this study applies method of qualitative research by applying critical approach to reveal how the ideology of Orientalism works in *Argo* film. The study shows that Iranian people are represented as sensual, exotic, irrational, dishonest, cruel and despotic through the othering process. Then, Orientalism works through the binary opposition constructed in *Argo* film does not only shows how US and Iran are different but also enforces the idea of the superiority of U.S.

**Keywords:** orientalism, othering, representation, the orient, the west

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## Introduction

Islam and Middle East have taken part in the world history since a long time ago. They are related to the Orient as Edward Said's explanation that the Orient does not always refer to the East Asia but instead it refers to the Indian subcontinent and especially to the Islamic Middle East (Parker 278). Based on Said's explanation, the Orient or the East is characterised as 'sensual, lazy, exotic, irrational, cruel, promiscuous, seductive, inscrutable, dishonest, mystical, superstitious, primitive, ruled by emotion, and as sink of despotism at the margins of the world where all people are alike and where their actions are determined by the national or racial category they belong to ("Arab," "the native")' (Parker 278).

As the Orient, Islam and Middle East are considered to have different culture and other perspectives from the non-Orient or called as the Occident (West). It means that Islam and Middle East are perceived as the other by the Occident. As explained by Tyson, 'The Other' is related to the colonisation between coloniser and colonised and that the colonisers saw themselves as the embodiment of what a human being should be, the proper "self"; native people as considered "other" different, and therefore inferior to the point of being less than fully human ( 419 – 420). Then, the process of identification as the Other/the Self or as 'Them/Us' is called *Othering*.

While the othering process occurs toward the Orient especially to Islam and Middle East, the stereotypes of both of them also emerge. Islam and Middle East are perceived as something savage and uncivilised like Edward Said explained that there has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's right that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find (xiv). It means that Islam and Middle East are considered as something strange because they have different rules in their cultures and customs, so that they are perceived as the Others by the Occident.

Islamism was a threat to the West or came to be increasingly bound up with the problem of terrorism (Lockman 223). The issue of Islam, Arabs and terrorism have been well represented in popular media, as

in popular books and news. Not only in books, the issue is also found in Hollywood films. There have been so many movies representing Arab or Middle East as terrorist such as *Syriana* (2005), *The Kingdom* (2007), and *Redacted* (2007). These movies were often produced amidst or after a heightened political tension between U.S. and the Middle East. The most recent example of those kinds of films is *Argo*.

*Argo* was a Hollywood film in 2012 that was produced and directed by Ben Affleck, a famous American actor, film director, producer, and screenwriter. *Argo* told about an agent of CIA conducted to escape and save six staff of American Embassy from Canadian House Ambassador. The six staff of American Embassy successfully escaped from U.S. Embassy office during the incursion of Iranian people toward U.S. Embassy office. This turbulence happened in 1979 in Tehran-Iran in order to collapse the Shah Reza Pahlavi and to ask Khomeini returned to Iran. The Iranian people did not know that six American staff successfully lost and they just realised it when the Iranian soldier found the data about U.S.'s staff from broken documents that recovered again by Iranian children. The success was not possible without the effort of CIA agent Tony Mendez (acted by Ben Affleck) and Hollywood film producers who planned the escape by making a fake film production in Iran.

### **Method of the study**

This study focuses on Othering process toward representation of Iranian people which is related to Orientalism context and ideology. Thus, the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said becomes the core theory for these theoretical concepts. The writer has explained in the first chapter based on Said's explanation that Western . . . constructed the East as sensual, lazy, exotic, irrational, cruel, promiscuous, seductive, inscrutable, dishonest, mystical, superstitious, primitive, ruled by emotion, and as sink of despotism at the margins of the world where all people are alike and where their actions are determined by the national or racial category they belong to ("Arab," "the native") (Parker 278).

In conducting this study, the writer applied qualitative method in analysing *Argo* film. The method of qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem (Creswell 2007). By applying this qualitative method, the writer focused on one concern which was going to be explored and analysed deeply in order to breakdown the problem statement. This qualitative method has several characteristics, one of which was using multiple sources of data. By applying multiple sources of data, the writer gathered multiple forms of data, such as interviews, observations, and documents, rather than rely on a single data source (Creswell 2009). It meant that the writer concerned on searching data from many trusted and relevant sources that could support this study.

The primary data for this study is *Argo* film. It was produced and directed by Ben Affleck, a famous American actor and director, in 2012. It won Academic OSCAR in 2013 for Best Picture, Adapted Screenplay, and Achievement in Film Editing, and many other achievements as the writer has explained in the first chapter. Further, the primary source used is Orientalism book by Edward Said, firstly published in 1978. The secondary sources are supporting books which contain about Iran, America, Islam, the aspects of narrative and non-narrative of film, and the qualitative research method. They are Meenakshi Gigi Durham & Douglas M. Kellner *Media and Cultural Studies Key Works* (2006), Little Douglas *American Orientalism* (2008), Zachary Lockman *Contending Vision of the Middle East* (2004), Mohamad Tavakoli Targhi *Refashioning Iran* (2001). Moreover the secondary sources are taken from trusted and relevant journals, articles, webs, and the previous researches which are related to and supporting this study.

### **Discussion**

#### **The Othering process through the representation of Iranian people**

##### **Sensual**

The meaning of sensual is expressing or suggesting physical, especially sexual, pleasure or satisfaction ("Sensual."). The sensual scene on this film is portrayed in a comical illustration.



Figure 1: The shah's wife is depicted in bathing milk (00:01:22).

Based on the narrative, a woman who was pictured on figure 1 was actually considered as the Shah Reza Pahlavi's wife. The figure of the Shah's wife is presented in sensual style because the picture shows the sexy shape of woman's body, instead the servants wear closed clothes which do not show any single part of the body about the sensuality or sexiness.

### Exotic

The other othering process of Iran could be seen on the dialogues between Tony Mendez and an Iranian staff when Tony was in Istanbul, Turkey, processing a visa to Iran. At that time, Tony acted as one of film crews from Canada. The dialogues could be seen below:

- Iranian staff : This film crew is just yourself? (54:05)  
 Tony Mendez : No, we have six more from Canada meeting us today. (54:07)  
 Iranian staff : You like to film at the bazaar? (54:10)  
 Tony Mendez : The bazaar, maybe the palace. (54:12)  
                   Landmark sites. (54:15)  
 Iranian staff : I see. (54:17)  
                   The exotic Orient. (54:19)  
                   Snake charmers, flying carpets. (54:21)  
                   You came to us at a complicated time. (54:26)  
                   Before the revolution, 40 percent of the movie theatres in Tehran  
                   were showing pornography. (54:28)  
 Tony Mendez : I understand. (54:33)

From the narration above, it could be found that Iran was obviously considered as the Orient because there was a statement 'The exotic Orient' that uttered by an Iranian staff; and that statement related to snake charmers and flying carpets. Then, when the Iranian staff explained to Tony if 40 percent of movie in Tehran showed pornography, it means that sensuality was not a strange phenomenon in Iran. Based on the three dialogues above, it can be argued that Iran is considered as the 'exotic' Orient through the representation of narrative like moonscape, Mars, desert, snake chambers, flying carpets, and sensuality.

### Irrational



Figure 2: The Iranian polices and revolutionary guards try to stop the plane in order to catch the seven Americans inside the plane (01:41:31).

Based on the narrative, after the Iranian revolutionary guards who got in charged at the airport knew if the passengers were the Americans who were searched by the Iranian revolutionary guards as their targets; then, the Iranian revolutionary guards tried to stop the plane by reaching the plane by using a pick-up car and two police cars. It means that what those Iranian revolutionary guards did was irrational because it did not make sense with the situation at that time in stopping Swissair plane.

The composition of figure 2 places the Swissair plane and the Iranian police cars in order to show the comparison between Iran with its two police cars and a pick-up car, while America with that Swissair plane. It can be considered that figure 2 wants to accentuate the powerlessness of Iranian guards. The powerlessness of Iranian guards means that the portrait of Iranian guards is smaller than the portrait of Swissair plane on figure 2, which figure 2 places Iranian guards are in front of Swissair plane in order to show that Iranian guards as the smaller one, instead the America which represented by Swissair as the bigger one.

### Cruel and Despotic



Figure 5: Iranian people are trying to oppress Ana and another U.S. embassy female staff in the office room (00:10:53).

Based on the narrative, after the Iranian demonstrators successfully entered and attacked the U.S embassy office, they pushed the U.S embassy staffs; and at that time, Ana, one of staffs who was pressed by the Iranian demonstrators. Ana could not give any protest or fight toward the Iranian demonstrators because the Iranian demonstrators acted such anarchy like pointed the shotgun to all U.S. embassy staffs and screamed loudly in asking all the U.S. staffs to follow their instructions. Ana could only do nothing and felt so scare; while another woman staff was trying to reject an Iranian man's oppression by taking step far away and screaming loudly. Based on the non-narrative, figure 5 is taken from medium shot with eye-level camera angle, and the colours are almost dark colours like black, grey, brown, dark green, and not pure white. In general, artists have used darkness to suggest fear, evil, the unknown (Giannetti 18). It means that figure 5 symbolises Iranian characters are on figure 5 similar to fear or evil.

### Dishonest

This point can be found when Sahar, a house keeper of Canadian ambassador, met an Iranian revolutionary guard in the gate of her master's house. This case can be seen in more detail from the dialogues below:

- Sahar : How else may I help, sir? (01:13:05)  
Khalkali : No, no, just one thing. (01:13:06)  
          How long have they been here? (01:13:10)  
Sahar : Pardon? (01:13:13)  
Khalkali : The guests of the Ambassador. (01:13:16)  
          The guests of the Ambassador. How long have they been here?  
          (01:13:17)  
Sahar : They arrived two days ago. (01:13:22)

Based on the dialogues between Sahar and Khalkali, there can be found that there is something missed on their conversation. When Sahar was asked by Khalkali about the arrival of her master's guests, she did not tell the truth. It was right if Tony Mendez came to her master's house from two days ago but the other guests were actually the U.S embassy staffs who escaped and run away from the office when the turbulence happened. Sahar did not mention about it. It means that there was something truth that was not revealed by Sahar; or in the other word, she became dishonest to Khalkali as Iranian people.

### Ruled by emotion

Based on the narrative, Tony Mendez and the six U.S embassy staffs were acting to search film location in the bazaar in Tehran and guided by Reza Borhani, an Iranian man. When they were doing sight-seeing to the shops in the bazaar, Kathy who rolled as the production designer, she took a photo in one of the shops there but unfortunately, the owner or the shop keeper did not allow her to do it; so there

was a trouble in the bazaar. After Kathy took a photo and walk in some steps, the shop keeper suddenly approached her and asked her to give back her photo. At that time, Kathy did not feel doing something mistake because she acted normally and the more important was there was no sign in the bazaar or in each shop if the visitors could not take photo there.

The case above raised the debates among the seven fake Canadian film crews and some Iranian people in the bazaar. Based on this narrative, it can be found if the representation of Iranian people who was acted by the character of shop keeper toward Kathy was ruled by emotion because in the case of Kathy, there was no certain case before between Kathy with the shop keeper, instead the shop keeper directly angered to her.

### **The work of Orientalism through the binary opposition on values of American people and Iranian people**

#### **The importance of protection and safety**

It can be seen from the dialogue between Mark and Bob Anders at the U.S. embassy office when they were watching the demonstrators protested loudly in front of the U.S. embassy office. At that time they had a little conversation about the windows on the U.S embassy office and the Iranian demonstrators.

- Bob Anders : The carnival's a little bigger today, huh? (03:40)  
Mark Lijek : Windows are supposed to be bulletproof, right? (03:45)  
Bob Anders : Well, they've never been tested. (03:47)

Mark said that the windows were supposed to be bulletproof and Bob Anders answered well, they've never been tested. It means that there should be the bulletproof window but actually they were not because according to Mark's point of view there must be a protection to face or to cover the Iranian demonstrators, and this kind of protection should be tested or proved certainly before, in order to protect the U.S embassy staffs safely. Based on this explanation, it means that no certain guarantee as U.S embassy staffs who worked in Tehran, Iran about their safe when there was a trouble.

#### **Applying hard tool (Iran) versus mastery in technology (America)**

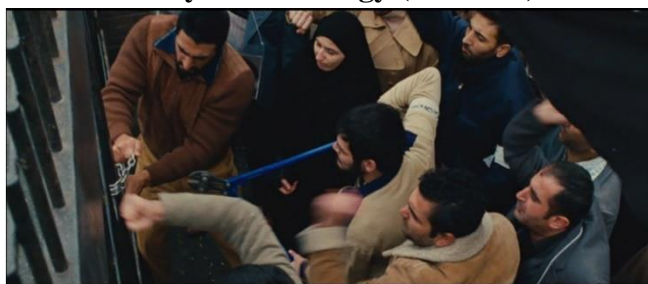


Figure 13: The Iranian demonstrators open the gate of the U.S. embassy office by using a big forceps (00:05:00).

Here, based on the narrative, it can be found that Iranian people used something hard physically in solving the problem in order to reach their goal. This representation of Iranian people is contrasted with the representation of Tony Mendez of figure 13 when he rearranged the cables of the telephone in his room at hotel in Tehran, Iran.

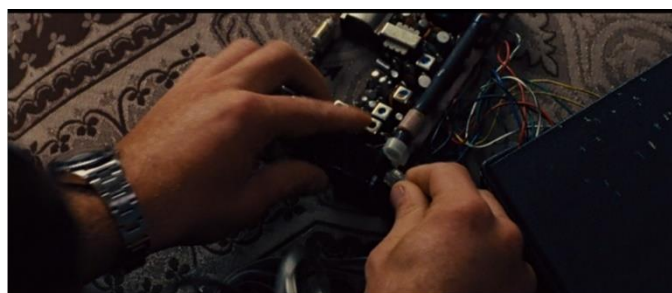


Figure 14: Tony Mendez rearranges the cables of the radio and connects to the telephone (01:01:26).

The other binary positions of superiority and inferiority can be found in the way Iranian people and Tony Mendez solved the problems. It can be seen on figure 13 that Iranian people used a hard tool to



break the gate of U.S. embassy office in order to attack the office when they demonstrated in front of the U.S. embassy office. This case is contrasted and compared with the representation of Tony Mendez on figure 14 that he was very advanced or mastery in technology. He rearranged the cables on the radio and connected to telephone in order to call O'Donnell in America. Actually, the representation of Iranian demonstrators and Tony Mendez are related to the idea of Orientalism which is related to Western and the Orient. In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand (Said 7). In the other words, in the case of Orientalism issue, Western is commonly put in an upper position than the other countries. America is a part of Western countries; then the binary opposition between America and Iran can be seen from the representation of Iranian demonstrators and Tony Mendez.

Based on the representation of Iranian demonstrators and Tony Mendez, it can be considered that the one who is superior is Tony as American and the one who is perceived inferior is Iranian demonstrators. This case is supported with other Said's explanation. If the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to note how in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction (Said 42). It means that through the representation of Iranian demonstrators and Tony Mendez, the film represents America as the superior one and Iran as the inferior one whether intentionally or not.

### Anticipation and deliberation

The other value can be found on figure 15 that shows the dialogue of Golacinski when he briefed American soldiers in order to prepare their defence in order to anticipate when there was an attack from Iranian demonstrators suddenly toward the U.S. embassy office.



Figure 15: Golacinski gives a brief to American soldiers in protecting the U.S embassy office in Tehran, Iran (00:06:03).

Golacinski : Don't fucking shoot anybody. (05:56)  
You don't wanna be the son of a bitch who started a war. (05: 59)  
They need an hour to burn the classified. (06:01)  
I need you to hold. (06:04)  
If you shoot one person, they're gonna kill every single one of us  
in here. (06:05)

This dialogue shows how America controlled and stimulated the mind of their people especially their soldiers to keep their fighting if there was no one who begun to fight. It can be seen from the first line: Don't fucking shoot anybody. (05:56) and the last line: If you shoot one person, they're gonna kill every single one of us in here. (06:05). These lines want to show that America always taught a goodness to all their people especially by not killing anyone because killing was a breach or a sin for them, and if they did a sin they would get the effect which was more worse. It means intentionally or not that there was a bad effect and result from killing something. It is supported by the second line: You don't wanna be the son of a bitch who started a war. (05:59). The meaning of 'bitch' is something which causes difficulties or problems, or which is unpleasant ("Bitch"). It means that being the one who began the war was the one who was perceived as the loser and not-gentleman. Instead, being the soldiers they must be gentlemen and as American they also must be the one who wins the war.

### Backward environment (Iran) versus well organised environment (America)

The other values can be seen from the representation of environment between Iran and America. The representation of street in Iran that is crowded, full of cars, full of pollution, and the people do not care about the safety because there appears a man just walks away crossing the street until he is almost crashed by a car. This situation can be seen in figure 16 below:



Figure 16: Street in Iran (00:53:04).

Figure 16 is contrasted with figure 17 that shows the street in America. On the other words, figure 17 shows the comfort facility for people on the street. Figure 17 shows the street in America is clean and well organised with the presence of the trees and the paves. There is no crowded which is full of cars and pollution like on figure 16.

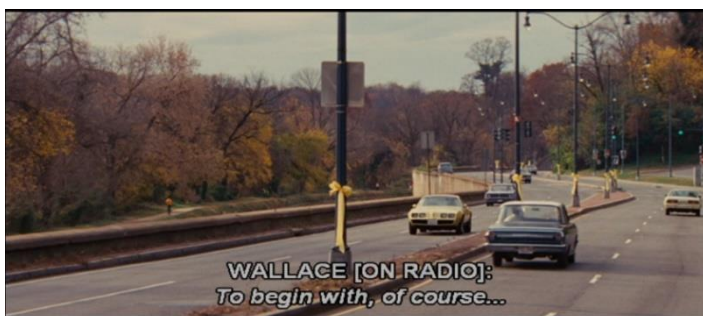


Figure 17: Street in America (00:13:36).

Based on the non-narrative aspects, figure 17 is taken from long shot with eye-angle camera. The colours are dominant yellow and the properties used are cars, yellow ribbons trees, and lamps. The presence of yellow ribbons means something on this scene because yellow ribbons are related to the meaning of solidarity in America toward their hostages in Tehran, Iran.

Based on the non-narrative aspects, it can be seen from all scenes that have already analysed on the finding; that almost all figures on *Argo* film are dominated with dark colours like blue, black, brown, grey, and not-pure white. In general, artists have used darkness to suggest fear, evil, the unknown (Giannetti 18). It means that *Argo* focuses on the representation of Iran by characterising or revealing Iranian people through the representation on film in order to suggest to the audiences that Iranian people are related to fear and evil.

From the representation of Iranian people through the othering process such as sensual, exotic, irrational, cruel and despotic, dishonest, and ruled by emotion and through the binary opposition on values between Iran and America occurred in *Argo* film, it can be found that Orientalism occurs on *Argo* film because Iran is the one that is considered as the Orient, is orientalised and compared with America as the West. In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand (Said 7). It means that Iran has been orientalised through the representation of Sahar, Iranian demonstrators, and the portrait of environment in Iran which represented Iran as dishonest, inferior, and troubled; instead, America was depicted as work hard, superior, and safe.

What is represented by the director of *Argo* film might be correct but as the readers we had to remember that all dialogues and scenes appeared on film were only as 'the representation'. Film directors see the reality of the world through their own perceptions (LoBrutto 132). It means that the director of

Argo chose those scenes in order to deputise Iran and America based on his knowledge or experience. Because Argo film was made by Hollywood, then the Hollywood had right to create this film based on Hollywood's perspective. It does not really matter whether Hollywood's representations are 'true' or 'false' (historically accurate or not); what matters is the 'regime of truth' they put into circulation (Storey 173). This depiction of Iranian people is related to Said's explanation. A representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth," which is itself a representation (Said 272). Since the representation is considered as anything besides the truth, it means that there is a reduction of humanity toward people as human beings especially the characters of Iranian people in this film. It means that something which is called as representation in any text or anything that is represented in certain figure is always considered not the truth because there is any certain reason and purpose the producer or the author creates something into certain form. The finding shows that Iranian people are represented as sensual, exotic, irrational, dishonest, cruel and despotic through the othering process. Then, Orientalism works through the binary opposition constructed in Argo film does not only shows how US and Iran are different but also enforces the idea of the superiority of U.S.

Thus, whether intentionally or not, the film maker or the director of Argo film did not only want to show how Iran and America were different through the binary opposition based on the characters appeared on film, but also to enforce the idea of the superiority of America. Moreover, Iran is considered as the other by the America, not because Iran is located in the non Western region; but because Iran can be orientalisised in such kind of representation by the West.

## Conclusion

The representation between the superiority of America and the inferiority of Iran can be seen from the values appeared in film. The values of America are high solidarity, hard worker, high intellectuality, carefulness, and believable. Instead, the values of Iran are high religiosity, demonstrator, low intellectuality, careful-less, and curious. Based on these values and the representation of Iran and America, it can be concluded that Iran can be called as the Other because Iran does not have and believe what America has and believes on Argo film. As the Other or the Orient, Iran is not only revealed in interacting with America but also with the indigenous people of Iran itself. The way the characters of Iranian people interact toward the other Iranian people is also important thing to be analysed. It can be seen from the character of Sahar. The representation of Sahar and other Iranian characters in this film are parts of othering in Orientalism issue. This study is one of Orientalism study which tries to reveal and analyse the representation of the Orient in order to deliver that message to the readers that we cannot judge if the superior one is right and good, while the inferior one is wrong and bad without knowing the historical background and the real contexts of the two cultures meet.

This study also predicts that othering process will be representing in other media or literary works in the future because if the belief of othering towards the Other/the Rest/the East/the Orient is condemned as 'the right one', Orientalism issue will be staying exist in any media or literary works. Furthermore, this study has limitation on exploring the othering process in film because this study only focuses on certain dialogues and scenes. Hopefully, the further research can explore more the othering process in this film from different point of views like the language and human right.

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