AUTHENTICITY OF CHARACTERS PORTRAYAL IN ISLAMIC FILMS: A STUDY ON *THE MESSAGE*

*Ketulenan Pemaparan Watak dalam Filem Islam:
Kajian terhadap The Message*

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Abstract

Muslim communication academicians and writers had been calling for portraying Islam in drama. This call has been answered by some directors and producers who attempted to produce drama about Islam. However, these attempts are facing criticism due to misportrayal of the original characters in the drama produced. The objectives of this study are to identify the main characters of *The Message* and to test the authenticity of the portrayal of the characters of *The Message*. The main finding of the study is that the characters of *The Message* were misportrayed. The misportrayal took place on the psychological dimension of the characters. Some of the Muslim characters were degraded, while some non-Muslim characters were elevated. The misportrayal of the characters lies in their voice tone that shows Muslims as barbaric and hegemonic on the first hand, while on the other hand non-Muslims are portrayed as wise and logical people.

Keywords: authenticity, characters, Islamic films.

Abstrak

Ahli akademik dan penulis (pengkarya) komunikasi Muslim telah diseru untuk memaparkan Islam di dalam drama. Seruan ini telah disambut oleh beberapa orang pengarah dan penerbit dan mereka mula menerbitkan drama berkaitan Islam. Walau bagaimanapun, percubaan untuk menerbitkan drama-drama ini berhadapan dengan kritikan akibat kesilapan dalam memaparkan watak-watak asli dalam drama yang diterbitkan. Objektif kajian ini adalah untuk mengenalpasti watak utama dalam filem *The Message* dan untuk menguji ketulenan pemaparan watak dalam *The Message*. Dapatan utama kajian ialah watak-watak dalam *The Message* telah disalahpaparkan. Kesilapan paparan ini berlaku dari sudut psikologi watak. Beberapa watak Muslim digambarkan sebagai rendah martabatnya, manakala watak-watak bukan Muslim berada pada

kedudukan yang tinggi. Dari satu sudut, salah gambaran watak-watak ini terletak pada tona suara mereka yang menggambarkan Muslim sebagai tidak bertamadun dan hegemonik, dan pada sudut yang lain, watak bukan Muslim digambarkan sebagai orang yang bijak dan rasional.

Kata kunci: ketulenan, watak, filem Islam.

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of film genre has concerned itself with the relationships between the film text and the expectations that spectators bring with them to the cinema (i.e. their understanding and response) during the course of the viewing process (Neale, 1990). In general, film texts provide meeting points in which various genres come into contact with one another. As filmic fictions bring into play real-life assumptions about social and cultural relationships, they also illustrate the generic interactions between characters and reflect specific cultural contexts; hence, illuminate artistic manifestations of historical phenomenon (Shohat & Stam, 1994; Lacey, 2005; Deleyto, 2011).

Bruce Mamer (2003) perceives film as compilation of projected photos or images in a theatre. However film was later defined as an audio-visual medium that convey message to a group of people (Nor Hafiz Zariq, 2015). Film contains story that is told using sound and moving pictures, shown at cinema or in television (Longman Dictionary, 2005). These images or popularly known as motion pictures are images that project certain impression and meanings to the audiences. According to Sadiman (1990), film influences and affects individual's social behaviour through visual information displayed. It is a tool that reflects the reality of people and often creates reality and public opinion. As a tool it delivers and strengthens public knowledge and understanding as well as creates awareness of any issues happening in our surroundings particularly related to Muslim societies. From the advent of still photographs to the motion pictures, films engage us in a complex way and allow audience to experience 'images and sound larger and louder than life (Grant, 2012). As part of a myriad art form, film's ability to magnify reality in different ways and modes explains its potential to convey ideologies and to make a statement (Turner, 2006). Thus, films share a fraction of popular culture which offer not only empowerment to various cultural groups, but also sites of ideological struggle rather than mere purveyors of the status quo (Grant, 2007). Also, Neale (1990) argues that the ideological significance of any text, or any genre, is always to be sought in a context-specific analysis.

For this study, drama as film genre can be examined as a genre that relies on the emotional and relational development of realistic characters, and dramatic themes play a large role in the plot as well (e.g. taken from intense, real life issues). Balio (2002) argues drama is a term of convenience that is used to encompass a range of production trends in contemporary Hollywood. The sub-genres of drama consist of diverse

narratives, including biography, melodrama, political, romance, historical, the Western, thriller, and courtroom (Deleyto, 2011). For instance, melodrama is perceived to be much more than a genre; it represents the central form of moral questions in American narratives, whether in literature, on the stage, or in film and television and, therefore, is the quintessential American narrative form (Ibid, 2011). Drama means an action or the play itself. A combination of suffering, pathos and a particular form of suspense are among the essential dimensions which create the melodramatic mode (Gledhill, 2007).

This research focuses on how Muslims are represented in the film *The Message* (1976, dir. Moustapha Al Akkad). The Message is an Islamic historical film that portrays significant events in the history of Islam, during the early revelation of Islam as a religion. The events mostly took place in Mecca and Madinah, the two important worship place of a Muslim. The film depicts the struggles of Prophet Muhammad and His followers from the stage when Islam was first introduced to the Arabs secretively until the day it was spread openly in Mecca. However the challenges of spreading Islam in Mecca had brought Prophet Muhammad and His companions to migrate to the city of Madinah. The focus of the film was on the heavy content of Islam and Arab cultures, ideologies and civilization in this film. These are amongst key rationales for selection of The Message for this study.

This study takes a cultural approach that focuses on the relations between a film's representational language and ideology. In general, the ideological and/or political placing of cinema in general, and of specific films, can be linked to the idea that all cultural representations are political, as it is one of the major themes of the media and of the cultural theory of the past few decades (Kellner & Durham, 2006). In extending this realm to filmmaking operations, Turner (2006) observes the contrary idea with regards to the linkage of film and culture, i.e. how films do not reflect reality, but represent their image of reality within the meaning systems of culture (within which the films are produced). Film analysis, in this context, views representation as a social process of making images, sounds and signs stand for some meanings (Turner, 2006) and how the audience interprets those conveyed meanings.

THE MESSAGE FILM
The Message film was initially released in 1977 in New York City. It was directed by the Syrian Muslim director Moustapha Akkad. The film attempts to portray the message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Islam. It focuses on limited but prominent incidents that took place at the time such as revelation, migration to Madinah, the battle of Badr and Uhud and the conquest of Mecca. The film does not depict the prophet himself, but rather outlines his story through the lives of certain cardinal figures that Akkad was approved by religious bodies to depict. Akkad did not depict the ten companions promised paradise following the decision of religious bodies that he sought approval from.

Akkad in a television interview stated that he consulted Islamic clerics in a thorough attempt to produce an Islamically accepted film that portrays the message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). He received Approval from al-Azhar in Egypt which is university associated with al-Azhar Mosque. It is Egypt's oldest degree-granting university and renowned as Islam's most prestigious university. However, *The Message* was rejected by the Muslim World League in Saudi Arabia which is one of the largest non-government Islamic organizations worldwide.

Furthermore, Akkad had to go outside the United States to get the financial support needed for the production of the film. Akkad stated that financing for the project finally came from the governments of Kuwait, Libya and Morocco, but when it was rejected by the Muslim World League, Prince of Kuwait withdrew financial support. King Hassan II of Morocco gave Akkad full support for the production. The Libyan leader Muammar al-Gaddafi provided financial support too.

In addition, Akkad in the television interview stated that the film was shot in Morocco and Libya. Production took four and a half months to build the cities of Mecca and Madinah as they looked in the Prophet's era. The production of the film took one year. The first six months was in Morocco, but Akkad had to stop when the Saudi government exerted great pressure on the Moroccan government to stop the project. Akkad went to al-Gaddafi for support in order to complete the project, and the Libyan leader allowed him to move the filming to Libya for the remaining six months. *The Message* was produced in two versions: Arabic and English. Akkad filmed the Arabic version of the film with an Arab cast for Arabic-speaking audiences. He felt that dubbing the English version into Arabic would not be enough because the Arabic acting style differs significantly from that of Hollywood. The movements of the lips will be different too (Aljazeera documentary, Jan 13, 2017). The actors took turns doing the English and Arabic versions in each scene. The actors and actresses of the Arabic version are Arabs except the non-Arab characters and the actors and actresses of the English version are English except the foreigner characters.

CHARACTERS IN DRAMA PRESENTATION

Referring to drama and its melodramatic 'mode', the term 'mode' is mentioned by several film scholars (e.g. Neale, 2000 and Gledhill, 1987) for its wider reach in a narrative, and labels have been coined such as the "family melodrama", "the male and female melodrama", and the "woman's film" (Deleyto, 2011). In essence, it is during narrative development that the film genre deals with familiar and recurrent settings, sequences of action and predictable resolution (Turner, 2006), which later sets up its thematic conventions. Turner (ibid) adds that there is a pleasure in the familiar, in recognising narrative conventions, relishing their repetition and restatement, and acknowledging the changes

within the narrative. Nevertheless, the recurrent setting of themes, particularly in drama, still enables narrative variation.

It is useful to analyse the different ways in which characters motivate a chain of events in a narrative (Gillespie, 2006, p.91). Occasionally generic characters will appear outside 'their' genre and take the resonance of their filmic origins with them (Lacey, 2005, p. 65). While the film plot moves, characters and situations encounter transformations, including character's transgression from a 'normal' behaviour and action (i.e. from good to bad behaviour) (Gillespie, 2006). This transformation occurs as characters and their traits including attitudes, beliefs, values, talents, tastes, appearances, psychological dispositions, and past experiences serve as the main agents of change (Ibid, p.91). For example, the portrayal of good versus evil character (e.g. through the meeting of protagonist and antagonist characters) could reinforce the notion of 'lost' and 'found' in the life quest of human being. These characters are indicative where division between good and evil are inextricably intertwined (Lacey, 2005).

One classic example is the portrayal of characteristics of Muslim and Arabs in Hollywood. As represented in an action blockbuster such as *True Lies* (1994, dir. James Cameron), *Three Kings* (1999, dir. David O. Russell), and *The Hurt Locker* (2010, dir. Katherine Bigelow), the Muslim and Arabs carries the Western connotations of the Muslim or Arab Other is at once sensual and hedonistic, militant and passive, as sadistic western killers, or as being troubled (Shaheen, 1997; Khatib, 2006). They were portrayed either as terrorists and have captured the white male protagonist and/or his family (for example in *True Lies*) or as a set of passive or submissive human beings, which also reflect the 'backwardness' of a particular group of people (as in *Three Kings*). Therefore, these characteristics exhibit their relations with the film narrative that emphases power based on race, religion, ethnicity and social class (as discussed in Gillespie, 2006).

CHARACTERS OF *THE MESSAGE*

Characters represent one of the most important analytical categories in drama since they carry the plot. In other words, there cannot be a play without characters. Characters' interactions trigger and move the plot and their various relationships to one another form the basis for conflicts and dynamic processes. Characters in plays can generally be divided into major characters and minor characters, depending on how important they are for the plot. A good indicator as to whether a character is major or minor is the amount of time and speech as well as presence on stage he or she is allocated. Major characters usually have a lot to say and appear frequently throughout the play, while minor characters have less presence or appear only marginally.

Every character has three dimensions. They are physical, social and psychological dimensions. The physical dimension or the personality

refers to what characters look like? How it presents itself to the world? The social dimension refers to the social environment where the character was brought up or the environment where the character lives and the circumstances he/she encounters such as parents, siblings, education, interest etc... The third dimension is the outcome of the first two. The psychology of a character is determined by the social and physical dimensions.

Furthermore, several types of characters can be identified. First, a flat character is a simple character known by one or two traits which is simple to predict and to deal with. Second, a round character is complex and unpredicted character which keeps changing throughout the play. Third, a stock character is a stereotyped character with specific traits created to fulfill its role in the play. Fourth, a static character remains the same from the beginning of the plot to the end. Fifth, a dynamic or a developing character undergoes permanent change.

The characters of *The Message* are supposed to reflect the true personalities who lived at the time of the beginning of Islam. The film contains a big number of characters divided into two types: main and secondary characters. Here is a list of the main actors and actresses of the English version of *The Message*.

Table 1: Main characters of the English version of *The Message*

No.	Actor/Actress	Character
Muslims		
1	Anthony Quinn	Hamza
2	Johnny Sekka	Bilal
3	Garrick Hagon	Ammar
4	Damien Thomas	Zayd
5	Neville Jason	Ja'far Bin Abi Talib
6	Ronald Chenery	Mus`ab
7	Ewen Solon	Yasir
8	Rosalie Crutchley	Sumayyah
9	Earl Cameron	Al-Najashi
Non-Muslims		
10	Ronald Leigh-Hunt	Heraclius
11	Michael Ansara	Abu Sufian
12	Hasan Joundi	Kisra
13	Irene Papas	Hind
14	Wolfe Morris	Abu Lahab
15	Martin Benson	Abu Jahl
16	Robert Brown	Utbah
17	Bruno Barnabe	Umayyah Bin Khalaf
18	John Bennett	Abd Allah bin Ubai bib Salul

METHODS & MATERIALS

This paper intends to answer some questions pertaining to the portrayal of Muslim characters in *The Message*. Qualitative content analysis was chosen to answer the questions of this paper. A coding sheet was established to breakdown the film into scenes. Having done with the breakdown, purposive sampling was implemented to choose two (2) Muslim characters and one (1) portraying non-Muslim ones to find the authenticity of the portrayal. This paper answers two questions. The first is who are the main characters of *The Message*? The second asks whether the characters presented in *The Message* authentically portrayed?

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The film was named The Message because the director aimed at presenting the message of the Prophet (PBUH) that is Islam not the personality of the Prophet (PBUH). Therefore, the film started with three horsemen in the desert carrying messages of the Prophet (PBUH). The opening scene showed three messengers to the three most powerful kings of the time even though the Prophet (PBUH) sent messages to other kings too. The three messages were sent to Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantium, to al-Muqawqis, the patriarch of Alexandria, and to *Kisra* (Khosrow) the emperor of Persia. These messengers were misportrayed. The imperative tones and body language of the actors who were playing the Prophet's messengers showed disrespect to the kings. In communication, the tone of voice is of paramount importance in communication. A sentence can give two opposite meanings when it is said in two different tones. The tone of voice changes the respect to disrespect and the begging to a command. Throughout the film, the voice tones of the actors who are playing Muslim characters were critically misused. Sheikh al-Ardh (2003) in his book Biography of the Prophet, stresses on the polite characters of the messengers of the Prophet (PBUH) because they are the representatives of the Prophet and Islam.

In the film, the messages were not fully stated. The original text of the message sent to Heraclius as narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari is

"بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ مِنْ مُحَمَّدٍ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ، إِلَى هِرَقْلَ عَظِيمِ الرُّومِ،
سَلاَمٌ عَلَى مَنِ اتَّبَعَ الْهُدَى، أَمَّا بَعْدُ، فَإِنِّي أَدْعُوكَ بِدِعَايَةِ الإِسْلاَمِ، أَسْلِمْ
تَسْلَمْ، وَأَسْلِمْ يُؤْتِكَ اللَّهُ أَجْرَكَ مَرَّتَيْنِ، فَإِنْ تَوَلَّيْتَ فَإِنَّ عَلَيْكَ إِثْمَ الأَرِيسِيِّينَ،
وَ{يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَنْ لاَ نَعْبُدَ إِلاَّ اللَّهَ}
إِلَى قَوْلِهِ {اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ}".

{"In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful. This letter is from Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah, to Heraclius, the sovereign of Byzantine. Peace be upon him who follows the Right Path. Now then, I call you to embrace Islam. Embrace Islam and you will be

saved (from Allah's Punishment); embrace Islam, and Allah will give you a double reward, but if you reject this, you will be responsible for the sins of all the people of your kingdom (Allah's Statement):--"O the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Come to a word common to you and us that we worship None but Allah"...."bear witness that we are Muslims".' (3.64)} (Albukhari, Vol. 6, Book 60, Hadith 75).

The statement of Allah in the message is a verse from the noble Qur'an. In Sahih al-Bukhari the full verse was not mentioned, but in the original message it was fully written. Here is the full verse.

{قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلاَّ نَعْبُدَ إِلاَّ اللَّهَ وَلاَ نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئاً وَلاَ يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضاً أَرْبَاباً مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ}.

{Say, "O the people of the Scripture (Jews and Christians)! Come to a word common to you and us that we worship None but Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah. But if they turn away, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims."}. (al-Qur'an, 3: 64).

In the film the message was "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. From Muhammed the Messenger of God to Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantium, greeting to him who is the follower of righteous guidance. I bid you to hear the divine call. I am the Messenger of God to the people. Accept Islam for your selfish". This message did not mention the reward mentioned in the original message if he accepts the call of the Prophet (PBUH). It also did not mention the Qur'anic verse that expresses the common things between the Prophet (PBUH) and the Emperor.

Furthermore, Hamza, the Prophet's uncle who was playing a main Muslim character was misportrayed too. For example, scene number thirty eight that took place before the battle of Badr when Muslims were not yet allowed to fight, Hamza was arguing with the Prophet, shouting at him and at the end he turned his back to the Prophet (PBUH) angrily insisting to fight the non-Muslim Meccans who confiscated all the Muslims' properties left in Mecca including their own houses which were sold. The body language, movements and voice tone of Anthony Quinn, the character playing Hamza, portrayed Hamza as an impolite and rough man who disrespected the prophet.

In fact, the discussion and insistence of Hamza took place. However, the disrespect has never happened (Sheikh al-'Ardh, 2003). The misportrayal might be originated to three reasons. First, Anthony Quinn was not Muslim and that made him loose the inner feeling of dignifying the

inviolability of Prophethood. Second, it might be the lack of experience or attention to the tone of voice. Third, it might be done purposely attempting to send negative hidden messages to the non-Muslim audience about Muslims.

On the other hand, the image of non-Muslims was improved compared to reality. Throughout the film, Abu Sufian, the chief of Mecca, is portrayed as the wise man that interferes to save the troubles. Michael Ansara, the character playing Abu Sufian, asked questions which made his argument logical and Muslims' are not. For example, in scene number eleven the leaders of Mecca are arguing with Ammar, a prominent Muslim character in the film, about Islam. Abu Sufian reverently and logically asked Ammar how to substitute many gods that they live with daily with an unseen God! Garrick Hagon, who was playing Ammar, could not answer the question raised by Abu Sufian even though the answer is repeatedly mentioned in the message of the Prophet (PBUH), Islam. Despite the fact that the message of the Prophet (PBHU) is totally logical and carry enlightenment for humanity, the lack of answer by Ammar, made it perceived as flimsy and vulnerable.

Moreover, in scene number sixty one Abu Sufian went to Madinah begging to reinforce the treaty of Hudaybiah that non-Muslim Meccans breached. The begging and asking for pity was misportrayed. Michael Ansara was superiorly shouting at the characters playing Muslims as if he had the upper hand on them. In fact, this incident took place, and Muslims refused to reply to his questions. The refusal of answering the begging made Abu Sufian in a big trouble as a leader who did not know how to bring the breached treaty back to terms (Sheikh al-Ardh, 2003). This scene represents the victory of truth, love, justice and integrity, represented by Muslims over the transgressors, represented by the non-Muslim Meccans. However, the indirect message received by audience from this scene is that Muslims are naïve and doltish because it was portrayed as if Abut Sufian was asking logical question, but the doltish Muslims cannot answer because they are naïve.

CONCLUSION
In short, the characters of *The Message* were misportrayed. The misportrayal took place on the psychological dimension of the characters. On the first hand, some of the Muslim characters were degraded. On the other hand, some non-Muslim characters were elevated. The lack of studies on *The Message* as well as the director of the film is no longer alive are hindrances to the identification of the true reasons of the misportrayal. However, it might be lack of knowledge about the real life of the Muslim characters of the time. It also might be due to the fact that the actors are not Muslims who are unable to portray characters of different inner beliefs. It also might be done purposively to send negative messages about Muslims and Islam to the non-Muslim audience.

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