



## **CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN *I DREAM OF JEANNIE* AND *GUNGA DIN* (1939)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Western media distorts and misrepresents the “other” cultures and creates stereotypes much like the colonial rulers who tried to paint the natives as “savages.” Postcolonial writers and filmmakers adapted colonial and Victorian texts to write back. Although sometimes postcolonial filmmakers extend their resistance beyond adaptations, but the paper intervenes with the examples of two select cultural texts viz. *Gunga Din* (1939) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1960), to examine how Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony can be applied to illustrate the distortion of facts by the western filmmakers.*

**Keywords:** *hegemony, distortion, culture, misrepresent, Arabs, and colonial.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Cultural hegemony as a concept is attributed to the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci who used Karl Marx’s theory that dominant ideology of society reflects the beliefs and interests of the ruling class. The ruling class distorts and misrepresents the “other” classes to assert its superiority and justify its rule and domination. In the writings of the British officers Indian men were portrayed as weak and effeminate while Indian women as nymphomaniacs, in order to justify the atrocities and sexual crimes meted out to Indian women by the British

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soldiers and company officials. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) talks about this misrepresentation of the Orient by the Occident. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), one of the most famous and cited texts in literary and cultural theory, remains relevant today in the field of Film Studies and Cultural Studies as well. Said's approach to studying hegemony relies heavily on textual analysis of Western texts written about non-West cultures.

The power to distort is provided by control over resources and access to power. There are various theories regarding the origin of the word hegemony. According to Perry Anderson, the word hegemony seems to be derived from the word 'egemonia' in the Greek language. The Greek word 'egemonia' (root word egemon) means "leader, ruler, often in the sense of a state other than his own". Since the nineteenth century, "hegemony" commonly has been used to indicate "political predominance, usually of one state over another" (Williams, *Keywords* 144). According to Perry Anderson's "The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci," "hegemony" acquired a specifically Marxist character in its use (as "gegemoniya") by Russian thinker and revolutionaries during the October Revolution, particularly by Lenin. He termed it essential for the 'proletariat' to lead the other classes that were marginalized and classes, "as the only consistently revolutionary class of contemporary society, [the proletariat] must be the leader in the struggle of the whole people for a fully democratic revolution, in the struggle of all the working and exploited people against the oppressors and exploiters" (Anderson, 1978).

Films have been used across the world for the propagation of ideologies for a long time (Chowdhry, 2000). Even the US Military and Department of defence has financed the following films in Hollywood: *Air Force One* (1997), *Apollo 13* (1995), *Armageddon* (1998), *Batman & Robin* (1997), *Battleship* (2012), *Behind Enemy Lines* (2001), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), *Captain Phillips* (2013) as per the military–entertainment complex agreement between Hollywood and the Department of Defence. Citing Tanner Mirrlees, Associate Professor, Ontario Tech University, Brandie Wickle in "How Hollywood became the unofficial propaganda arm of the U.S. military" writes:

*Hollywood had received its marching orders from the military, and during the war, he says, "people who'd been trained to sell soap, cereal and home appliances were now being enlisted by the state to sell war to the American public." No country in the world churns out as many images of itself as the military hero... like the United States does. That is a unique cultural phenomenon. (Access Denied)*

In this paper two different works of art from two different decades across two different cultures have been chosen to justify Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony.



## 2. Misrepresentation of cultures by Hollywood

Hollywood has a history of creating stories that misrepresent Indigenous people and other cultures. Whether they are inaccurately portraying Indigenous culture or applying fictional and exaggerated stereotypes to foreign cultures, misrepresentations of these kind can have devastating effects on their image and reputation. Misrepresenting “Others” in media can be a serious issue and has been done extensively in Hollywood. One of the most detrimental consequences of misrepresenting Indigenous peoples is their absence of character and personality in depictions. This typically occurs because Indigenous individuals are usually cast as supporting roles and rarely given their own voice to speak on, leading them to appear as one-sided individuals who exist solely to entertain others. This creates an image of them that lacks depth and nuance; ultimately creating dull personalities or individuals with only one purpose: entertainment. Hollywood films often portray Native Americans as savages or warriors, while Native women are depicted as beautiful maidens available to White men.

The same is true for depiction of people from Middle east and other cultures. These stereotypical images still shape public perception of these groups today and have contributed to a long history of negative views towards Indians, residents of Middle East and Indigenous peoples.

Misrepresenting cultures around the world may be an issue for all humanity, but it has especially negative repercussions for people of Native American populations, Indians and Muslims. These groups have long been mistreated and endured various forms of injustices like cultural appropriation, racism and discrimination. These misrepresentations can have a lasting impact on these communities and cultures, as well as having an adverse effect on their children in general. As such, many Indigenous children grow up with low self-esteem and an unfavourable perception of themselves and their cultures.

Misrepresenting cultures in film and television can be a serious issue that should be addressed by Hollywood. This paper draws attention to two instances of such misrepresentation in Hollywood.

## 3. Gunga Din, the subservient Indian Bhishti: Another victim of misrepresentation

Misrepresentation of Indian people in Hollywood is a sadly common occurrence for Indians. Unfortunately, many Bollywood movies and American shows portray stereotypes about our people that are inaccurate or even offensive. From The Simpsons to Disney’s Jessie, characters such as “Apu” from The Simpsons and “Ravi” from Jessie create an unflattering



image of Indian people. On Jessie, Ravi is depicted as an un-athletic, nerdy boy wearing traditional Indian kurtas with a heavy accent that goes unnoticed by most viewers. Even the popular series, The Big Bang Theory misrepresents or stereotypes, the Indian Rajesh Koothrapalli as he is shown to have a very bad fashion sense and cannot talk to women without consuming alcohol.

Another issue with these portrayals is that they fail to acknowledge India's diversity. Instead, they focus on its 'monolithic quality' and paint India as a homogenous nation.

Indians can feel uninspired and disenfranchised when their culture is misrepresented on TV or film, making integration into society much harder. Additionally, this creates a negative impression on others within the community when individuals see Indians portrayed on TV or in film who do not reflect their true selves. To address the problem of Indian misrepresentation in Hollywood, filmmakers and television producers need to pay attention to how Indian culture is presented. Doing this helps them avoid creating a negative image of Indians while also helping them better comprehend their audience. Sushma Rao, an Indian woman living in the United States, expresses concern about how Indian stereotypes are presented in Western media. She believes these false representations of her people can cause disapproval among her peers and strives to change how her community is portrayed through media outlets. She believes the stereotyping of Indian males with turbans in struggling positions is a common error made by those unfamiliar with Indian culture. These inaccurate representations often lead to the misconception that all Indian men are doctors or engineers, and she advocates for breaking these stereotypes.

This misrepresentation however, is not a recent phenomenon. It has been going since the British occupied India. In this section we discuss the misrepresentation of a character based on a poem by Kipling called "Gunga Din"(1892). This misrepresentation stems from the desire of the colonisers to see the natives as subservient. Subservience, the noble service of another, often demonstrated through obedience or submission, is an honourable act. The word "subservience" appears frequently in English, especially military and legal documents. It can refer to voluntary or compulsory service such as that provided by the army or police; alternatively, it could also be employed in relation to dishonorable or unethical behavior such as refusing a prisoner to pay his fine, or accepting a defective product as if it were its own. In the film Gunga Din (1939) Gunga Din, a native water-bearer, joins three British sergeants stationed in India to complete a hazardous telegraph repair mission. Although the majority of the cast are British, it's worth pointing out that it features several American actors such as Cary Grant and Sam Jaffe. Directed by George Stevens - who previously directed shorts for Hal Roach and Charley Chase - this film marks his directorial debut. Chris Morris designed the set design for this movie, who also created The Adventures of Pinocchio and The Great



Mouse Detective as well as several films based on Charles Dickens' works such as The Pickwick Papers and The Christmas Carol. Morris' VFW post set design was an example of his ability to combine modern theatrical trends with a timeless, traditional aesthetic. During the making of the film, Filmindia magazine took issue with what they perceived to be misrepresentations of Indian characters and insensitivity towards Hindu customs. Censors then banned certain scenes that were deemed too insensitive for both its Indian setting and cast.

In the movie three British sergeants and Gunga Din fight the "Thuggee", an Indian murder cult, in colonial British India in 1880. Gunga Din, the protagonist of the film, is inspired by Rudyard Kipling's poem of the same name. This eighty-four line narrative is divided into five seventeen line stanzas and utilizes various poetic devices like alliteration, enjambment, repetition and imagery. The opening stanza begins with a young British soldier serving his country in India. He describes himself as "limpin' lump of brick-dust," or an ignorant, unskilled soldier who can't even drink alcohol when it's safe. This description of his life mirrors how his superiors and other soldiers treated him throughout the conflict.

The story of the film is combined with elements of Kipling's short story collection Soldiers Three. Kali worshippers are distorted, shown to be merciless and vile, while the British are shown to be valiant and just. The only person from India who is shown in a good light is the loyal and subservient yet brave Bhishti Gunga Din who fights his own countrymen and lays down his life serving the colonial masters. The message is clear, Indians were vile and savage, and the only way for their redemption was to serve the colonial masters and even make the greatest sacrifice in doing so. Hence Gunga Din is the epitome of subservience to British rule. Gunga Din is an admirably directed film, particularly for its portrayal of a native Indian character and emphasis on subservience over leadership or responsibility. The scene in which Colonel Sanderson formally inducts "Gunga Din" character is particularly memorable, while its ending has long been considered one of cinematic action-adventure classics. Moreover the fact that Gunga Din is an American production distances the East further from the source of its representation, according to Bernstein and Studlar (1997). India, represented by a land of fakirs and snakes, is portrayed as a country full of poverty and strange worshipping rituals in the west. It seemed to be the agenda of the west to show scenes of absolute poverty and crime in India. This prejudice against India was so rampant and stark that in BBC found itself in trouble in India in the 1970s. Reporting this incident Souvik Mukhopadhyay in Livemint writes:

*The BBC was in trouble in India in the early 1970s. Even at that time, it was about contentious BBC documentaries. When two documentaries named Calcutta and Phantom India were released, while Indira Gandhi was the*





*prime minister of India, the Indian diaspora in the UK was outraged. Even the Indian government took exception at the movies and briefly kicked the BBC out of the country. Louis Malle directed the French documentary miniseries Phantom India, which was about India. The Indian government believed Malle painted a biased picture of India by emphasising the underdeveloped regions as opposed to the developing ones. Malle also served as director of the French documentary - Calcutta. Malle's depiction of poverty, slums and rituals in the city sparked debate. One of the harshest critics of Calcutta was Oscar-winning filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who questioned Malle's motivations. ("Business News Today: Read Latest Business News, Live India Share Market News, Finance and Economy News | Mint")*

Thus, the prejudice of the western filmmakers against India is rampant. Just as every Bond villain is either a Russian or an Arabian terrorist organization, every Indian is shown to be funny, clumsy and confused. In The Big Bang Theory an American sitcom, there are a number of racial stereotypes including a Jewish household that has an overprotective mother. Above all the imperial rule used various methods of coercion and whoever travelled across the empire to other nations found that British institutions and customs were rarely questioned in the public least by those who served the empire in any official capacity (Patterson, 2009) Yet, for all the various methods of coercion and rule employed in ruling the empire, at least one common thread of imperial thought could be found wherever one traveled in the empire. Most simply, the superiority of British institutions and customs was rarely publicly questioned, at least not by those who served in any official capacity.

Gunga Din's India is not only uninhabitable but also foreign though with predictable narratives consumable in cinema, always reassuring the narcissistic 'us' of their cultural superiority over the other. Like Gunga Din "despite his freedom of form, however, and the limitless array of potential it signifies for others, the genie cannot escape the role of slave, just as Aladdin cannot avoid being a street rat and the princess cannot avoid being royalty" (Bernstein & Studlar, 1997). There are inherent limitations on narratives that such texts and cinema posed. It seemed that colonial texts attempted to obviate any admissible vulnerability. Whether it is Kipling whose poem is adapted for Gunga Din or Naipaul or Rushdie there is a manifest juxtaposition of problematic narratives, and at times there is a "hidden admission of cultural ignorance" (Suleri, 2005). In fact the camera is incapable of making up what Suleri would call "complicated acts of unseeing" the colonial narrative (Paranjpe, 1994).

#### 4. Misrepresentations of Muslims and Middle East in Hollywood



A report by the Pillars Fund and USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative indicates that lack of representation in Hollywood has an effect on how Americans think about Muslims. Entitled *Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies*, the report examines 200 popular global movies to examine their depictions of Muslims. It was found that Muslims, despite being the largest religion in the world, are not accurately represented on screen. Characters tend to be stereotyped and often come from violent or traumatic backgrounds which make them seem less than human. Additionally, Muslims were disproportionately depicted as terrorists or members of groups which use violence for achieving their objectives. According to the report, 39% of Muslim characters in the sample were perpetrators of violence and 53% targets. They were also portrayed as "foreign," speaking English with accents or not speaking at all, and wearing clothes that reflected their religious identity.

These stereotypes have a real-world effect on how viewers perceive Muslims and can shape how they act toward them in their personal lives. According to researchers, these negative perceptions and feelings of fear among Muslim youth may contribute to these effects.

Ahmed, the first Muslim actor to be nominated for an Oscar, has made a point of speaking out against how Muslims are depicted in media. Additionally, Ahmed co-founded Pillars Artist Fellowship - awarding Muslim artists with \$25,000 and career support - which provides them with financial aid and exposure.

##### **5. I Dream of Jeannie, the exotic, blonde genie.**

The other cultural text for the purpose of this paper is *I Dream of Jeannie* written for screen by Sidney Sheldon in the 1960s. Sidney Sheldon is generally known for his popular fiction like *The Other Side of Midnight*, which is a page turner. He also authored *The Doomsday Conspiracy* (1991), an action thriller, and *Nothing Lasts Forever* (1994).

Sheldon's *Tell Me Your Dreams* (1998) is a psychological thriller that deals with the condition of a split personality disorder to name a few. However, he had a career before he entered writing popular fiction. Sheldon was a screen writer in Hollywood and wrote musicals for Broadway as well. One of the most significant things that happened with Sheldon was the loss of a job in 1950s during the 'red scare' in America, where a number of screenwriters and directors were suspected of being communist sympathizers. Some were jailed while some simply lost their jobs. Sidney Sheldon in the 1960s created a fantasy series *I Dream of Jeannie*, a very popular sitcom in the US television. It deals with the relationship between a US Military astronaut Major Anthony Nelson, who discovers a bottle on a stranded island. The bottle contains a genie (Barbara Eden) who has been trapped in the bottle for



more than 2000 years due to the curse of the kind of genies, Haji. The reason for the success of the series was the situational comedies between Major Nelson, his friend Roger (Bill Daily) and a military psychiatrist Colonel Dr. Bellows. Dr. Bellows always suspects that there is something wrong with Major Nelson and tries to trap him in some hanky-panky or the other. But due to the intervention of Jeannie, Major Anthony Nelson is saved and Dr. Bellows, who is himself a psychiatrist, is recommended to go for psbye-evaluation. It looks like a very good and innocent play of situations in the backdrop of the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA) campus. The American public liked it very much until the producers tried to interfere in the script and get Jeannie married to Nelson. Sidney Sheldon was against this idea because in his opinion the success of the series lay in the “sexual tension” between the two protagonists. In *The Other Side of Me* Sheldon explains how he was forced to make these changes by the producers. But that is not the only thing that the producers interfere and make the writers do changes which distort the script as well the comprehension and portrayal of characters and situations. The concept of a genie is peculiar to the Arabic culture with their belief in the existence of djinns. According to Geller:

*Records tell us that the races of Jinn were created on a Thursday – the day after angels were created. These Jinn are said to be created either out of a ‘mix of fire’ or from ‘smokeless fire’ that is spoken of in Surah 72 could actually refer to a type of energy. This would explain why the Jinn had a longer lifespan than humans and were undetectable to the human eye. (Geller)*

Therefore, it is safe to assert that a djinn has its origin in the Arabian civilization and the very concept is Middle eastern and Islamic. A man born in the Middle East has been depicted to have blonde hair and fair skin by the Church for over 2000 years now. He is none other than Jesus Christ. The cultural appropriation of Jesus by the Caucasian race is not the only example of distortion of reality, images and history. Djinns and many other concepts have been represented according to their will by the west. The idea of genie became popular due to the story of “Aladdin and the Magic Lamp” in the cultural text 1001 Arabian Nights. In the story, the genie is depicted as a benevolent giant shapeshifting creature than can grant the wishes of whoever has a magic lamp. But the perception of the Djinns is not so simplistic in the Middle East and the Islamic world. There are various opinions and beliefs about the nature of Djinns or genies. In Islamic theology, Djinns (or genies) are not the lamp-dwelling, wish-granting servants that Westerners have come to expect.

Djinns are often feared for their potential to haunt and cause accidents or health issues. In 2000, teachers at an all-girls school in Saudi Arabia reported experiencing mysterious fits and seizures they attributed to a Djinn spirit. Hollywood and TV often feature Djinns or genies as whimsical figures, yet they are no more magical than ghosts, fairies or vampires that appear





elsewhere in popular culture. Despite their ancient Mesopotamian mythic roots, genies remain one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented creatures within modern-day pop culture. For instance, genies are sometimes depicted as evil demons or angels that try to steal people's soul. While they have the power of making wishes come true, they're not exactly known for being particularly kind-hearted supernatural beings. Idris Elba portrays a more nuanced portrayal of a genie in *Three Thousand Years of Longing*, where he portrays an intense yet romantically starved genie who attempts to seduce Alithea (Tilda Swinton) with three wishes and set him free.

One of the iconic cinematic genies, Barani from Ray Harryhausen's classic cult horror film *The Brass Bottle*, stands out. He's an emotional little fellow who laments about his lamp in its smoke-filled interior, yearning for a better life free from eternal bondage. The story has been told and retold in many different ways across cultures and civilizations, some even forming a part of lessons in school books. The west due to its resources and control over power could choose to do so because the countries in the middle east had not discovered oil till in 1960s and were poor. The animated series on Aladdin "draws heavily on U.S. representations of Iran and Iraq in recent decades, filtered through the lens of the U.S. State Department and intelligence community" (Bernstein & Studlar, 1997). Even today, the Middle East suffers from the stereotypical images of the Arabs shown to be dirty, bearded, terrorists who have a filthy lifestyle and indulge in bestiality with goats in films like *You Don't Mess with the Zohan* (2008) and *Harold and Kumar go to White Castle* (2004). *I Dream of Jeannie* also suffers from many of such cultural distortions. Like Gunga Din's

India, the Middle East has been imposed on the public consciousness in the United States through ubiquity which acquires the veracity of a cliché.

With respect to the misappropriation of the cultural symbols of the Arabian civilization Katherine Bullock writes:

*Aspect of Arabic culture has been appropriated by the West quite as vividly as the genie (aka "jinn"). In the 1992 animated Disney film Aladdin, the genie was male and voiced by Robin Williams. In the 2019 live-action Aladdin, he was played by Will Smith in blue face. Then there is the other well-known pop culture genie from the 1960s sitcom I Dream of Jeannie. The producers of the TV show didn't even try to stay true to the genie's dark roots, casting blond American actress Barbara Eden in the title role and making her a TV star. (Bullock)*



“The show was full of stereotypes and it slowly filled viewers with negative versions of Arabs/Muslims,” Katherine Bullock, an Islamic Politics lecturer at the University of Toronto, wrote for *The Conversation* in 2019. “These standardized characterizations of Arab/Muslim men as barbaric, and women as submissive, highly sexualized harem girls, is on par with the worst offensive racial stereotypes. Unfortunately, while most producers no longer consider stereotypes of other ethnic groups as entertaining or acceptable, exotic and barbaric Arab/Muslims remain normalized.” Attitudes like this can lead to everyday acts of racism. There are many cultural distortions that are evident in the film. There is a particular episode in *I Dream of Jeannie* in the third season which is the epitome of cultural distortion. The 20th episode entitled “Please Don’t Feed the Astronauts” shows the astronauts reaching an Arabian village which is stereotypical Orientalist setting with a harem of women. One of the astronauts accidentally enters the harem and is punished by a character called Hamid.

Hamid uses language which is stereotypical like “desecrated women’s tents” and “infidel dog!” The women in the tents are dressed like belly dancers. Katherine Bullock conducted her research on this episode on a group of Arabian Muslim women. Citing their reaction, she writes, “when a small group of Muslim Arab women, who had not heard of the show before, watched this episode, they instantly recognized negative stereotypes, pointing to Jeannie’s costume as an example. One of them said: “They show them as Arabs ... in tents of course. They just ... forgot to add the camels.” (Bullock, 2015) This shows how offensive the Arab Muslim women found the depiction. On the other hand the reaction of the other cultures was quite different. She writes:

*The non-Muslims I interviewed, men and women, did not notice any orientalist stereotypes. One woman said: “I’d forgotten she wore that cute little outfit.” Most said that they had not thought of Jeannie as coming from any particular region, religion or place in the world. Some were adamant that Jeannie’s world was a magical, fantasy, fairy-tale place, and not an actual region in the world, even though she is continually visiting Baghdad. They said I was wrong about my assumption that Jeannie and her family come from the Middle East. (Bullock, 2015)*

There is an overt perpetuation of prejudice against the ‘other’ in the imperial design, whether the idea of the ‘other’ constitutes of India or the Middle East and therefore Muslims.

Negative stereotypes have always prevailed in the colonial discourse and media as its extension. *I Dream of Jeannie* is replete with misrepresentations of Arabs although Bullock argues that non-Muslims did not perceive any negative media stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims (Bullock, 2015)



## CONCLUSION

Scholarship in postcolonial studies and film studies particularly that comment on revisionary scholarship has failed to break up the imagined cartography of India and the Middle East as homogenous realms of static identity. Said said “Throughout the exchange between Europeans and their “others” that began systematically half a millennium ago, the one idea that has scarcely varied is that there is an “us” and a “them,” each quite settled, clear, unassailably self-evident” (Said, 1994).

Gunga Din (1939) and I Dream of a Jeannie reflect the coloniser’s anxiety which resorts to binaries and cultural stasis. These troubling parallels suggest a broad indictment of the ‘overruled,’ with an overdue lack of cultural criticism and “misreadings of alterity” (Suleri, 2005). Orientalist understanding of colonialist texts adapted in cinema have foregrounded a romancing of the other (Bernstein & Studlar, 1997). These narratives are just a collage of mistaken ‘realities’ particularly born out of a commercial enterprise to commodify the exotic part of the binary, whether it is in the form of the genie or in the absolute subservience of Gunga Din.

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