

Neo-Orientalist Perspective on Iran, India, and East: Case Study of Oscar Winners *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar*

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Abstract

The main question this paper seeks to answer is what the legal and political This paper studies the film *Argo* which narrates the historical event of the escape of six U.S. diplomats from Iran during the 1979 hostage crisis and the Iranophobia and Islamophobia presented in the film. It also examines the film *Slumdog Millionaire* and the role of Muslim slum dwellers and their petty and thoughtless lives as well as the film *Avatar* which narrates the conflict between human beings and native people on the Planet Pandora, where humans exploit the land and suppress the natives as mirrors of the Neo-Orientalist approach towards Iranians, Indian Muslims and Easterners through the Western media. Although avoiding the uses of white bodies for forcing their central storyline and lacking the labels of 'colonialist' or 'racist', they show traces of a Western superior culture. All three movies have a potential for so-called humanism, *Argo* by depicting Western stereotypes about Iran and Iranians, *Slumdog Millionaire* by framing slums as useless spaces that are worlds of their own, and *Avatar* representing colonization by means of Orientalism through a scientific approach and war. However, underpinning all three films are Orientalist stereotypes about Iranians, Muslim slum-dwellers, and Easterners which are wrapped in the sentiment of Neo-Orientalism by the New Media.

Keywords: *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Avatar*, *Argo*, Dualism, Orientalism, Colonialism, Neo-Orientalism

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Introduction

Nominated for seven Academy Awards in 2012 and winning three Oscars including Best Film Editing, and Best Adapted Screenplay, *Argo* is an American film about the Iranian hostage crisis of 1979. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a 2009 film Nominated for ten Academy Awards in 2009 which won eight Oscars including Best Picture and Best Director, set in India, based on a novel by an Indian author, but produced, written and directed by the English. *Avatar* is also an internationally released film which broke several box office records in 2009 and became the highest-grossing film of all time. *Avatar* was also nominated for nine Academy Awards in 2010 and won three Oscars, for Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects and Best Art Direction.⁽¹⁾

Argo is a historical thriller film directed by Ben Affleck released in 2012. The movie is adapted from the book *The Master of Disguise* in which Mendez rescues six U.S. diplomats from Iran during the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. The film stars Ben Affleck as Mendez with supporting roles by John Goodman, Bryan Cranston, and Alan Arkin. Upon release, *Argo* received widespread acclaim and seven nominations for the 85th Academy Awards and won three prizes. What is more interesting is that the winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture, i.e. *Argo*, was given by First Lady Michelle Obama from the Diplomatic Room of the White House in February 2013.⁽²⁾ The film tells the true story of the underground CIA operation to rescue six U.S. diplomats who escaped their own embassy after revolutionary disturbances in Iran and received refuge from the Canadian ambassador, hiding and fearing their possible discovery and



execution. According to Jian Ghomeshi, a Canadian writer and radio figure of Iranian descent, the film has a "deeply troubling portrayal of the Iranian people". Ghomeshi asserted that "among all the rave reviews, virtually no one in the mainstream media has called out [the] unbalanced depiction of an entire ethnic national group, and the broader implications of the portrait." (Ghomeshi, 2012)

The film *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan and written by Simon Beaufoy, is based on the Novel *Q & A*, by Vikas Swarup. Accused of cheating, a Muslim orphan from the slums of Mumbai reflects back on his life. He is arrested by the police under the suspicion of cheating on a game show, and is interrogated by the authorities. The story continues by portraying Jamal's experiences in life which eventually give him the knowledge he needs to answer the tough questions given to him on the show; *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The following scenes show Jamal and his older brother, Salim, as young boys, living in the slums and losing their mother in a mob attack on Muslims. Eventually they are forced to rely on themselves and turn to petty crimes such as pick pocketing and begging. The film moves on by showing scenes of Jamal and Salim's adolescence and Jamal's wholehearted love for a childhood friend called Latika, and his search for her. The film's finishing remarks are when Jamal and Latika are finally re-united and Jamal succeeds in answering the final question on the show for one million rupees.

Avatar is a 2009 American epic science-fiction film, starring Sam Worthington, Zoe Saldana, and Stephen Lan. *Avatar* was internationally released on December 16, 2009. The film broke several box office records and became the highest-grossing film of all time. It also became the first film to gross more than \$2 billion. *Avatar* was nominated for nine Academy Awards in 2010, including Best Picture and Best Director, and won three, for Best Cinematography, Best Visual Effects and Best Art Direction.⁶⁹ In a 2007 interview with Time magazine, Cameron was asked about the meaning of the term



Avatar, to which he replied, "It's an incarnation of one of the Hindu gods taking a flesh form. In this film what that means is that the human technology in the future is capable of injecting a human's intelligence into a remotely located body, a biological body" (Winters, January 11, 2007). The movie tells the story of colonialism towards Planet Pandora, the place in which the valuable mineral, unobtainium, can be obtained and the Na'vis which are indigenous to the moon reside on this planet. The movie follows a soldier named Jake Sully who assumes his dead brother's place in the AVATAR program, where people connect to a lab-grown, organic human-Na'vi hybrid called an "avatar" and so humans can freely observe the natives so as to get them to surrender their land. The humans represent the natives as uncivilized and try to educate and shape the natives based on their own values. Indeed, the aim to obtain the powerful resource unobtainium becomes a colonial mission. The humans arrive divided: on the one hand we have those who support brute force, a direct colonization of the 'natives', 'indigenous', 'others' or 'savages' who live there, in this case the Na'vi people, killing and managing war against them to take what they want.

I- Trace of Orientalism

According to Plumwood, "a dualism is an intense, established and developed cultural expression of such hierarchical relationship, constructing central cultural concepts and identities so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable. Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of being constructed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders and kinds, and hence as not open to change" (Plumwood, 2002: 47-48). Thus, as described, dualism tends to define a social identity based on a specific quality and radically



differentiate between “us” and “them”, between the “self” and the “other” and this is done usually because of a political motive. Four principles of dualism can be described as follows: Firstly, the two sides are monolithic entities and there is no diversity among them. Secondly, Others are eternally the same and there is no dynamism in place, thirdly, exaggeration of a point of difference is a crucial factor in stoking differences between the two sides and last but not least, Others are politically radical, irrational, threatening us and must be feared. The following paper has studied all three films according to these principles so that traces of Neo-Orientalism are seen in the films.

Monolithic Entities: The first principle seen in dualism is that the two sides are monolithic entities and there is no diversity among them. In the film *Argo*, every Iranian character in the film is either a yelling indigenous nuisance, a suspicious bureaucratic stooge, or an absolute moron. The opening of the film depicts a convincing explanation of the CIA’s meddling in Iran’s affairs over the decades before the hostage crisis; meddling which led to the rise of the corrupt and tyrannical regime of Pahlavi, which eventually fell in 1979. The sequence even humanizes the Iranian people as victims of these cruelties though nothing that follows the sequence proves that, and the rest of the movie in fact undoes what this opening accomplishes. Children are depicted as being forced to spend all hours of the day rearranging shredded embassy documents to discover any trace of the identity of the missing six diplomats, statues are burned in the street and women in scarves ride around in jeeps with automatic weapons, and most traumatic of all, the streets of Tehran are filled with cranes hanging corpses of collaborators of the Pahlavi regime. One could argue that Affleck has depicted a stereotyped and caricatured view of the Iranian society and has made a mockery out of Iranian culture. Thus, no diversity whatsoever is seen in the characters of the Iranians of the film, only a black, retarded, savage image of Iranians is portrayed throughout the film.



One could vividly argue that *Slumdog millionaire* has traces of a dualistic approach in the characters and the story. The story portrays monolithic entities that are all the same. Firstly by depicting slums as shallow, with impressionistic portrayal of poverty and generalizing its inhabitants. And secondly by illustrating everyone in the film as cruel, mean, violent and having no sense of humanity whatsoever. The host of the show *Who wants to be a Millionaire?*, which is played by the famous actor Anil Kapoor, the audience of the show, the policemen, the teacher, the Hindus, the rich people namely Javid Khan, and the brother named Salim which is portrayed as the symbol of Islam, are all nasty, violent and aggressive in one way or another. The film portrays the host of the show as an inhumane character that constantly makes fun of Jamal and insults his personality and job. He is intentionally emphasizing on the superiority of the upper-middle class and their jobs and the inferiority of other jobs, and what is even more surprising is the cruelty of the audiences which laugh at the boy and also help the host to continue his scornful act. He is deceptive in tricking him by giving him the wrong answer to the question in the washroom and is a hypocrite by showing that he is happy for his success. The other inhumane and monolithic characters seen in the film are the police. The opening scene of the film shows the inspector torturing Jamal with electric shocks, hot water, and hitting and slapping him in the face. He uses the same mentality of discrimination towards the people who live in the slums by saying: "What the hell can a slum dog really know?" and continually referring to him as a "slum dog" and not by his name. The other policemen shown in the film are also portrayed as corrupt and sadistic.

While *Slumdog Millionaire* depicts monolithic entities and shows no diversity whatsoever among the different roles in the film and depicts Muslim slum dwellers as shallow, brutal and violent, the film *Avatar* illustrates different characters with different resemblance which in the eye of the naïve seem as not monolithic. But if one gets deep into the meaning and goals of the characters it could be seen that even



characters like Dr. Grace who are not in favor of war and aggression still believe in colonization through means of science. Dr. Grace Augustine resembles a Scientific method for colonizing. She is a scientist that believes in dialogue, diplomacy, understanding the Na'vi and achieving her scientific goals through peaceful means, without violence and brutality. She tries to convince Parker, who is the corporate administrator for the RDA mining operation, to use a diplomatic method for obtaining what he wants instead of war. *She states: "The wealth of this world isn't in the ground, it's all around us. The Na'vi know that, and they're fighting to defend it. If you wanna share this world with them, you need to understand them."* Dr. Grace can be criticized that she still believes 'the humans' are superior, and have the right to order the Na'vi people around and is looking for the humans' interests. She believes that because of science, humans have the right to go to the Na'vi's land and even colonize them, but should do it through diplomacy. Thus, all the human characters in the film *Avatar* believe in the superiority of the West, colonization through different means and a subtle Neo-Orientalism which is cleverly depicted without being obvious.

Generalization: The second principle of dualism can be defined such that others are eternally the same and that there is no dynamism in place which is shown in all three movies. Ben Affleck in the film *Argo* generalizes violence, aggression and hostility to all the Iranians, and what is more distressing is that he does not confine this to the Iranian government, police or officials, but generalizes to extend this portrayal to all Iranians. The superficiality of every single one of the film's Iranian characters is so blunt and obvious, and besides from one character sympathetic to the Americans, the maid at the Canadian residence who eventually becomes a refugee and citizen of Iraq, there is not one single Iranian who is slightly likeable in the entire film. The Iranians depicted in *Argo* are basically and in essence a screaming, loud mass of frantic people. They smash buildings, torch flags, bang on cars, hit and stab innocent people and exploit children. They are scary, distrustful, and essentially violent and sadistic. Cultural



critic Nicolini states that *Argo* completely neglected to provide the Iranian side of the story, and said: “The film is a sanitized version of the events.” She argued that “there is nothing authentic about the film’s manipulation of historical events,” and described the movie as “pure political propaganda.”⁴⁾

In *Slumdog Millionaire*, violence and aggression and generalization comes to the extreme when Muslims are depicted in the movie. Salim, Jamal’s brother, is portrayed as a symbol of Islam. Whereas Salim is portrayed as a practicing and devoted Muslim, he has traces of a radical terrorist and a fanatic Muslim. While Jamal himself and many other characters in the film are also Muslims, Salim is the only person who uses Arabic terms like: *Allahu Akbar* (meaning God is Greatest), or “O lord forgive me, for I have sinned” and he is the only person depicted praying in the movie. The movie shows how he is bad in *essence* even from a young age by selling Jamal’s autograph of Amitabh Bachchan which was so dear to Jamal, or by letting go of Latika’s hand in the train scene. Salim is a gangster, a mob, a gambler, a killer, and in most scenes drunk and is the main cause of Jamal and Latika’s separation, making him the antagonist of the movie. He is a practicing Muslim that kills without any boundaries or any sense of humanity and also commits suicide in a bath tub full of money while shooting at the other mobsters. Salim in this film is portrayed as a typical *Western*-style extremist Muslim and terrorist. The movie not only generalizes the characters and classes and puts labels on them, but also lacks any dynamism whatsoever. The film depicts all the labor performed by the poor or the inhabitants of the slums as either petty hustling or criminal acts. No one is occupied with any productive and meaningful work. As Sengupta states: “No associational life whatsoever: no self-help group, no community organization, no recreational club and no charitable society is seen in the movie” (Sengupta, 2010). The world of slums is also without familial bonds of any depth, or even specific individuals sympathy and consideration. This is specifically seen when Jamal’s mother is killed by the Hindus,



and Jamal and Salim are immediately malformed into street beggars. One might ask oneself; “why does no one, perhaps a neighbor or a relative help them?” As Sengupta again concludes: “View of those who live and work in the country’s slums: the ever-resilient ‘culture of poverty’ narrative” (Sengupta, 2010). The same stereotype, generalization and depiction that others are eternally the same and can never change, is realized.

This generalization and seeing no dynamism in Others is clearly shown in the movie *Avatar* through Col. Quaritch and Parker Selfridge. Col. Quaritch is the symbol of a warrior who just obeys and encourages the Boss to engage in conflict, war and killing. He presents methods of war and aggression for colonizing. He is a violent, ignorant person who uses means of force and war, deceives and uses cruelty. According to him, only fighting and war is the solution to obtain relevant goals. He, like other Orientalists, has biased and dualistic ideas about the Others. He says: *I want you to learn these savages from the inside, I want you to gain their trust. I need to know how to force their cooperation, or hammer them hard if they won't.* Parker Selfridge (the corporate administrator for the RDA mining operation) is the symbol of the Western countries’ leaders. He is looking only for interests and profit and believes in human superiority and has no pity for the Na'vis. According to him, diplomacy doesn't work so they should go through war for colonizing the Others and gaining their resources. He states: *This is why we're here. Unobtainium. Because this little gray rock sells for twenty million a kilo. That's the only reason. It's what pays for the whole party, it's what pays for your science...Now those savages are threatening our whole operation. We're on the brink of war and you're supposed to be finding a diplomatic solution!* Thus both characters not only generalize the Others but see them as nothing but savages that should be killed and slaughtered. Thus, as seen from the examples, all three movies generalize Others and see no dynamism among any of them.

Exaggeration of Differences: The third trait of dualism that is harsh in the movies is the exaggeration of differences. *Argo* ultimately



emphasizes the dualistic opposition of a civilized and cultured West and a savage and vicious Iran. Aside from the way Iranians are depicted as savages, the film presents a moral paradigm where the Americans are not merely protagonists but heroes. The six hostages are all kind, compassionate and loving towards each other, and Mendez is depicted as a loving father who feels sympathy for his fellowmen and even disobeys the commands given to him by his supervisor in order to save the Americans. Aside from Mendez, his supervisor and even the White House and the president himself, are ready to sacrifice their honor and lives to save the six hostages to a point where the supervisor (Jack O'Donnell) has, according to the film, 'crossed the red line' for this mission. Thus, this black and white multitude is accentuated throughout the movie through the characters and the story. Many speeches in the movie are in Persian, but only when Persian is spoken by a Western character does the dialogue have subtitles. Persian spoken by Iranian characters in the film is incomprehensible and loud noise. One could argue that the film correctly reflects the contemporary reality of today's world, in which the West imposes its discourse on Iranians, but is incapable of listening to theirs. What is even more interesting is that even Ken Taylor, the former Canadian Ambassador to Iran at the time of the Hostage crisis has also criticized the movie, saying: "*Argo* incorporates a myriad of creative liberties that included the 'black and white' portrayal of Iranian people and fabricated scenes", also stating that *Argo* "characterizes people in a way that isn't quite right."⁶

In *Slumdog Millionaire*, while Jamal and Latika are symbols of purity, honesty, love and compassion, every adult the children come across is heartless; the teacher, the host of the show, the audience, the Sikhs in the train and the police. The other main exaggeration of differences is seen between the white men and the Indians. The film only depicts two scenes where Western men are shown: the American and the European tourists in Taj Mahal. The white tourists are the only adults who are kind to the boys; they are shown as being naive, even-tempered, polite



and humane. The European tourist, while knowing that Jamal is giving false statements about Taj Mahal, is patient and tolerant. The other scene also depicts the Americans as hurrying to Jamal's rescue, protecting him from the driver's punches, and handing him a hundred dollar bill in the name of 'American justice'. The actual quotation of the movie is staggering, when Jamal says: "You wanted to know what the real India is, this is the *real India*." Jamal means that this ugly, dirty, cruel and violent perception of India is the *truth* about India, not the beauty of Taj Mahal or how the tourist guides depicts India for you. In response, the American tourist hugs him and gives him money while stating ... "and this is the *real America*." This sense of otherness and exaggeration can also be seen in the way the movie portrays the slums as dirty, cruel and violent places. As Stam and Spence claim, "these cameras skillfully create an intense sense of difference between the viewer's (affluent, comfortable, developed) world and Jamal's impoverished one. The interesting question, however, is how this 'difference is transformed into "otherness" or exploited by and for power" (Stam and Spence, 1983).

This exaggeration of differences is also seen in the film *Avatar*; their religion is nothing more than primeval science, an accident of insight that needs European systems of evaluation for its legitimacy. They are known as backward, uncivilized and savage people. What comes to mind is an exaggeration of a point of difference as being a crucial factor in stoking differences between the two sides and that Others are shown as secondary or derivative.

Otherness: The fourth characteristic that can be described as a dualistic trait in the films is a sense of otherness and that these Others are irrational, they threaten us and fearing them is inevitable. In the film *Argo*, Iranians are most often seen through the eyes of the hostages as frightening threats. These Iranians are so dangerous and so alien that it might as well be a different planet: the locals are a mysterious mass with irrational rules. For instance, as the Americans are walking through the Grand Bazaar, you see a man standing up, roaring at the



female American in Persian to put on *hijab* and when she takes a picture of a shop, the shop owner attacks the photographer, yelling at her inconceivably in Persian, because she took a picture of his shop. The shopkeeper is so irrational that even when she gives the picture back, he does not calm down. The episode is overall terrifying, disturbing, and underlies the worst fears of Westerners traveling to “exotic” countries and being offended by the locals, whom they imagine as superstitious and irrational. Many threatening and radical actions are seen throughout the film such as the violent acts of the security guard in the airport, the masses banging on the Americans’ car, shooting innocent people on the streets without a trial and covering the hostages’ heads, ironically like the Guantanamo Bay prisoners, and putting them through false executions. This all creates an image of Iran and Iranians as radical extremist that should be feared and which threaten the West. Thus, *Argo* is a great example of the generalized ‘us-versus-them’ narrative of the war on terror. It is the story of the brave C.I.A. versus the Muslim threat, which is exactly the narrative of what today's politicians propagate.

In the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the idea that slums cause the city’s problems is maintained as supremacy, even for the middle-class of India. The slum-dwellers are the ‘other’ and what is suffered today in India politically, economically, and socially are just because of them. As Matza puts it: “The ‘culture of poverty’ thesis typically worked together with purported distinctions between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving poor’ to produce a thoroughly unsympathetic portrayal of the urban poor—and of slum-dwellers in particular—as people who had rejected the dominant norms of their society, and were therefore ‘disreputable’, even ‘dangerous’ (Matza, 1966; Chevalier & F Jellinek, 1973).

Also in the film *Avatar*, Na’vis are politically radical, irrational, threatening and must be feared. When Col. Quaritch welcomes the new teams who have entered the Pandora, he says: “*Out there beyond that fence every living thing that crawls, flies, or squats in the mud wants to kill you and eat*



your eyes for jujubes. We have an indigenous population of humanoids called the Na'vi. They're fond of arrows dipped in a neurotoxin that will stop your heart in one minute. And they have bones reinforced with naturally occurring carbon fiber. They are very hard to kill." This is the image that he makes of the native people.

II- Superiority of the West

The other feature seen in the films is the superiority of the Westernized upper class. Describing the supremacy of the West needs no explanation in the film *Argo*, since the whole story is seen through the eyes of the Americans; the American protagonist and the civilized and superior American is the main plot and theme of the movie. When Mendez's mission is successfully accomplished, the Americans celebrate by saying: We made history tonight and are all given medals and awards and Mendez is called 'The great American' by the president. Cultural critic Nicolini rightfully criticized *Argo* stating: "Given the vast number of people who have died in the Middle East (Americans, Iranians, Iraqis, Afghanis, etc.), why should we give so much attention to 6 white American diplomats who were saved by Hollywood and the CIA? What about all the other people from so many cultural demographics who have and are continuing to be massacred, murdered and tortured daily?" the critic argued. "Argo, above all else, is a piece of conservative liberal propaganda created by Hollywood to support the Obama administration's conservative liberal politics as we move toward the Presidential election," she said before Obama was re-elected for the second term. "It also primes the war wheels for an American-supported Israeli attack on Iran, so that Leftists can feel okay about the war when they cast their vote for Obama in November (2012)," the critic pointed out."⁶ As stated, according to the film *Argo* Americans are portrayed as the protagonist, the civilized and the superior, which should be sympathized with by the rest of the world and thus *Argo* portrays for us who is right and who is wrong; it gives us heroes to adore and villains to condemn and despise and entreats us to differentiate between what we know and what we believe. It tells us that if we all invest in the myth of



Western supremacy the West might actually succeed.

In the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, the TV host demonstrates sarcasm trying to legitimize the superiority of the Westernized upper middle class in India and the inferiority of the “slumdogs,” who are victims of the market forces and neoliberalism themselves but are blamed for not being Westernized and successful enough. The film somehow summarizes and expresses so many wishes, hopes, and longings of the West toward what is perceived as the troubled East. Sengupta has labeled the film as a story of a: “...white man’s imagined India. It’s not quite snake charmers, but it’s close. It’s a poverty tour” (Matza, 1966; Chevalier & F Jellinek, 1973). Koehler also gives a good description of how the film portrays India through the glasses of ‘the superior West’ and again sees India through the stereotyped Western view. He states: “Boyle’s feverish, woozy, drunken, and thoroughly contrived picaresque also conveniently packages misperceptions about India (and the East) that continue to support the dominant Western view of the Subcontinent, making the film a potent object to examine not only what is cockeyed about an outsider’s view (particularly, an Englishman’s view) of India, but even more, what is misperceived by a middlebrow critical establishment and audience about what comprises world cinema” (Koehler, 2009).

One could also see the superiority of the West in film *Avatar*, where the Na’vis as non-humans are hyper-separated in many ways; in their clothing, their behaviors and also their religion and spiritual beliefs. Thus humans use science to order the Others and place them in an inferior state and as lesser beings and accordingly can only be saved through the power and knowledge of the West. This superiority of the West and the inferiority of the East are clearly shown in the two characters of Jake and Neyriti. Jake Sully in the movie *Avatar* is the symbol of the *West*. He is the one who is transformed by the Na’vis and a white man who saves the Na’vi people (Others). He plays the role of a warrior who became palsy in war. This handicapped white man has a main role to help Na’vi people fight humans. He becomes the leader of the people and this handicapped



man is equated with the entire Na'vi race. He has no presumption and has come to Pandora to learn with his bad intentions and company's interests. He quotes: *Well, if I'm like a child, then uh...maybe you should teach me. I came to learn.* His actions are ignorant of the Na'vi way of life and assert his own human customs and this can be seen in scenes such as Jake stepping forward and offering a hand shake (Bernstein, and Studlar, 1997: 3). Therefore, if the humans have nothing to offer the Na'vi, then why does Jake, the sympathetic white human Marine, become the savior of the Na'vi? Why tell the story from his standpoint at all? Why not make Neytiri, the main Na'vi figure, the film's centre? Why not allow them to save themselves? The answer is obvious; the Others can't save themselves and they need someone from the West who is superior and can save them. According to the movie, even the Na'vi people believe that only a white man can save them.

III- Neo-Orientalism

To understand neo-Orientalism, one should understand the concepts of Orientalism and Colonialism and what defines and characterizes them. Orientalism defines 'the Orient' as a social label which promotes that Orientals are radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some essence proper to that space. Said maintains that in any observation, research or analysis, the intention of doing the job is a decisive factor. There is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful observation and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge – if we can call it that – that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, hostility and outright war (Samiei, 2010: xiv). Said shows the close relationship between knowing the Orient and dominating it by showing the close relationship between knowledge and power. Said worked on the terminology and epistemology of imperialism, stating that there is no such thing as value-free knowledge and by knowing the orient, one could rule and govern it. Said uses 'Orientalism' in many different ways. In Said's terminology, Orientalism



is studying the Middle East and Asia in broad contexts such as their history, literature, culture and philology. Secondly, he describes it as a term that helped Europe to define itself in the mirror of Orientalism, as being 'what the Orientals are not', based on dualistic concepts of oppositions. Thirdly, Said describes Orientalism as a way of categorizing and classifying the knowledge about the Orient in order to rule and govern it⁹. This approach clearly shows how Said describes knowledge to be the power itself and by this, one could dominate the Orient by knowing it.

With the emergence of new theories like "Clash of Civilizations" of Huntington, and G. Kepel and his theory of 'New Andalusia', escalating empirical studies on Islam by many Western research organizations which highlight Islamic civilization, the fall of the Soviet Union which put U.S foreign policy without an enemy, the September 11th event and the acts of terror in the name of Islam and the revolution in information technology which has provided access for everyone, anywhere and the issue of globalization, Orientalism has entered a new paradigm and has taken a new form, which is less evident, obvious, wrapped in a new delicate design and promoted by new means such as New Media including films. According to Samiei, Orientalism, as Edward Said used the term, can be defined as an ideology which promotes the 'West-and-Islam' dualism and the thought that 'Others are less human'. Since Said first published his ideas in 1978, however, the world seems to have become much more interdependent and political interrelations between the West and Islam have altered dramatically. Consequently this dualism, though more or less in place, has been influenced by increasing waves of globalization and been redistributed and reshaped in a different form called 'Neo-Orientalism' (Samiei, 2010). With these new changes in the recent decades, a new Orientalism is set in place which is enfolded in a new subtle design that is less evident and obvious.

Neo-Orientalism in *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar*: The film *Argo* clearly has dualistic and Orientalist traits of Others being



less human both in the plot, characters and theme which clearly in this film are Iranians. In his speech upon receiving the Oscars, Affleck said, “I want to thank our friends in Iran who live under terrible circumstances.” Mehr News’s response to this was: “After distorting history, Ben Affleck continues to show a bleak picture of Iran: Iranians live in terrible circumstances.”⁶⁸ In one scene, an Iranian teases the CIA protagonist with a dialogue straight out of Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’, stating “snake charmers and flying carpets” in order to explain the exotic orient for filming. One could claim that Affleck is clearly familiar with standard post-colonial discourse. His film delivers its main points with a hypocritical honesty that allows the audience to feel superior. Another point that is realized in *Argo* is that in order for Mendez to save the Americans, he and his supervisor contact a Hollywood make-up artist to set up a phony film studio, and successfully establish the deception of developing *Argo*, a science fantasy film in Iran. It is this movie within a movie that makes ‘Argo’ a complex example of the power of fiction, to not only tell a story, but also to shape reality. *Argo* is presumably about a fake movie which saves lives, and hence about the undeniable power of movies and specifically the power of Hollywood. Just as the setting of “Argo” is an Orientalist vision of an exotic pseudo-Middle Eastern fantasy world where anything is possible, *Argo* takes place in an Orientalist version of Tehran.⁶⁹

Slumdog Millionaire also shows vivid traits of Orientalism and dualistic approaches of generalizing everything to a simple logic, creating a sense of “otherness” that should be feared and exaggeration of differences between the “self” and the “other”. These concepts are also emphasized even greater through the filming of the movie. Boyle uses a series of long-distance and overhead shots, and by that the differences are weakened, and the Orient is reduced to a uniform space, defined only by markers that convey a sense of a flawed social and political system (Sengupta, 2010). *Slumdog*’s shifting panoramas of roughness call to mind Edward Said’s observation that:



“One of the enduring techniques through which the ‘inscrutable’ Orient is delivered to the Occident is surveillance from above, or distance, with ‘the aim of getting hold of the whole sprawling panorama before him...every detail [is seen] through the device of a set of reductive categories” (Said, 1996). What is of real importance is to distinguish between the real and the Orientalist Image of the slum dwellers. The Orientalist image is that; it depicts the ‘slum’ as an uncultivated wasteland, a place of evil and decay that lacks order, productivity and compassion but the real image is that many of the film’s sequences were filmed in a slum called Dharavi, which is home to one million people of enormous ethnic and religious diversity (Magala, 2010). Dharavi is actually the core of industrial and commercial activity. There are thousands of highly profitable small businesses, in fields such as embroidery, pottery, jewelry making, wood workshops, soap manufacturing, leather tanning and food processing (McDougal, 4 March 2007). Sengupta states about the dwellers in Dharavi and their mutual networks: “While Dharavi no doubt has its share of underworld bosses and simmering communal tensions (the latter fuelled continually by Mumbai’s Shiv Sena movement), its residents have nurtured many collaborative networks, often across potentially volatile lines of religion and caste, to set up community organizations that address a range of needs, such as affordable childcare, waste disposal and clean water” (Sengupta, 2010). One should not forget that beside collaborative social and economical networks, the slum’s residents, despite their poverty, have valuable lives and generous spirits.

From an analytical perspective, *Avatar* reveals colonialism and its intrinsic notions of unusual "Other"/East. According to Said, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences... Unlike the Americans, the French and the British—less so the Germans, Russians, Spanish, Portuguese, Italians, and Swiss—have had a long tradition of what I



shall be calling Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West)" (Said, 2003: 1-2). That's how Said has defined Orient and Orientalism. In *Avatar*, Pandora is shown as a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes and the most recurring images of the Other.

Orientalism as a "style of thought" based on the duality between the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West, is an influential European ideological creation whose myths influenced all records of knowledge, becoming "the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, 'mind', destiny and so on" (Said, 2003) Bernstein believes that "cultural critics and theorists have taken up Orientalism as an intriguing and compelling paradigm for the representation of race, ethnicity, and gender in the media and particularly in film" (Bernstein, and Studlar, 1997: 4-5). Thus we can place a critique of this paradigm of Orientalism in Affleck's, Boyle's, and Cameron's techniques of exaggeration and hyperbole in characterization, situations, cinematography, lighting and color which can be seen as the idea of dualism.

Colonialism in *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar: Argo* ingenuously portrays an American conquest and makes Americans 'feel proud' of the U.S and obviously the CIA. One could argue that the film instead of focusing on revolutionary Iran like always had to focus on the 'white Americans in danger' storyline. It's a story about Americans in Iran that for the plot's convenience reduces Iranians to mostly antagonists like many other Hollywood films. Ben Affleck does not realize that this movie should have been about how the CIA



interfered in Iran's affairs and Iranians resented the U.S. for interfering in Iran's affairs. The very reason behind this hostage taking was that in the 1950s, the CIA overthrew an Iranian Prime Minister named Mosaddegh for being brave enough to nationalize Iran's oil, which set grounds for Mohammed Reza Pahlavi to enforce an authoritarian government under the disguise of Westernization and progress. When the revolution in Iran took place, the Iranians held the Shah responsible for all the torture, injustice and brutal acts of his governance and when the U.S. refused to hand him over to the people, Iranians saw the U.S. as denying them justice; basically deciding whether the Shah would answer for what he'd done when the choice was not America's or the CIA's to make. Consequently, the demonstrations and the hostage taking of the U.S. diplomats took place. Although these events were somehow narrated at the beginning of the movie, the film went on describing and depicting a whole other story of the Americans in peril and the heroic image of CIA and American government and justifying all the meddling in Iran's affairs through colonial and imperialistic means.

Although *Slumdog Millionaire* is set in India, and is based on a novel by an Indian author, it is produced, written and directed by English people who have little or minimal knowledge of Indian life and culture. As Paul states: "The director Danny Boyle, had never so much as visited India before making this film" (Paul, 2011). *Slumdog Millionaire* also shows traits of colonialism and the celebration of the export of the British game show to the Indian viewing public named "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" The film revolves around this show, and this show is precisely the symbol of the 'Western narrative of life'. The show claims that since Indians are playing our game, then we- the West- are the directors of the world and India is becoming the centre of the world, because it is playing our game. Also one should not fail to remember that the whole game and its success are only by chance and accidental knowledge, somehow depicting that the success of India is only by chance and fortuitous. The other British and Western theme is the



British-themed 'Call Center' which is portrayed as the opening of opportunity and upward mobility for Jamal. This is how Koehler speaks of the land of prosperity and opportunity only through the British themes and Western values and way of life. "Perhaps especially now, after the fearsome attacks by Islamist extremists on Mumbai's most cherished institutions and on Western tourists, Boyle's film is just the soft pillow for concerned Western viewers to plump their heads; surely, there's hope, when even a Muslim lad who is abused, scorned, and rejected can recover his dignity, win the girl and thrive in a world free of terror. It's precisely the India of which Westerners, starting with its former British masters, heartily dream, an India where everything is possible" (Koehler, 2009).

Avatar shows the defeat of voracious and American-inspired imperialists, but does so in a provisional setting, the movie shows a historical colonization. The West as a colonizer and the East or the Others as the ones who are colonized. This can be analyzed in three phases. First: before colonization, when the Westerners send their Orientalists to the East to gain more knowledge and information about them, to know them and gain their trust. That's what Jake Sully does in the film. He tries to gain Na'vi people's trust and after that obtain what the West want through a scientific approach and in an indirect way or through war and direct way which leads to colonization. Second: During Colonization: in which they begin to attack the Orient through war and occupy the land step by step. They promote their language and their culture in the Orient. In *Avatar* they attack the holy tree of the Navi and begin the war. Last but not least, the third period after Colonization where Jack as a leader helps the Others to defend themselves and their land, this white man becomes the leader of the Navi and helps them fight and again this is the West that the Others need to be saved.

IV- Comparative Perspective

One could see *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *Avatar* as great examples of dualism both in the characters and the stories. The sense



of exaggeration, generalization, lacking any dynamism and the sense of otherness and that these others are irrational and dangerous adds greatly to their dualism. While sharing these traits, there are also differences in how this Orientalism is depicted in the three movies. The protagonist figure of the Americans, the Islamophobia and Iranophobia presented in *Argo*, the emphasis on the superiority of the Westernized upper class in *Slumdog Millionaire* and the Westernized scientists in *Avatar* also show traits of Orientalism and dualistic approaches of generalizing everything to a simple logic. Firstly in *Argo* and *Avatar*, Iranian Muslims and Easterners are disparaged and mocked through the eyes of a Westerner or better said an American while in *Slumdog Millionaire* this is done through the eyes of an Indian which Sardar describes as Orientalist or the 'Brown sahib' (Sardar, 1999: 86). As Nezvati Soguk defines it: "One who physically resides in the 'East', and sometimes in the west, yet spiritually feeds on the west. S/he announces her/himself to be 'post-oriental' or 'postcolonial', yet is a practicing member of the 'Orientalising' praxis in its daily operations in the interpenetrating realms of art, aesthetics, folklore, media, education, and so on." *Slumdog Millionaire* depicts dualistic and Orientalist traits as being portrayed through the eyes of the European and the American but wrapped and given to you by the middle class Indian, so that one would not label it as having Orientalist or colonialist traits and figures. *Avatar* on the other hand depicts this Orientalism through a science fiction of colonization and the need of Others to be rescued by the West and the 'white man'.

Secondly, *Argo* reveals the sophisticated US scheme to make use of every medium in its propaganda tools to provoke Iranophobia across the globe. Iranian academic Dr. Salami wrote in an article on Press TV website in November 2012. "Argo is an arrogant instance of Hollywoodism. As a matter of fact, it is yet another attempt to foment Iranophobia not only in the USA but across the world as well, in recent years, Iranophobia has come to encompass a wider scope of



media including cinema which is incontestably capable of exercising a more powerful effect on manipulating the audience” Furthermore in *Argo* all the brutality and viciousness and irrationality of Iranians are highlighted because Islam and the sense of Iranophobia is highlighted through Islamophobia. By playing the Azan- which is a symbol of Islam, by depicting Imam Khomeini’s photo on many occasions throughout the film and portraying many religious clerks with head turbans on the streets and doing violent actions, the emphasis on hostility of Islam and Islamophobia is highlighted, while in *Avatar* this is only confined to superstitious beliefs and spirituality of the Na’vi which is somewhat portrayed as a fine attribute for them. In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the emphasis on backwardness and uncivilized Indians is due to their religion, but not as bold as what is viewed in *Argo*.

Thirdly, in *Argo* the past is a mirror image of the present. The film quite clearly aims to draw parallels between that moment of history and the U.S's current and increasingly aggressive attitude towards Iran, which is motivated continually by a belligerent Israel. Fars News declared, “In a rare occasion in Oscar history, the First Lady announced the winner for Best Picture for the anti-Iran Film ‘Argo,’ which is produced by the Zionist company Warner Bros.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Fourthly, In *Slumdog Millionaire*, the American tourists and export of the British game show are admired, but in *Avatar*, the natives show suspicion and distrust towards the humans, but hostility and resentment towards Americans is accentuated much more in *Argo* where anti-American premise is seen in the Iranian dialogues, scenery of the film and actions. You’re an American, you’re a spy!, or Stop speaking English, you should speak Farsi here, this is Iran! Photos and U.S flags being burnt by Iranians and billboards of ‘down with U.S.A’ scattered throughout the film are only a few examples of many anti-American notions of Iranians used in the film. Last but not least, one could argue that *Argo* shows attributes of Orientalism and dualism by focusing on the white Americans in danger against the Iranian antagonists. It portrays a fictional story of *Argo*, a film within



a film, between the truth and fiction. *Argo* is about the complex fictional worlds that are created with political consciousness by Americans about Iranians and Muslims which are easy for Westerners to believe, that are far away from the actual reality and truth, and as Joe states in the movie: My little story is the only thing between you and the gun to your head! The same concept is also seen in *Slumdog Millionaire* and the qualities of colonialism and the celebration of the export of the British game show and the Western depiction of life to the Indian viewing public named "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" To conclude, all three movies depict the Neo-Orientalist view of Iran and Iranians, Indian Muslims and Easterners only through different lenses to highlight Iranophobia, Islamophobia and less evident East-phobia.

Conclusion

Said argues that the media has its own share in perpetuating the myth of the Orient: "One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been the reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds" (Said, 2003: 26). Affleck's *Argo*, Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* and James Cameron's *Avatar* all have dualistic features which are similar to the framework defined in Said's *Orientalism*. They all show the sharp Otherness and exaggeration of differences in their films. In *Argo*, the American hostage taking is seen through the eyes of the civilized West and the heroic actions of a CIA agent in rescuing the Americans from the savage and malicious Iranians, in *Slumdog Millionaire* Boyle makes Jamal the Muslim Indian, the superstar who embodies values of Western culture, and in *Avatar*, the West uses the direct way of colonization through conflict and war and indirect way of colonization using scientific approaches. In all three films, there is clearly a distinction between the modern, civilized West and a traditional backward East with its bad and good elements, but as Tyree argues, the



latter having Westernized values and principles. “The tactic resonates with the work of a new breed of developmentalist, who indignantly reject colonialism’s and modernization theory’s overtly paternalistic distinctions between a modern, civilized West and a traditional backward Third World—who argue for a robust appreciation of culture and inter-cultural learning in the making of human development indices, for good governance models, and so on—but who nevertheless read cultures beyond their own as having both good and bad elements, with the former consistently mirroring the West’s prized values, and the latter in need of speedy obliteration” (Tyree, 2009). This is where the concept of Neo-Orientalism arises. This Orientalism is no longer presented through the West’s civilizing mission, but by rescuing Americans from the hands of horrendous Iranians and Iran, by freeing fine locals like Jamal or the Na’vi people from the horrific and evil India and East.

Argo, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar* are all perfect examples of a Neo-Orientalist approach towards the Iranians, Indians and the East in the era of the twenty first century. It is an Orientalism wrapped in a new delicate design that can only be revealed to the few who look beyond the structures and the outward images. One could see that *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar* avoid the use of white bodies to force their central storyline. They even lack the labels of ‘colonialist’ or ‘racist’ but underneath, they clearly show the superiority of Western culture. The power of films and propaganda are so vast that concepts of the new culturalism that are proliferated in the three films are also present among the American masses, which sense this cultural difference with respect to the Iranians, Indian Muslims and Easterners. *Argo*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, and *Avatar* in one way or another fit into the ‘grammar of imperialism’ (Paul, 2011) but in the surface they deny the charges. All this said, along with traits of colonialism, lead us to a conclusion about neo-Orientalist characteristics of the films; an Orientalism beneath the outward image, which lack the labels of Orientalism but convey the same ideas only in a polite and gracious way.

Notes

1. www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/
2. www.nydailynews.com
3. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/>
4. <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/02/25/290790/argo-wins-oscar-hollywood-plays-dirty/>
5. <http://www.presstv.com/detail/2013/02/25/290790/argo-wins-oscar-hollywood-plays-dirty>
6. www.presstv.com/detail/2013/02/25/290790/argo-wins-oscar-hollywood-plays-dirty/
7. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/colonialism/>
8. www.mehrnews.com
9. <http://www.policymic.com/articles/20970/argo-movie-review-good-filmmaking-but-it-stereotypes-the-middle-east-shamelessly>
10. www.articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-02-25/world/37275941_1_iranian-media-anti-iran-mehr-news

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