

STEREOTYPING ARABS AND MUSLIMS

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will examine language and the power of words to craft impressions.
- Students will identify stereotypical thinking about Arab people, Muslims and Islam.
- Students will recognize cultural stereotypes as well as counter-stereotypical efforts in popular media.

VOCABULARY & CONCEPTS

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)	counter-stereotype	<i>keffiyeh</i>	stereotype
Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)	jihad	KKK	

MEDIUM

Video clips from the feature film True Lies and the television programs The West Wing, 24 and The Daily Show (Total running time: 9 min, 3 sec)



MATERIALS NEEDED

- Unit 4, Lesson 2 video clips from DVD or Web site

TIME

45 minutes

LESSON STEPS

1. Present *Introduction to the Lesson* (pg. 2) to the class.
2. Present *Background Information* (pg. 3, 4, 6, 7) for each clip before showing and ask students to look for stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages about Arabs or Muslims in each clip.
3. Play each video clip and lead a discussion for each using the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* (pg. 3-8) as a guide. Present *Additional Information* (pg. 4, 5, 7, 8) for each clip (optional).
4. Lead a discussion about stereotyping using *Further Questions* (pg. 9).

INTRODUCTION TO THE LESSON

Since World War II, countries in the Middle East have been bombarded with western media via satellite and Internet transmission. By the early 1990s, up to 60% of entertainment television programs broadcast in the Middle East were produced in the U.S. and Europe. Some have called the resulting impact “cultural imperialism” or “Westoxification.” These critics argue that cultural imports have created tensions in the Middle East between an older generation that holds to traditional values and a younger generation that wants a consumer lifestyle marketed in western TV and film (Molwana 44).

In addition to consumerism, another aspect of western media that affects both western and Middle Eastern audiences is the stereotypical way in which Arab and Muslim people have often been portrayed in U.S. television and film. One online dictionary defines a stereotype as “a conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conception, opinion, or image” (TheFreeDictionary.com). Stereotyping of Arab people in U.S. films has become a major issue in recent years. Professor Jack Shaheen reviewed more than 900 films in his book Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People, which explores the issue of stereotyping Arab and Muslim people. He concluded that the “vast majority [of Hollywood films]...portray Arabs by distorting at every turn what most Arab men, women and children are really like” (1). Shaheen found that Islam in particular is targeted by “imagemakers (who) regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror, depicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders, and as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons” (9).

The introduction to Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People begins with a quote from media analyst Sydney Harris: “The popular caricature of the average Arab is as mythical as the old portrait of the Jew. He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airplanes and blowing up public buildings. It seems that the human race cannot discriminate between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable and the ethnic strain from which they spring. If the Italians have the Mafia, all Italians are suspect; if the Jews have financiers, all Jews are part of an international conspiracy; if the Arabs have fanatics, all Arabs are violent. In the world today, more than ever, barriers of this kind must be broken, for we are all more alike than we are different” (qtd. in Shaheen 1).

Some television producers and filmmakers work to challenge these stereotypes. According to wikipedia.org, a counter-stereotype is “the reverse of a stereotype or simply an individual who doesn’t conform to stereotypes. It can also be opposition to the process of stereotyping.” Recent efforts at countering negative stereotypes have come as a result of studies like Professor Shaheen’s and protests by groups working for fairness, like the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC).

In this lesson, you will see four brief clips - one from the feature film True Lies, and others from the television programs 24, The West Wing and The Daily Show. For each of these clips, look carefully for stereotypes or counter-stereotypes and be prepared to provide evidence to support your analysis.

→ **Present** the *Background Information* that will help students understand the particular context for each clip.

- **Project** each clip in turn, asking the probe questions. Use the *Questions, Suggested Answers and Evidence* to focus the decoding.
- **Use** the *Additional Information* to identify public concerns about stereotyping within that film or series.
- **Use Further Questions** to discuss stereotyping.

True Lies



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

In this 1994 feature film, the character played by Arnold Schwarzenegger works for a super-secret government agency fighting terrorism. He and his wife are captured by Muslim extremists and taken to an island where the terrorists have nuclear warheads. In this scene, Aziz, the leader of “Crimson Jihad,” who is nicknamed “Sand Spider” by the U.S. agents, is making a videotaped threat to the U.S. government. As you watch this clip look for stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages.

- **Show** the clip from True Lies.

QUESTION	Are there stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages about Muslim or Arab people presented in this clip? If so, describe the messages and where/how they are presented in the clip.
SUGGESTED ANSWER	This clip reinforces stereotypes that Arab and Muslim people are vengeful, hate the U.S., are terrorists, are intimidating and abusive, and are compliant to authority.
EVIDENCE	<p>They are vengeful – The leader says, “You have killed our women and our children and bombed our cities from afar like cowards.” They call their group “Crimson Jihad,” which suggests “holy war.” (Note: In the U.S., jihad is typically defined as “Holy War” but Islamic texts often use jihad to describe an internal struggle to adhere to the Islamic faith.)</p> <p>They hate the U.S. – “...unless you, America, pulls all military forces out of the Persian Gulf area immediately and forever.”</p> <p>They are terrorists – “Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one U.S. city each week.”</p> <p>They are intimidating and abusive – Aziz stares down the videographer and calls him a “moron.”</p> <p>They are compliant – The videographer is clearly frightened of the leader and does what he says.</p>

QUESTION **What are the stereotypes about the appearance of Arab or Muslim men?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER They wear *keffiyehs* or head scarves. They wear combat gear and carry weapons. They have brown skin and facial hair.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

When this film opened in Washington, DC protestors carried signs saying, “Hasta La Vista Fairness,” “Reel Arabs are not Real Arabs” and “Open Your Eyes and Terminate the Lies.” Radio personality Casey Kasem wrote to the film’s director, James Cameron, about the racist depiction of Arab people saying, “We’re trying to make people more sensitive to the fact that when you vilify one group, you vilify all groups.” Cameron responded by saying, “I just needed some convenient villains. It could have been anybody” (qtd. in Shaheen 504).

West Wing



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This clip is from the NBC series The West Wing, which focuses on the lives of a fictional White House staff and administration. In this clip, a group of high school students are visiting the White House when a security breach prevents anyone from leaving the building. Presidential aide Josh Lyman leads the students in an impromptu class in the White House cafeteria. As you watch this clip look for stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages.

→ **Show** the clip from The West Wing.

QUESTION **Are there stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages about Muslim or Arab people presented in this clip? If so, describe the messages and where/how they are presented in the clip.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER Although the students in the clip give some stereotypical answers to Josh’s questions (Arabs and “Islamic” people want to kill U.S. citizens because of our “freedom and democracy”), Josh tries to counter this stereotypical thinking.

EVIDENCE Josh says, “Muslims defend this country in the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, police and fire departments.” He says that the U.S. is a target because of “the people [authoritarian leaders] we support, troops in Saudi Arabia, sanctions against Iraq, support for Egypt.”

QUESTION

What point was Josh making by saying that Islamic Extremists are to Islam as the KKK is to Christianity?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Josh is suggesting that Muslim extremists, like the KKK, are a tiny fringe group that claims to speak for their religion. The KKK uses violence and terror to try to achieve a "pure" white, Protestant America. Most Americans recognize that the KKK does not represent most Protestants or Christian teachings, yet many Americans stereotypically equate Muslim extremists and terrorists with Islam and the views of most Muslims.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

While highly acclaimed, The West Wing did receive serious criticism for its own stereotyping of Arab people when the series first began in 1999. For example, Hala Maksoud, President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), wrote to NBC to express "profound shock and dismay" over the first two episodes in which "the Republic of Syria had, for no apparent reason, shot down an unarmed American Air Force jet killing over 50 Americans." Maksoud went on to say:

"This storyline constitutes a slander and calumny against the Syrian nation and the Syrian people, who have never been involved in any way in such an incident. In fact, there have been three instances of unarmed planes being downed by surface-to-air missiles, none involving Syria...By creating a fictional story that blames a real and actually existing nation, government and people for such a heinous crime, NBC has slandered an entire nation in the most unfair manner possible...Moreover, this slander against Syria deliberately promotes fear and hatred of Syria, Syrians and Arabs in general. Why was Syria chosen as the villain in this instance? What would have prevented NBC from concocting a fictional nation to play this role? Why are we not surprised that, as usual, the villains in this fantastic scenario are Arabs? How would NBC, the producers, or the rest of American society react if Israel, not Syria, were accused of such a fictional crime?"

(<http://www.adc.org/action/1999/7oct99.htm>)

Beginning in the third season, the creators of The West Wing did indeed create an ongoing storyline involving a fictional Middle Eastern country named Qumar, perhaps in response to this criticism. Qumar was portrayed as a country that abused its women and actively supported terrorism, and the President eventually approved a covert assassination of the Qumari leader (5/22/02). However, the show also continued to do storylines revolving around actual Middle Eastern countries, including negative portrayals of Saudi Arabia and Iran (5/1/02), Islamic northern Sudan (12/3/03) and Syria (10/27/04). The West Wing has also specifically explored aspects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, including an episode revolving around whether the President should accept the gift of a 1709 map of Palestine that excluded Israel (1/9/02) and two episodes at the beginning of the sixth season in which the President brokered new peace negotiations between the two countries at Camp David.

24



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

This clip is from the Fox series, 24, in which the hero, Jack Bauer, works for the Counter Intelligence Unit where he foils terrorist plots against the US. The husband and wife that you are about to see were involved in a terrorist plot (with their son) to melt down all of the nuclear power reactors in the United States. The mother, Dina, is trying to save her son, Behrooz, from his father, Navi, who wants to kill him because he believes that he has gone “soft.” Dina is trying to distract Navi on the telephone so that the hero of the show can go in and rescue Behrooz. As you watch this clip, look for stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages.

→ **Show** the clip from 24.

QUESTION

Are there stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages about Muslim or Arab people presented in this clip? If so, describe the messages and where/how they are presented in the clip.

SUGGESTED ANSWER

This clip reinforces stereotypes that Arab and Muslim people are violent, heartless martyrs to their cause and controlling of their families.

EVIDENCE

They are violent - Navi has kidnapped his son and seems willing to kill him as he has killed others. He is involved in a plot to melt down nuclear power plants.

They are heartless - Navi says, “You’re going to have to live knowing that everyone important in your life to is dead – your son, your brother. Yes, I killed your brother too.”

They are martyrs – “Our sacrifice is nothing compared to the martyrs who have given all they have for our cause.”

They are controlling – Navi threatens Dina, saying, “He’ll remain alive as long as you remain silent,” “And you will suffer even worse than them.”

QUESTION

What are the counter-stereotypes that you notice in the characters of Navi and Behrooz?

SUGGESTED ANSWER

Mother and son break from the stereotype of being submissive and compliant as they challenge the father’s plans for violence.

QUESTION **What are the stereotypes about the U.S. counter-intelligence agents?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER They are shown as brave and righteous heroes willing to risk their lives to save a terrorist's family.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) challenged the Fox network when it first aired this plotline on 24 showing an Arab family as terrorists. Fox agreed to remove some of the stereotypical scenes, and to broadcast CAIR public service announcements featuring American Muslims of European, African-American, Hispanic, and Native American heritage. Each person in the spots states how he/she and his/her family have served America and ends by saying, "I am an American Muslim."

In a public statement appreciating Fox's positive response, Rabiah Ahmed, Communications Coordinator for CAIR, referenced a public opinion survey conducted by Cornell University on the impact of television stereotypes on viewers. She said, "What we are hoping to do is to try and mitigate the damages of the stereotypes because it can bring real-life consequences on American Muslims and their lives here....When average Americans don't have any personal interaction with Muslims, whether it be at work or at school, they base their perception of Islam and Muslims from what they see on TV" ("Fox Cuts Out Anti-Muslim Scenes").

The Daily Show



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Daily Show is a satiric late night talk show produced by Comedy Central. It stars comedian Jon Stewart as the host and several other well-known comedians as "correspondents". As you watch this clip, look for stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages.

→ **Show** the clip from The Daily Show.

QUESTION **Are there stereotypical or counter-stereotypical messages about Muslim or Arab people presented in this clip? If so, describe the messages and where/how they are presented in the clip.**

SUGGESTED ANSWER This clip counters stereotyping by making fun of the people who stereotype Muslims as dangerous terrorists.

SUGGESTED ANSWER That they are "hirsute" with "dark, five o'clock shadows" and are cause for suspicion

QUESTION **How does Jon Stewart counter stereotypes of Arab people as dangerous terrorists?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER By naming the stereotypes in a humorous manner, Stewart invites people to see how foolish the stereotypes are. He points out the irony that if someone merely switches their stereotyped identification (from Middle Eastern to Dominican), their whole view of safety and danger can transform instantly, with a simple change of perspective.

QUESTION **How does Jon Stewart distinguish his role from that of a journalist?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER He says that his guest, reporter Seymour Hersh, will “tell me what I don’t know but his sources do. He does a thing called real reporting. I watch TV and find out what other people are saying.”

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) confirmed Jon Stewart’s suggestion that Middle Eastern people are targets of suspicion based on stereotypes. Their report, titled “A Rush to Judgment,” was released after the 1995 bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City. Immediately following this attack, many media sources put forward suspicion that Muslims were responsible. In fact, the man found guilty and executed for the crime was U.S. citizen and Gulf War veteran Timothy McVeigh. The CAIR report detailed over “200 incidents of anti-Muslim threats, harassment, stereotyping, property damage and physical assaults resulting from unfounded links between Muslims and the April 19, 1995 terrorist attack on the federal building in Oklahoma City. We were vilified publicly, harassed, beaten and our houses of worship vandalized” (Hurley 129).

In Reel Bad Arabs, Shaheen suggests that selective news coverage of “a minority of a minority of Arabs, the radical fringe” creates conditions that further these damaging stereotypes in the public mind. “The seemingly indelible Arab-as-villain image wrongly conveys the message that the vast majority of the 265 million peace-loving Arabs are ‘bad guys’” (Shaheen 28). He argues that ever since the late 1940s, “when the state of Israel was founded on Palestinian land,” this image has intensified with selective news reports on wars, hijackings, hostage-taking and oil embargos that paint Arab people in a negative manner.

This perspective was challenged by Kazim Saeed of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in his essay, “Media Stereotypes Do Not Define the Image of Muslims.” Saeed argues that “whining about caricatures only shows an unwillingness to face reality... There is a very clear and urgent alternative to whining for all American Muslims who see U.S. foreign policy toward Muslim countries as unjust but who do not believe in terrorism. They should organize to present a strong, consistent and reasoned criticism of U.S. foreign policy while clearly condemning terrorism” (qtd. in Hurely 133).

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Can you think of stereotypes that have harmed you, your family, or your friends?

How can you challenge stereotyping in a way that doesn't harm or shame others?

Can you think of other examples of stereotyping of Arab or Muslim people that you have seen in popular culture – music, videos, TV, films or video games?

Could you ever portray an Arab as part of a terror plot without it being deemed a stereotype? Why or why not?

CONNECTIONS

Compare these stereotyped images with stereotypes of protesters or of Russian people in these TV commercials from Project Look Sharp's Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: protesters in 1968 Nixon and Wallace "Law and Order" ads, Russians in 1964 Goldwater "We Will Bury You" and Reagan's 1984 "Bear in the Woods" commercials.

Examine stereotypes in Newsweek's coverage of the 1991 Gulf War and the War in Afghanistan using Project Look Sharp's Media Construction of War.

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