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Deadly Preconceptions

RR2-1

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Prompt: Based on the two texts, *Reel Bad Arabs* and *the Arab World*, make a statement about preconceptions about others (stereotypes) in the 21st century.  Your thesis has to be something worth making.  Support your ideas with proofs from Shaheen and Hall.  This is not an essay type of writing so your response should demonstrate a critical reading of the text.

In a modern world of mass communication, where globalization has reached its extreme, and whose expected outcome should have been the building of bridges across different cultures, “Westerners and Arabs still do not understand each other (Hall, 1966, p.90). While the underlying causes of this lack of understanding might vary, it has surely resulted in devastating outcomes such as discrimination, wars, Anti Americanism, Islamophobia and many others. However, one major cause of this gap between the West and Arabs is stereotypes that act as a barrier between the two cultures and prevent each party’s acceptance of the other as such.

Whether on the personal level, or on a larger, scale like Arabs and Westerners, “Stereotypes hurt” (Shaheen, 1988, p.313). Just like when a long haired boy is still eyed with disrespect in the supposedly boundless modern world of the twenty-first century (It reached me that a proctor in a test questioned my instructor about my performance based on my appearance), Arabs are still viewed as villains and are still treated as subhuman and a good example is how they are treated at Western airports. The media has been very successful at projecting the image of a few terrorists on a whole Arab nation, ignoring the real terror practiced on Arabs in Palestine and the pathetic living conditions of a whole people there, in addition to those who are living in refugee camps, because they were forced out of their land.

Stereotypes or preconceptions, in general are the result of the failure of one culture to understand the complexity of another and this can only lead to ignorance by intensifying the existing gaps and of course lead to prejudices that hinder the interaction between groups, namely Arabs and Westerners. However, the irony is that even in modern days that require regular interaction between Arabs and Westerners, these stereotypes still determine the way each party views the other. The Westerners who consider themselves more civilized than Arabs view them as barbarians who lack the notion of public privacy, who breathe into each other’s faces, who build their relations, based on smell, or even who have no real boundaries and rules for trespassing (Hall, 1966, p.92-97). Unfortunately, most Westerners’ behavior is still governed by these preconceptions that are forever transmitted by media and according to Shaheen the role of media in general, and Hollywood’s role in this area are so crucial that they can’t be ignored anymore (Shaheen, 1988, p.314).

As mentioned, media and mainly Hollywood have been working hard on transmitting negative stereotypical images of Arabs. As a result, Arabs are almost never portrayed in Hollywood movies as good people. They are either terrorists, or rich, brainless men who desire Western women. Even Arab women are still portrayed as poor submissive creatures behind their veils or as vindictive terrorists. Arabs are portrayed to children as bad and lowlifes and human hyenas (Shaheen, 1988, p.314). In fact there are still some Americans who view all Arabs as desert people who move around on camels, marry many women, and of course are associated to oil and money that can buy anything. In short, Hollywood almost never shows Arabs as a normal people and the West can never view Arabs without the effect of these negative images.

One might ask here, what the Arabs did to receive so much negative feedback, to be treated as a barbaric race and as second rate humans. Is there anything more shocking than considering an Arab baby’s adoption by a Westerner as questionable or unacceptable (Shaheen, 1988, p.314). This is the epitome of discrimination and as Shaheen clearly stated, Arabs for the West have become the equivalent of Jews for Hitler (1988, p.314). Western media through feeding the world all the negative preconceptions about Arabs has succeeded in creating a prejudiced people who are trapped in the circle of stereotypes and who can’t, even if they try, understand that Arabs are humans and that they are actually the victims of Western manipulations, and that they only differ from them in their culture. Think of how many unarmed Palestinians die every day and how many children have died under the Israeli tank tracks. But people, who live in the West, are usually oblivious to this reality and are rarely exposed to these images. They live in their own limited world, unless they choose to widen their perspective and cast away the slanderous poison their media feeds them. How would one expect to reconcile these two worlds and give them the chance to explore each other and understand the complexities and particularities of each, if this negative propaganda doesn’t stop? No one expects an average Westerner to question the Arab image provided in the media and to further research it to evaluate its validity. Everyone just takes what he is fed for granted and as Shaheen puts it “The Arab remains American culture’s favorite whipping boy”, though according to Shaheen America is friends with 19 out of 21 Arab countries (1988, p.314).

The sad fact about the negative stereotypes transmitted by media, and the treating of the Arabs as second rate humans, is that Arabs are not trying hard enough to counter the effects of the Western media. Arabs do not lack resources and can even make an Arab Hollywood which would be more significant than the present Zionist one. Moreover, Arabs can take the time to reward and put under the spot light, all the Arab major contributors like Michael De Bakey or Helen Thomas (Shaheen, 1988, p.315). However the most significant role has to be played by the current media. As Shaheen pointed out, current media is in the right direction and is revealing true images of Arabs namely Palestinians, or maybe as Shaheen suggested a movie featuring nice Arabs would be a good idea for revealing Arabs as humans (Shaheen, 1988, p.315). In fact accepting and treating the other party with respect can open the door to a deeper understanding because as Hall suggested, many of the problems of today are the result of cultural misunderstandings. Surely Arabs would never have questioned the idea that, “to fail to intervene when trouble is brewing is to take sides” (Hall, 1966, p.96), nor the West would have thought that addressing each other without facing each other would be an insult for an Arab (Hall, 1966, p.95). The cultural differences are certainly responsible for this lack of understanding, but preconceptions are the main reason this gap still persists in the twenty-first century.

Preconceptions hurt, but they don’t just hurt Arabs, they hurt the whole world and they can even be deadly to human civilization. Therefore an immediate remedy is needed in today’s world that is plagued with wars everywhere. Only a deep understanding of each other can save our world from the ultimate destruction it is heading to, and only an honest media that deals with both sides without prejudices and with an objective perspective can fix the image of Arabs in the West. The solution lies in the hands of the media and every person to help eradicate the negative images of Arabs and try to convey reality as it is without any form of bias or distortion. The solution lies in the awareness of people that stereotypes “blur the vision” and hinder the understanding and accepting of each other (Shaheen, 1988, p.313) and in that it is high time to start building bridges between cultures and make the world a better place for the Arab and the Westerner.

References:

Hall E., *the Arab world*, 1966

Shaheen J., *the Media’s image of Arabs,* 1988