Volume 19 Issue 36
Originally issued as A9



Global Journal of human-social science: A
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 19 Issue 9 Version 1.0 Year 2019
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460X & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

# September the 11th: The Noble Moor Strikes Back in *Babel* (2006)

By Tarik Bouguerba
*Ibn Tofail Univeristy*

*Abstract-* This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Gonzalez INARRITU's *Babel* (2006). This filmic production offers a critical examination of the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. *Babel* offers a rather different narrative tone drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist mode of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco. *Babel* is a multi-narrative drama through which multiple stories unravel. The story takes place in four different settings: Morocco, Japan, Mexico, and the United States respectively.

*Keywords:* *babel, mode of narration, orientalism, hollywood.*

*GJHSS-A Classification:* *FOR Code: 170199*



*Strictly as per the compliance and regulations of:*



© 2019. Tarik Bouguerba. This is a research/review paper, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 Unported License http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/), permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

# September the 11th: The Noble Moor Strikes Back in *Babel* (2006)[1]

Tarik Bouguerba

*Abstract-* This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Gonzalez INARRITU's *Babel* (2006)[1]. This filmic production offers a critical examination of the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. *Babel* offers a rather different narrative tone drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist mode of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco.[2] *Babel* is a multi-narrative drama through which multiple stories unravel. The story takes place in four different settings: Morocco, Japan, Mexico, and the United States respectively.

*Keywords: babel, mode of narration, orientalism, hollywood.*

## I. Introduction

This article aims at exploring acts of narration and representation of Morocco in Gonzalez INARRITU's Babel (2006). This filmic production offers a critical examination of the representation of the typical Moroccan in Hollywood. *Babel* offers a rather different narrative tone drifting away from Hollywood traditionalist mode of narration, writing in bold a new tradition of narration and representation of Morocco.[3] *Babel* is a multi-narrative drama through which multiple stories unravel. The story takes place in four different settings: Morocco, Japan, Mexico, and the United States respectively. Reviews of this film indicate that Iñárritu's masterpiece was nominated for a number of awards and prizes worldwide. Before engaging into a critical reading of this film production, I would narrow down the scope of this paper to highlight the narrative strategies being adopted to describe things Moroccan. One mode successfully revisited the Orientalist tradition and all the way to invent a modern frame of narration; a frame that takes its shape in the backdrop of the World Trade Centre attacks. The article also aims at exploring the traditional vilifying and taxonomizing strategies inherent in classical Orientalism and it examines how it translates into new norms of representation where terrorism becomes the Arab attribute *par excellence.*

A close reading of this multi-faceted narrative suggests that the very approach in *Babel* drives from the very first scene at orientalising Morocco. The very first shot-an establishing shot- awakens the stereotype inherent in the Western and American Orientalism and adds up to the stabilization of this very image of the Moor. The shot, I am trying to decode in this passage, traces the seeds of Orientalism in Hollywood and represents the Moroccan as the unshaven bearded villain living in the desert. Hassan signals out villainy as the name suggests.[4] After this establishing shot, the camera establishes a different point of view as it moves to feature patterns of Oriental women. In using such a technique, the movie seems to have introduced Hassan and Abdullah[5] as two suspicious characters. This intentional cautious approach Iñárritu adopts is indicative of how the West has always been suspicious in its dealing and engagement with Orientals. Other successive sequences, dealing mainly with Hassan and Abdullah, take this caution further as it suggests that they might be involved in illicit arm trade. In *Babel*, these denigrating strategies that the Orientalist used to dehumanize the other translate into 11th September standards through which America becomes the victim the world's conspiracy and subsequently this cultural other is suspected of all felonies. Felony and terrorism, to use The American Century's typology are Moorish assets by nature. The movie, at issue, fails to correct the classical cliché that felony is an Oriental attribute by distinction. It also falls into perpetuating this image and taking it even further that it has become Moorish.

As it starts out in so dehumanizing a tone, *Babel*'s mode of narration defines Morocco in a contrastive paradigm. What follows of sequencing takes the viewer to the USA through which we could define Morocco. This film production therefore examines the differences between the West (USA) and what lies beyond this dividing line, the East (Morocco). In his haste to represent the glamorous America, the

*Author: Assistant Prof, Ibn Tofail Univeristy, Kenitra, Morocco.*
*e-mails: tarik_mahdi@yahoo.fr, tarik.bouguerba@yahoo.com*

[1] Tarik Bouguerba is an assistant prof at Higher Institute of of Technology, Ibn Tofail University, kenitra. His main areas of interest include Shakespearean Studies, cultural studies, Theatre Studies, Drama, Film Studies and related fields. This article is part of a research on project on Hollywood representation of Morocco.

[2] This article is part of a research project on Hollywood productions on Morocco. Other films I have worked on are: Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) and Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990).

[3] This article is part of a research project on Hollywood productions on Morocco. Other films I have worked on are: Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942) and Bertolucci's *The Sheltering Sky* (1990).

[4] Hassan might be a direct reference to one of America's foes: Hassan Nasserlah.

[5] Abdullah, the two young culprits's father, is one more name suggestive of Muslims as terrorists.



© 2019 Global Journals

filmmaker fails to maintain his objectivity[6] and rather falls into radical subjectivity. In his version of the East, Morocco falls short if compared to the Rest (USA). This version produces the west as peaceful, delightful, and clean as opposed to the chaotic, gloomy, and dangerous Morocco. Mr Jones's[7] children are scared not because they are living in the USA but because their parents are still voyaging through the Orient, Morocco. Yet, I would point to his failure as a filmmaker in the way he relegates Morocco to the background of his film production and concurrently elevates the American plot to the centre. Put succinctly, the filmmaker tends to produce America as the centre of meaning into which other plot components converge to build up the main story; it is American *par excellence*.

In an unusual haste, Gonzalez Iñárritu restores his demeaning rendition of Morocco so as to argue in a populist fashion that Morocco is prototypically Oriental. 'I hate this place', Mrs Jones translates *à là lettre* American Orientalist views on Morocco. Her hatred of the place, as it stems from her American education, manifests in her facial expressions; She had also sleepless nights *en route* across Morocco. In short, *Babel* seems to have borrowed, so to speak, a number of 'stock shots' to replicate the classical copyrighted image of the Orient inherent in the psyche of Americans. Put rather differently, Iñárritu's film-story features an American couple, traversing the desert. It follows how traditionally a Western love story is retained and maintained in this remote place, Morocco. Whilst crossing the desert, the camera travels back into time to retain this very image of Morocco in classical Orientalism. The cameraman draws the American couple's attention to a group of veiled women. Iñárritu's reservoir of 'stock shots' and his portrayal of Moorish women reminisce of their image in colonial travel catalogues and colonial postcard representation.[8] They are represented through Hollywood's distorting lenses as almost the same so that you could hardly distinguish one from the other.

Iñárritu's film also champions the ideals of America as a new global power on the world stage. Delving into America's foreign policy, the movie, at issue, represents Japan- America's economic rival- as illegally involved in selling weapons to Moroccan terrorist cells. Incarnated in an old Japanese hunter, *Babel* suspects Japan's engagement in this weapon black market. At this stage, I would point out that one of the movie's pitfalls is that it retains very quickly its denigrating approach as it features Moors 'living on dates and shepherding'. Awkwardly yet eloquently, the movie goes to great length to represent Morocco as the Hell shaking up to deliver its visitors. When Mrs Jones was shot, the desire for voyaging into the desert translates into a desire to escape the Hell, Morocco. "We don't want to stay with these people" (Moors).[9] Being fascinated by the desert, tourists' adventure becomes an extremely frightening experience. In brief, his use of these rhetorics of fascination and fear affirms that Iñárritu is well-versed in colonial discourse paradigms. In a nutshell, he is Hollywood's heir of the classical guild of European Orientalists.

Prior to the spirit of this American Century, investigations took place at an international level to find out the culprit behind the unsuccessful murder of Susan Jones. To explore aspects of Luce's influential article, I would show how Mrs Jones's story receives wide media coverage to the extent that news programs reveal that the USA government-satirically enough- holds the shooting to be a terrorist act. Given its global power, America puts much pressure on Moroccan government to apprehend the terrorists, Yussef and Ahmed, two Moroccan children at the age of innocence. This wide media coverage, I believe, is suggestive of how Hollywood prioritizes the American issue and ward off things Moroccan. By way of investigating, the Moroccan policemen use violence to have Hassan confess the crime. Portraying Morocco in such a way explains America's tendency to show that violating Human Rights acts is a Moroccan attribute *par excellence*.

Iñárritu's *Babel* traces American global hegemony to move to a third location, Mexico that I would label as a replica of Morocco. Given the frontiers problem between USA and Mexico, the movie tends to represent Mexico through the same distorting lenses. Replicating the orientalist images on Moors, Iñárritu categorizes Mexicans as outlaws trying to enter illegally American soil. A Twenty first century *oeuvre*, *Babel* could not however dismiss the traditional denigrating approach on Morocco and articulates rather American hegemony. This American hegemonic power is displayed in the fact that the Moroccan subject-subservient as it was depicted in classical Orientalism-incarnated in the policemen descend in a remarkable haste on Hassan's house after having traced the rifle back to him. Then what follows is Abdullah and his children escape from the police after Yussef's killing bullet wounded Mrs Jones.

Interesting was the governmental debate on this issue so that America was accused of destroying 'our image in the world as a country of peace'.[10] Satirically enough, the movie highlights how corrupted the Moroccan official discourse. By way of illustrating, "Minister Hassan Hazal has said that terrorist cells have

[6] By objectivity I mean that American Orientalism claims some neutral stand and some objectivity in its approach to the Orient, Morocco in this case.

[7] Acted by Brad Pitt.

[8] I am thinking here about Malek Alloula's seminal study on colonial postcards, *the Colonial Harem* from which *Babel seems* to have borrowed these images of veiled harem.

[9] The Movie.

[10] The movie.



© 2019 Global Journals

been eradicated in our country".[11] This ebb and flow in mediatising Mrs Jones' story follows the ideals of this American Century that celebrate America as the centre of meaning.

Through Denis Porter and Sara Mills, colonial discourse paradigms seem to vacillate between the classical savage Moor and the Noble Moor. This transition in representing and narrating the Moroccan explains that the discourse on this very Moor is heterogeneous and not lop-sided as Edward Said sees it.[12] Through this heterogeneity, Iñárritu translates *à là lettre* the claim –in my version of reading American discourse at least- of the neutral stand that American Orientalism takes in its rendition of the Other. Therefore, *Babel* seems to have held this banner of heterogeneity to articulate the native voice which had been policed and suffocated in most of Hollywood films on Morocco. Henceforth, the Moor is acknowledged as an active participant in the course of the main plot. The Noble Moor will therefore come to the rescue of the Jones at a critical moment in the story. So important is therefore the role assigned to him that the Moroccan takes the wounded Mrs Jones to his town. Being well-versed in the English language is indicative of his visibility in the movie.[13] His eloquence helps the Moor be visible within these Hollywood exclusivist distorting lenses. However, the movie holds to articulate other Western voices whose offensive attitudes towards Morocco triggered more media coverage, linking the Jones' story to terrorist cells.

Although of a clumsy nature, this different mode of narration takes the Moor's visibility further to portray him in his prayer, pleading Allah's mercy to save the poor Susan Jones. The interruptions in the rite of narrating Morocco fail to shake up the movie's main agenda, to highlight America's role in the world or to explain how representations of the world have changed after September the 11Th. One of the movie's merits is that it describes, through a Japanese voice, Hassan as a good Moor and it highlights his noble deeds. Hassan was thereby saved as was Abdullah correcting the propaganda held against their case. In conclusion, Iñárritu's *Babel* as it replicates the same traditional orientalist clichés closes dramatically to champion universal human relations over the dominant political discourse. If political issues between Morocco and USA prevent the coming of a helicopter to save Susan Jones, Anwar the Noble Moor breaks these rigid rules in the name of humane human relations. 'Kill me but save my brother', Yussef, a future Moroccan terrorist in the eye of Americans points out in the closing scenes of the movie. At this stage, I would argue that the way Morocco was portrayed in colonial texts takes a new direction after September the 11Th whereby the backward, superstitious, irrational, underdeveloped Moor becomes a suicide bomber and a terrorist with no effort to assure the real suspects and the actual circumstances. Although it tries to articulate the native voice- awkwardly at times- the movie seems to have innovated in the typology vilifying the Moor and fallen into 'parroting' old dogmas inherent in the psyche of Orientalists.

In its Orientalist nostalgia, Iñárritu's *Babel* stretches the stereotype on the Moor further to draw in a dogmatic rite of narration on what media specialists label 'Islamophopia'. It is the impact of September the 11th that fashions people's attitudes towards Arabs. This Islamophopia particularly stems from the psychological effect of the World Trade Centre attacks on Americans. In the way it portrays Moroccans through the same classical demeaning frames, *Babel* works out the image of the devilish Moor out of which it creates the Muslim terrorist. After being mediatised, this image of the terrorist the movie fabricates seems to have trespassed ordinary norms to stabilize new 'stock images' of the same distorting mode. This Islamophobic banner that Iñárritu's production raises translates the world's attitudes towards the Muslim world, views that seem to divide the world into unequal halves. The first sphere depicts the rational, developed, humane and powerful Christian West whereas the second part categorizes Morocco as irrational, underdeveloped, inhumane and inferior Muslim East. This dividing line the movie sets between Christendom, Christian America, and Islam, Muslim Morocco, explains Iñárritu's ideological affiliations. Xenophobia is such an ideological affiliation through which the Christian West dismisses any possible dialogue with the Muslim East. The filmmaker translates this hatred of Muslims-be it Moroccan or non-Moroccan-into tourists' irresistible attitudes towards this cultural other. 'We don't want to stay with these people' is such an enunciation used in xenophobic or Islamophobic discourse.

The debate *Babel* engages in that the discourse on this cultural other takes a new dimension. At this stage, I would use Huntington's seminal rendition of this struggle between Christendom and Islam, between the West and the East, between the North and the South, and between the economically powerful and the economically vulnerable part of the world. I concur with Huntington's thesis that the conflict is more than a struggle between the West and the East. It is what he has labelled 'clash of civilizations'. In my judgment, the movie seems to have brought back in so nostalgic a mode of narration Huntington's division. The line between the civilized West and the uncivilized East, Morocco, is very apparent in *Babel* that its story-line

[11] The movie.

[12] For further details look at Edward Said's *Orientalism* , Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. (London: Routledge, 1997), and Dennis Porter, *Orientalism and Its Problems*. (Colchester: university of Essex, 1983),

[13] This film production seems to articulate the local voice as opposed to the silenced or policed version in the majority of Hollywood productions or other Western literary tradition.



© 2019 Global Journals

seems to praise the Western civilization and condemns the Arab-Muslim civilization. To use this Saidian concept of 'positional superiority', *Babel* holds to relegate the Moroccan civilization or roughly speaking the Muslim civilization to the margin and celebrates the superiority of Christian civilization. This American Century division in Iñárritu's opus takes up an act of narration and representation that aims to distance the Northern civilization from its Eastern-Moroccan- counterpart. In the movie, Mr Jones rejects any contact with Moroccans namely after the unsuccessful attempt to murder Mrs Jones. This mode of narration that hardens this dividing line between what lies East of the West and the West itself is never shaken up in *Babel*. These I have called mere 'interruptions' which feature Anwar 'the Noble Moor' striking back' in the Age of the American Century fail to disrupt Iñárritu's awkward filmic discourse on Muslims. His awkward rendition of Morocco translates *à là lettre* this unequal division of the world into a 'civilised Christian civilisation' and an 'uncivilised Muslim civilisation'. Iñárritu's version of this division is not accidental as it affirms his preference to Western civilization over the Muslim world. It is also evident in his inclination to Orientalist mode of narration. My contention here is to argue that Iñárritu's main objective was to revitalize those dogmas inherent in the Orientalist mindset and of which Edward Said seems to be very critical. In his book, *Orientalism*, Said identifies these dogmas as follows. 'One is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior'. [14] Another dogma Iñárritu brings to the heart of his narrative is that 'the Orient (Morocco) is at bottom something either to be fared.... or to be controlled'. [15] His awkward version of Oriental civilization is reminiscent of another dogma. 'The Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself'. Morocco fails to define itself as a civilisation in the Western filmic narrative whereas the West seizes the opportunity to construct its identity in opposition to whatever is Eastern, Moroccan. Yet, I would argue against what I would like to label 'Western Myth' as to suggest that Moroccan civilization pushes to the centre to define itself and subsequently helps the West, America, rethink the definition of American identity. Last but not least, the movie under study seems to conform to Huntington's copyrighted version of this struggle. Iñárritu attributes this impossibility of a dialogue between the West and the East, Christendom and Islam, between Morocco and Hollywood, and between the Jones and the Moors. Put succinctly, the rapport was impossible to establish because the Moorish culture is incompatible with the Western. This impossibility of coexistence translates into those several Western voices [16] expressing their chauvinistic attitudes to dismiss any possible rapport with the uncivilised Moroccan.

## II. Conclusion

In short, *Babel* defines the Americans as 'tourists' and Moroccans as 'terrorists' and it fails to mobilise if not erase these biased stereotypes of the Moor to open up a possibility of modification of the Moroccan.

## References Références Referencias

*Primary Resources*

1. Iñárritu, Gonzalez. *Babel*, a 2006 movie

*Critical, historical and theoretical Works cited*

1. Ahmed, Aijaz. (1992). "Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said" in *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures.*
2. Alloula, Malek (1986). *The Colonial Harem*, Trans. Myrna. Godzich.
3. Bekkaoui, Khalid. (1998). *Signs of Spectacular Resistance*: *The Spanish Moor and British Orientalism*.
4. Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) *The location of Culture.*
5. Bill, Ashcroft and Alluwalia, Pat Eds. (1999).Key *Ideas*.
6. Edwards, Brian T. (2005) *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express*.
7. Mills, Sara. (1997). *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*.
8. Porter, Dennis. (1983). '*Orientalism and Its Problems'*. In *The Politics of Theory*. Eds. Francis Barker.
9. Said, Edward W (1993). *Culture and Imperialism.* London: Chatto and Windus.
10. _____ (1978) *Orientalism*.
11. Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Othello The Moor of Venice*. London: Penguin Books, 1994.
12. Shaheen, Jack G, (2003). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People.* Sage publications.

[14] I have referred to Said's discussion of these dogmas in a previous footnote. For further discussion of these dogmas, see Said's *Orientalism*, PP.300-301.

[15] Ibid.

[16] I mean here these voices of tourists in the movie.



© 2019 Global Journals