



Reimagining the Orient in Virtual Realm: A Critical Examination of Virtual Reality and Cultural Imperialism in the Middle East

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ABSTRACT

This research study explicitly scrutinizes the intersection between Virtual reality and Western cultural imperialism in the Middle East continually glorified by Orientalist discourse. The pervasive nature of Virtual reality (VR) has undoubtedly unlocked new vistas on cultural representation and interplay. In so doing, the Middle East, has become a laughing stock for Orientalists, stigmatizing it as exotic and uncivilized, questioning VR's role in eternalizing or nullifying western cultural imperialism. Qualitative methodology, incorporating close reading and critical discourse analysis have been employed, scrutinizing how cultural narratives have been devised accompanied by various perspectives on cultural imperialism. This research study's findings bring forth the fact that how VR technology reinforces or counters cultural imperialism in the Middle East, exploring the potential for VR to promote inter-faith dialogue, eternalizing existing power dynamics. This study offers a refined perspective on VR's potential to reshape cultural narratives and power dynamics in the Middle East, offering new opportunities for promoting an inclusive representation.

Keywords: Virtual Reality (Vr), Middle East, Cultural Imperialism, Digital Dictatorship, Power Dynamics, Strategic Essentialism.

Introduction

In the Middle East context, Virtual reality (VR) technology is undoubtedly credited with a remarkable potential, exacerbating cultural imperialism which responsibly inoculates Western cultural values and norms into local cultures using enthralling digital experiences. As Virtual reality (VR) becomes increasingly rampant, Western digital dictators, capitalists, and digital media outlets might harness it to export their cultural contents and values to the Middle East, potentially marginalizes local cultures and traditions. For instance, VR experiences devised in the West might prioritize Western perspectives, histories, and narratives, which could lead to a lack of representation and agency for Middle Eastern cultures and communities.

Visual discourse has been one of the integral dimensions of virtual reality (VR) via the Orientalist discourse and portrayal can be effectively harnessed to shape people's attitude and understanding, compelling them to be inferior and uncivilized. The term 'visual culture' describes a philosophical and epistemological vantage point, endorsing visuality as an indispensable element to the constitution of the world. This visuality unlocks drastic implications when it commits the misrepresentation which is the part and parcel of the process of *othering* and the core of the western biased

stereotypical calculus. Under this filthy misrepresentational calculus, the East has been labelled as exotic, erotic, inferior, and slave. This can be manifested clearly in the Oriental harem's paintings and photography wherein, drawings, paintings, and photographs have substantially shaped our beliefs, opinions, and values. *The Lustful Sultan* in Turkish Drama, clearly reflects the western negative psyche, showing its monopolized grip on the realm of representation. This strategic depiction cleverly embodies moving images produced within the dynamics of social power and ideology of empire, leading to East-West dichotomy (Zeing, 2017).

Virtual reality, an indispensable facet of neo-colonialism or neo-cultural imperialism, has been eternalizing in imperious Western cultural values, norms, and perspectives, strategically levying them on non-western cultures. The footmarks of this so-called cultural imperialism has been vividly represented in the seminal creation *The Allure of Empire* by Todd Porterfield, rendering 19th century orientalist art, denigrating Middle Eastern and Asian cultures as object d'art and stereotypical entities. Contextually speaking, the same denigrating imagery can be clearly depicted in the *Orientalist Aesthetics* by Roger Benjamin. They have thoughtfully employed the lens of art to understand social concerns, depicting a divergent understanding of artistic agency in such societies. Benjamin describes *Orientalist Aesthetics* as a mutable developed cultural system, lacking congruity with western civilized norms. To decenter discourses: modernity, civilization and art have not been merely a matter of offering a new perspective; it is exigent clearly owing to the extent to which such notions rest for their credibility upon an original essence __a central truth (Munif, 2007).

The term *cultural imperialism* itself emerged in the wake of international expansion in the field of electronic communication in the late 60's and early 70's, by western capitalists, headed by the US, also called *media imperialism*. Cultural imperialism has been continually imposed on third world by Western digital elite's via exporting popular drama programs in the vicious garb of virtual reality, particularly, from US. These programs are totally congruent with US culture, harnessing and giving an impetus to the very process of cultural dissociation: *disconnection from cultural context accompanied by blurring cultural frontiers, allowing individuals to coalesce with different identities or cultural norms, perpetuating and reinforcing the status quo, pushing the non-western cultures to subtle oblivion.*

It is widely accepted that the term "culture" is so broad that it engulfs pattern of behaviors, arts, facts, beliefs, and values. Through this digital imperialism, the western digital dictators have masterfully employed the potent tool of virtual reality, inoculating their imperial values into the susceptible non-western cultures (Ibrahim, 1991).

To dominate their orientalist discourse and denigrating stereotypes against the Middle East, imperial digital power tactically operates via mundane digital objects: smartphones, social media platforms, online maps and GPS, digital identity systems, Algorithm and AI systems, drones, digital identity cards, surveillance cameras with facial recognition, and online tracking system, from 'doing' to 'theorizing'. This leverages a digital culture, paving a way for irreparable digital uncoupling. In context of *strategic essentialism*, Gaza -based media outlets operating on Facebook are leveraging virtual reality, bringing forth the ardent struggles and realities faced by Palestinians via storytelling, countering western biased and polemical narratives, amplifying Palestinian stance, demystifying the parochial and cherry-picked

stereotypes, and promoting empathy. In the same vein, AJE expounds the terms *explore*, *high-definition*, and *experience* against the inaccessibility of al-Aqsa. Generally, these terms are used by digital companies to promote 360-degree video or virtual reality, eroding the devilish imagery glorified by western digital media against the Middle East (Kamil, 2019).

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward W. Said, has vividly explored the Western imperialist attitudes towards the Orient, considering them as uncivilized and barbaric. More importantly, Said has categorically declared this attitude as:

The colonialist /orientalist has convincingly created a schism in the human space, mapped by geopolitical frenzied totalitarianism.

Putting this into context, this so-called Orientalist discourse has thoughtfully created a dichotomous worldview, splitting human space into the *Occident* and the *Orient*, with the former placed as civilized the latter uncivilized. This bipolar thinking legitimizes western hegemony, accentuating on mobilizing interventions *cultural imperialism*. By mapping this world via a geopolitical lens, Orientalism eternalizes a totalizing narrative that erodes the intricacy and diversity of non-Western cultures (Mahfedi, 2011).

Robert Bear, in his seminal book, *Sleeping with the Devil* (2004) (26), explicitly sheds light on the concepts of Faustian bargain, western complicity and cultural clashes between Saudi Arabia and US, and has sarcastically described the pathetic existence of Saudi Arabians, stigmatizing them as *the most sexually repressed people in the world*. Such polemical and sarcastic views reinforce the imperial values to be inoculated into the bizarre culture having been practiced by the Arabs. Contrarily, Saudi's intelligentsia has tactically challenged the inherently static and monolithic image of Saudi Arabia, its culture and people in the West. The stereotypical portrayal of Arabs as terrorists, veiled women, oil rich sheikhs, and exotic have been the staple food of Orientalists' discourse. This cultural imperialism (Orientalism) is controlled via media representation, content export, and cultural values (Alomaish, 2020).

Despite some efforts on part of the Western mainstream media to provide a fair and objective portrayal of Muslims, the dominant one still goes biased. Media have continually eternalized tarnishing stereotypes with regard to Muslims. As the author has put it: *a suspicion of the other and a need to control definition of otherness have been integral elements of the creation and legitimization of British imperialism and colonialism. Discourses that have rendered Islam different, and inferior, have been part of this history; and process of domination and exploitation of people of the Islamic faith have been part of British Imperial history.* (p. 100-101)

In Australia, Anne Aly (2007), has reinforced the point that the media tend to portray Muslims as threats to the liberal and secular culture of Australia. In addition, Islam has been portrayed in Australian media as backward, oppressive, and uncivilized; Muslims as terrorists, enemies from within, illegal, and Muslim women as oppressed, with the veil (hijab) as a tool of oppression.

These justifications are used by the Western media to revive the very image of the Muslim, specifically living in Middle East, reinforcing the very paradigm of cultural imperialism (Eid, 2014).

Decentering these cherry-picked stereotypes, Virtual Ummah must harness new Islamic communication paradigms, dispelling various nasty “___isms”, affecting a potential revolution in the interpretation of Islamic culture. Essentialist thinking is one of the integral insights into this westernizing paradigm, sensitizing Eastern values in their own psyche and countering the cultural fetishism — *a process technically employed to reduce the complex practices, traditions, and identities to simplistic, exotic, and low-born representation*. This process is strategically carried out via social media, online coverage, and digital media to reinforce the notion of stagnant ‘Oriental’ culture (Khiabany, 2003).

Digital imperialism, a brainchild of Western imperial design, has been skillfully maneuvered by Orientalists to portray the polemical imagery of the Middle East, representing it exotic and terrorist. This sophisticated front has opened new vistas on maliciously stigmatizing Arabs' culture, keeping western cultural blueprint as a reformative measure to cleanse Middle Eastern moribund values and norms. As per research, among 1,000 films from the year 1896 to 2,000 had been reported anti-Arabs and anti-Muslim, depicting them ‘others’. This has been a staple food of digital orientalism industry tactically spewing parochial stereotypes against Arabs (Rehman, 2005).

Discussion and Analysis

Virtual reality (VR) has been a requisite tool which can be strategically harnessed to unlock new perspectives primarily exploring *cultural expression*, *interplay*, and *exploration*. These have been interpreted in the context of Middle East having been subjected to the derisive stereotypes enunciated by the Western imperialists. Middle East has been a subject of intense debate (...owing to the lurking complexities) on part of the orientalist, keeping its cultures, values, and other traditional facets in their bad books.

This research study has critically examined the convergence of Virtual reality (VR) and cultural imperialism in the Middle East. This interplay convincingly harnesses interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural integration, accentuating on the key facet the *strategic essentialism: a modus operandi or a well thought-out strategic endeavor maneuvered by the Middle Eastern intellectuals to essentialize the Middle East traditional and cultural values, demystifying the negative labelling imposed by the orientalist using digital media*. In addition, it posits a strong message with regard to VR technology that how it might reimagine the Orient in the Virtual space.

Cultural Imperialism and the Middle East

Cultural imperialism implies “*the practice of promoting and imposing one culture over others, often via media, technology, or economic power, viz. dominance of western cultural values and norms, suppression of local cultures and traditions, imposition of foreign cultural products and practices, and unequal cultural exchange, where one culture is privileged over others*”. This cultural imperialism unleashes its corrosive impacts on other cultures in the form of; loss of cultural diversity, homogenization of cultures, marginalization of minority groups, and cultural disintegration. The cultural and traditional essence of Middle East has been pathetically poisoned and liquidated by the continual inoculation of western values and perspectives via *colonialism* (domination of a people or an area by a foreign state or nation: the practice of extending and maintaining a nation's political and economic control over another people or area) and *imperialism* (the policy, practice, or advocacy of extending the power and dominion of a nation especially by direct territorial acquisitions or by gaining indirect control over the political or economic life of other areas), shaping region's politics, economy, and its culture substantially.

Reimagining Orient in Virtual Reality (VR)

To reimagine the Orient in Virtual reality (VR) technology, it provides a profound opportunity to nullify the traditional cherry-picked stereotypes and misrepresentation on part of the western digital dictators. Through engaging experiences, VR can potentially offer a refined and transparent portrayal of the Middle Eastern culture and tradition. This strategic tool can be effectively employed to give voice to the voiceless that in turn, will promote cross-cultural harmony. Contrarily, this tool can also pose a significant risk by eternalizing the status quo and the orientalist's tropes if it is not handled masterfully. Virtual reality (VR) creators must know the *Frankenstein* facet of this technology and ought to prioritize diverse vistas and genuine portrayal to empower VR's potential. In so doing, VR can be turned into a powerful tool for reimagining the Orient and promoting cultural empathy.

The interplay of VR, Cultural Imperialism and Strategic Essentialism

The interplay between VR, cultural imperialism, and strategic essentialism is undoubtedly very intricate. Virtual reality (VR) has been a requisite tool with the help of which cultural imperialism can be either eternalized by imposing the dominant narratives or can be demystified by empowering the marginalized voices. In contrast, if this imperative tool is not devised strategically, it can give an added impetus to the already existing power dynamics and status quo, suppressing the susceptible cultures, pushing them to subtle oblivion. *Strategic essentialism* can be a powerful tool in this context, allowing for the temporary grouping of diverse experiences to challenge and nullify the dominant narratives and to promote genuine expression. By prioritizing diverse perspectives and genuine representation, VR technology can be harnessed to subvert cultural imperialism and foster greater understanding and empathy.

Conclusion

Summing up, this research study primarily brings forth the deep-seated tie-up between Virtual reality (VR) and cultural imperialism, affecting the very image of the Middle East in terms of its culture, values, and perspectives. It explicitly unlocks a new set of refined perspectives, technically harnessed to assuage the Middle East tarnished image and to convincingly promote interfaith and cross-cultural harmony. In the same vein, it offers a powerful insight in the shape of *strategic essentialism* via the Middle East intelligentsia can potentially empower their intellectual response, nullifying such pathetic stereotypes willingly or unwillingly imposed by the Orientalists.

Last but not the least, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of VR's role in determining cultural discourse in the Middle East, accentuating on the significance of inclusive and thoughtful VR creation and consumption.

Acknowledgment

The authors acknowledge the valuable support of the editorial committee of this publication, and in particular, Prof. Dr. Atta Ullah Jan, Qurtaba University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar, for extending his generous intellectual support and guidance throughout this research endeavor.

Thanks also go to the Journal proofreading committee for extending their invaluable guidance in finalizing and approving our research paper.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest. This research hasn't received any specific funding from any agency in public, commercial, and not-for-profit organization.

Additionally, the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the research findings. All concerned data and materials employed in this research study are properly cited and referenced. The authors are responsible for the content and clarity of this research article.

Funding

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing interests

The authors claim no competing interests.

Dedication

"To my caring parents, whose unflinching love and support have been the ultimate guiding forces behind my every successful endeavor."

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