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Research Article

Voices of War: A Feminist Perspective of Arab Women in Contemporary War Films

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Abstract

This research paper delves into how Arab women are portrayed in the context of war, with a particular focus on two films: *Mosul* (2019), directed by Matthew Michael Carnahan, and *The Swimmers* (2022), directed by Sally El Hosaini. Using a gendered perspective that incorporates feminist narratology, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies, the study investigates how women's voices, experiences, and emotional realities are depicted on screen during times of armed conflict and forced migration. It critically analyzes the concept of narrative authority who tells the story and from which viewpoint highlighting how this influences the visibility or invisibility of women in war cinema. The research indicates that although *Mosul* is closely tied to the Arab world and shares a meaningful narrative from the perspective of the Iraqi military, it tends to overlook women, presenting them only as victims of violence. Conversely, *The Swimmers*, directed by an Arab-British woman and inspired by the true stories of two Syrian sisters, elevates female voices, offering a more intimate, nuanced, and emotionally impactful representation of women's strength and suffering. By examining these two films, the paper emphasizes the need for culturally aware and gender-sensitive storytelling in visual media. Ultimately, this research calls for a more

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

inclusive approach to cinema that acknowledges the emotional depth and lived experiences of Arab women in conflict zones.

Keywords: Arab women in war, gendered analysis, feminist narratology, postcolonial theory, trauma studies, refugee cinema

Introduction

In the realm of war stories especially in films male characters often take center stage as soldiers, leaders, and heroes. Meanwhile, female characters, particularly Arab women, frequently find themselves relegated to the sidelines, depicted as victims of violence or mere bystanders in the chaos. These portrayals aren't just random; they mirror deeper societal and political beliefs that shape how war narratives are crafted in global media. Western filmmakers, in particular, have played a significant role in framing Arab women as voiceless, oppressed figures in desperate need of saving. Such depictions not only overlook the genuine experiences of these women but also perpetuate outdated stereotypes that continue to color international perceptions of Arab society and gender dynamics.

This paper sets out to challenge the limited portrayals often found in film by exploring two specific movies: *Mosul (2019)* and *The Swimmers (2022)*. The first film, crafted by a Western director, follows a male-dominated war narrative, while the latter, directed by an Arab-British woman, tells the heartfelt true story of two Syrian sisters facing the challenges of being refugees. Through a comparison of these two films, the study highlights how the storyteller's perspective impacts the representation of Arab women in times of war. It also brings to light the critical importance of narratives shared by Arab women themselves stories that express their deep emotions, resilience, and the realities of enduring conflict through a female lens.

Literature Review

The topic of gender representation in war films has generated quite a bit of interest among academics. Feminist thinkers like Laura Mulvey have highlighted that films often reflect the “male gaze,” she state where women are sidelined as mere objects for viewers rather than being the main characters. In her influential essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey is discusses how women are frequently depicted in passive roles, while men are the ones driving the action. This trend is especially pronounced in war films, where women often appear as background characters, romantic interests, or victims.

Another important work is Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which delves into how the West perceives and depicts the East. Said argues that the Western perspective often views the Arab world as exotic, mysterious, and less civilized. This viewpoint fosters stereotypes in media, including the portrayal of the “voiceless Arab woman” who requires rescue by Western forces.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

Such narratives are used to rationalize war and intervention, yet they fail to capture the true experiences of Arab women.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and "mimicry" shed light on how colonialism creates complex and often confused identities. In war films, Arab women are sometimes depicted as torn between tradition and modernity, but their emotional and cultural richness is seldom explored. Unfortunately, Western filmmakers often overlook the opportunity to portray Arab women as independent, thoughtful individuals.

Scholars like bell hooks and E. Ann Kaplan have pointed out that real change in how media represents women happens when women of color share their own stories. When Arab women take the reins as writers or directors in film, the outcome tends to be more genuine, layered, and emotionally resonant. These narratives don't just turn women into symbols; they reveal their resilience, strength, and choices.

Cathy Caruth's insights in trauma studies add another dimension to this conversation. She emphasizes that trauma isn't solely about the act of violence itself; it also profoundly impacts memory, identity, and relationships. Films that tackle war should reflect how trauma lingers in the minds and lives of survivors.

In her book, *Women and the War Story*, Miriam Cooke underscores how Arab women are reclaiming the narrative around war. Rather than remaining silent figures, they are now sharing their daily struggles, experiences of motherhood, emotional turmoil, and acts of resistance. This shift not only challenges stereotypes but also opens up new perspectives on Arab women in the context of war.

All these theories and writings shed light on the importance of representation especially in films that explore themes of conflict, identity, and survival.

Theoretical Framework

This paper dives into three key theoretical approaches feminist film theory, postcolonial theory, and trauma studies to take a closer look at how Arab women are portrayed in war films. Each of these perspectives offers valuable insights into the interplay of gender, culture, and storytelling in cinema.

Feminist Film Theory, pioneered by Laura Mulvey and further developed by scholars like E. Ann Kaplan and bell hooks, examines the positioning of women in films. Mulvey's idea of the "male gaze" highlights how women are often depicted as mere objects of visual pleasure for male audiences, rather than as individuals with their own voices and experiences. This framework helps us spot instances where female characters are rendered passive, decorative, or reliant on male protection especially in war films, where male heroism tends to take center stage. Additionally, feminist theory looks at the importance of female authorship, showing that when women are behind the camera, it often results in more genuine and nuanced female characters.

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

Postcolonial Theory, particularly through the lens of Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, investigates how the West portrays the East. Said's concept of Orientalism reveals that Arab women are frequently depicted as exotic, submissive, or oppressed in Western narratives. Bhabha's notions of "mimicry" and "hybridity" shed light on the identity struggles faced by postcolonial subjects, including Arab women who find themselves navigating the tension between traditional values and modern expectations. This theory is particularly useful for uncovering colonial biases in Western films like *Mosul*.

Trauma Studies, drawing from Cathy Caruth's work, focuses on how trauma is remembered, represented, and processed. Trauma isn't always overt; it can manifest through silence, repetition, or fragmented memories. Films like *The Swimmers*, which utilize flashbacks and emotional storytelling, create space for personal trauma in ways that military-centric films like *Mosul* often overlook. Together, these theories illuminate the gendered and cultural gaps present in war cinema.

Analysis of Films

1. *Mosul* (2019) – Directed by Matthew Michael Carnahan

Mosul tells the gripping tale of an elite Iraqi SWAT team battling against ISIS. The film is packed with intensity and action, showcasing the struggle of men determined to reclaim their city. Yet, it's hard to ignore the near-total absence of women in this narrative. When they do make an appearance, they often take on the role of silent victims: mothers weeping, women fleeing from violence, or nameless characters without a voice.

The film places a strong emphasis on themes of brotherhood, loyalty, and revenge, all seen through a male lens. Women are portrayed primarily as symbols of the devastation wrought by war, rather than as active participants in the fight for survival. This perspective aligns with the concept of the "male gaze" and echoes Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, where Western filmmakers often discuss the Arab world without genuinely engaging with its complexities.

Despite the Arab setting and characters, the viewpoint remains distinctly Western. The narrative fails to delve into the emotional and social impacts of war on women. There are no female voices, no moments that reflect on gender dynamics, and no acknowledgment of women's suffering beyond a superficial glance.

2. *The Swimmers* (2022) – Directed by Sally El Hosaini

The Swimmers tells the inspiring true story of Syrian sisters Yusra and Sara Mardini, chronicling their incredible journey from war-torn Syria to Europe. This film is a heartfelt exploration of both the physical and emotional scars that come with such a harrowing experience. It offers a personal, female-focused perspective on the refugee crisis, making it all the more poignant.

Yusra's aspiration to compete in the Olympics becomes a powerful symbol of hope and resilience. Meanwhile, Sara emerges as a fierce protector and later an activist, adding depth to their

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

shared journey. The sisters are portrayed not as victims, but as strong, courageous individuals capable of making tough choices.

In contrast to *Mosul*, this film beautifully weaves in themes of female friendship, family ties, and rich cultural nuances that feel genuine. With an Arab-British woman at the helm, the film steers clear of clichés, presenting the sisters as empowered and vocal rather than exotic or frail.

Moreover, the film approaches trauma with sensitivity. Through the use of flashbacks, emotional tension, and intimate close-ups, it immerses the audience in the characters' stress, fear, and strength. It skillfully links political turmoil with personal experiences, revealing the profound human cost of war and migration.

Themes

1. Silencing vs. Speaking Out

A key theme here is the concept of voice. In *Mosul*, women are often sidelined, appearing only briefly as mothers, refugees, or victims. Their presence doesn't shape the narrative; instead, it highlights what has been lost or damaged. They serve to evoke emotional or moral responses from the male characters, but their own agency is stifled. This silence perpetuates the stereotype that Arab women are voiceless or insignificant in the context of war. On the flip side, *The Swimmers* places women's voices front and center. The two sisters, Yusra and Sara, articulate their emotions, fears, and aspirations with clarity and strength. Their dialogues propel the story forward, showcasing their inner battles and resilience.

2. Resilience Beyond Physical Survival

While *Mosul* depicts resilience through sheer physical strength and combat, *The Swimmers* redefines it to encompass emotional, psychological, and relational aspects. The sisters not only navigate perilous border crossings but also confront the emotional toll of war, loss, and migration. Their journey illustrates that resistance can manifest in various ways not just through armed conflict, but also by nurturing hope, safeguarding loved ones, and reclaiming their dreams.

3. Cultural Authenticity and Perspective

Perspective is crucial in storytelling. *Mosul*, directed by an American filmmaker, influences how Iraqi life is portrayed. Even though it features Arabic-speaking characters and Arab actors, the film often lacks emotional depth and cultural nuance, particularly in its depiction of women. In contrast, *The Swimmers* is helmed by an Arab-British woman who brings a personal and culturally sensitive viewpoint to the narrative. Cultural elements like language, family dynamics, and social expectations are presented with authenticity and care. This theme underscores the significance of insider versus outsider narrative authority.

4. Representation of Trauma

One of the central themes is the portrayal of trauma. In *Mosul*, trauma is depicted through intense action like gunfights, destruction, and a thirst for revenge. While emotional trauma is touched

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

upon, it doesn't get the deep dive it deserves. On the flip side, *The Swimmers* takes a more intimate route. With its use of flashbacks, close-up shots, and heartfelt conversations, it reveals the unseen scars of war memories, guilt, fear, and the relentless pressure to survive. This theme illustrates that trauma goes beyond just physical wounds; it deeply impacts mental health and personal identity.

5. Heroism and Gender Roles

In *Mosul*, heroism is all about masculinity showing courage on the battlefield, loyalty among men, and the ultimate sacrifice in war. Women are primarily portrayed as those in need of rescue. *The Swimmers*, however, flips this narrative. Here, heroism is defined by resilience, compassion, and moral fortitude. Yusra and Sara may not wield weapons, but they confront life-threatening situations to save others, swim for hours in treacherous waters, and work to rebuild their lives. The film redefines what it truly means to be a "hero."

Together, these themes underscore the significance of representation, perspective, and emotional richness in narratives about women in war. They also highlight how gender influences not just who gets visibility, but also how their pain and strength are perceived.

Discussion and Findings

The analysis of *Mosul* and *The Swimmers* highlights how gender, culture, and authorship shape the portrayal of Arab women in war cinema. These two films present strikingly different viewpoints on the Arab female experience during conflict, and their contrast uncovers several key insights.

To start, the presence or lack of women's voices in film narratives makes a significant impact. In *Mosul*, women are nearly silent. They appear for just a few fleeting moments, often relegated to the background, and are never given the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings, or experiences. This results in a one-dimensional portrayal of war, where only the bravery and suffering of men are acknowledged. Conversely, *The Swimmers* places women at the forefront. The film revolves around their emotional journeys, allowing viewers to form a deeper connection with the characters. This demonstrates that when women are included in storytelling as active participants rather than mere objects the narrative becomes more nuanced and authentic.

Additionally, the cultural background of the filmmaker significantly influences representation. Although *Mosul* is set in Iraq, it is directed by a Western man. This leads to a focus on violence and action, while neglecting the emotional trauma and daily struggles, particularly from a female perspective. In contrast, *The Swimmers* is helmed by an Arab-British woman who approaches the narrative with sensitivity, care, and personal insight. Her cultural ties lend authenticity to the characters and their experiences, especially in relation to family dynamics, gender roles, and migration.

Another key takeaway is how each film portrays heroism and resilience. In *Mosul*, heroism is depicted through violence, loss, and unwavering military loyalty, with women largely sidelined

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

in the narrative of resistance. Conversely, *The Swimmers* reimagines heroism through themes of sacrifice, endurance, and emotional fortitude. Yusra and Sara may not be soldiers, but they take significant risks, demonstrate leadership, and inspire those around them. This fresh perspective challenges the traditional, male-centric view of bravery and creates space to acknowledge the courage of women in various forms.

When it comes to trauma, the films present it in starkly different ways. In *Mosul*, trauma is external and visceral, manifesting through destruction and death it's fast-paced, loud, and visually striking. In contrast, *The Swimmers* explores trauma as an internal, emotional experience that unfolds slowly. The characters navigate their pain through silence, memories, and personal struggles. This underscores the importance of more nuanced representations of trauma in war films, particularly those that delve into the emotional experiences of women.

These insights reveal that the narratives surrounding Arab women are often influenced by the storytellers. Western viewpoints frequently silence women or depict them merely as passive victims. However, when Arab women take the reins of storytelling as directors, writers, or central characters new narratives emerge that capture complexity, humanity, and resilience. These stories go beyond mere survival; they focus on reclaiming identity, dignity, and agency.

Conclusion

This research highlights a significant contrast in the portrayal of Arab women in the films *Mosul* and *The Swimmers*. While *Mosul* adheres to a conventional war narrative dominated by male action and silent female characters, *The Swimmers* breaks away from that pattern. It showcases Arab women as strong, emotional, and integral to the storyline, emphasizing the importance of allowing Arab women to share their own narratives.

Films like *The Swimmers* offer a fresh perspective on Arab women in wartime not as mere victims, but as resilient survivors, fighters, and leaders. In stark contrast, *Mosul* clings to outdated narratives that silence female voices. This paper illustrates that gender, culture, and authorship play a crucial role in shaping how war stories are told and understood.

Furthermore, whether women's experiences are included or excluded in films significantly affects how global audiences perceive conflict and those who endure it. Representation in cinema influences public empathy, memory, and even political views. By bringing women's stories to the forefront, particularly from an insider's cultural viewpoint, filmmakers can challenge stereotypes, reveal hidden truths, and create more accurate depictions of wartime realities. As we look ahead, it's essential for the film industry, scholars, and audiences to support and elevate authentic female voices in war narratives—voices that have been silenced for too long but are now reclaiming their space through impactful storytelling.

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The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 7 & Issue 2 (April 2025)

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