



## Understanding The Western Perspective In The Process Of Decolonialism Through Documentary Films Influenced By Orientalism

Assistant Professor Hüdai Ateş | ORCID: [0000-0001-8097-278X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8097-278X) | [huadai.ates@bozok.edu.tr](mailto:huadai.ates@bozok.edu.tr)

Yozgat Bozok University, Faculty of Communication, Radio Television and Cinema Department  
Yozgat, Türkiye

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/04qvdf239>

Professor Dr. Dilek Takımcı | ORCID: [0000-0001-7800-1685](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7800-1685) | [dilek.takimci@ege.edu.tr](mailto:dilek.takimci@ege.edu.tr)

Ege University, Faculty of Communication, Radio Television and Cinema Department İzmir,  
Türkiye

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/02eaafc18>

### Abstract

The strengths of documentary cinema in depicting cultural, social and historical issues and the responsible use of this power are among the leading debates in the field of cinema. In particular, the representation of Eastern cultures in documentaries is addressed as distorted through orientalist stereotypes and prejudices. In this study, feature films that won awards at the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) were examined, and 13 films about Eastern societies were selected as a sample and analyzed in terms of orientalist representations. The research presents findings on how the awarding criteria at IDFA have been based on orientalist representations over time. This study aims to raise awareness of orientalist representations and contribute to decolonialism studies.

### Keywords

Orientalism, Documentary Film, Film Festivals, Decolonialism, Eastern Collective

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## Oryantalizmden Etkilenen Belgesel Filmler Üzerinden Dekolonializm Sürecinde Batılı Bakış Açısını Anlamak

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Hüdayi Ateş | ORCID: [0000-0001-8097-278X](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8097-278X) | [huadai.ates@bozok.edu.tr](mailto:huadai.ates@bozok.edu.tr)

Yozgat Bozok Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Radyo Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü Yozgat,  
Türkiye

ROR ID: <https://ror.org/04qvdf239>

Prof. Dr. Dilek Takımcı | ORCID: [0000-0001-7800-1685](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7800-1685) | [dilek.takimci@ege.edu.tr](mailto:dilek.takimci@ege.edu.tr)

Ege Üniversitesi, İletişim Fakültesi, Radyo Televizyon ve Sinema Bölümü İzmir, Türkiye

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### Öz

Belgesel sinemanın kültürel, sosyal ve tarihi konuları tasvir etme konusundaki güçlü yanları ve bu gücün sorumlu bir şekilde kullanılması sinema alanındaki önde gelen tartışmalar arasında yer almaktadır. Özellikle, Doğu kültürlerinin belgesellerdeki temsili, oryantalist klişeler ve önyargılar aracılığıyla çarpıtıldığı ele alınmaktadır. Bu çalışmada Uluslararası Amsterdam Belgesel Filmleri Festivali'nde (IDFA) ödül alan uzun metrajlı filmler incelenmiş, Doğu toplumlarını konu alan 13 film örneklem olarak seçilerek, oryantalist temsiller açısından analiz edilmiştir. Araştırma, IDFA'daki ödül verme kriterlerinin zaman içinde nasıl oryantalist temsillere dayandığına dair bulgular sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, oryantalist temsillerin farkındalığını artırmayı ve dekolonyalizm çalışmalarına katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Oryantalizm, Belgesel Film, Film Festivalleri, Dekolonializm, Doğulu Toplum

## Atıf Bilgisi

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## Introduction

The perpetuation of Eastern exoticism through works of art is closely linked to the historical context of colonialism and imperialism through which the West views and portrays the East. Said states that the West constructs a distorted and exoticized image of the East and calls it "the Orient," and that this image is based on a set of stereotypes and misconceptions (Said, 2017). The stereotypes and representations that have been perpetuated from the past to the present play an active role in shaping perceptions of Eastern cultures and societies. These representations lead to distorted and incomplete understandings of cultures and reinforce notions of cultural superiority and otherness. Sardar argues that the portrayal of the East as an exotic place is deliberate and the result of an effort to create a rationale for colonization. According to him, the construction of the Eastern narrative is not based on what the West knows, but on what it wants (Sardar, 1999).

Appiah criticizes directors who produce films from an orientalist perspective defining them as cultural servants of Western world capitalism. According to him, Western state administrators institutionalize the film industry in line with the interests of the West and legitimize the source of hegemony through the extensive press and news network by honoring orientalist directors with awards (Appiah, 1993). In this context, documentaries produced from an orientalist perspective contribute to a uniform and static reflection of Eastern histories, religions, and economic systems. This approach fails to recognize the diversity of Eastern cultures and distorts the realities of their life experiences. It is important for documentary filmmakers to be aware of the power dynamics between East and West and to try to create films that provide a more balanced view of foreign cultures.

Thinkers such as Abdelkebir Khatibi argue that balanced approaches can only be achieved if both sides on the East-West axis are able to get their act together. Khatibi' is critical of fundamentalist modes of thought both in the West and in the Islamic world, stating that the West should be neither centered (Eurocentrism) nor marginalized (fundamentalism), but confronted through original and critical thought, thus providing a decolonial transmodern response to Eurocentric modernity (Khatibi, 1977).

Based on Khatibi's idea that it is not easy to understand the present without coming to terms with the past, this study examines the extent to which orientalist patterns of representation have been effective in the award criteria of the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) in the feature documentary category from the past to the present. A fundamental problem is that documentary filmmakers and directors rely on orientalist stereotypes and prejudices in their portrayals of Eastern cultures, or are influenced by orientalist perspectives in various ways, such as portraying Eastern societies as exotic, mysterious, or terrorists. It is important for documentary filmmakers to be aware of the potential impact of orientalist perspectives on their work and to strive to present an

accurate portrayal of Eastern cultures and societies, with attention to detail and without stereotyping.

Like many works of art, documentary films are worthy of scrutiny both for the claim that they present real information and for the reason that they do so from an aesthetic point of view. In this study, all scenes in the documentary films that received awards in the feature-length category of IDFA were analyzed in the context of orientalism. In this way, it was revealed to what extent the directors maintained the classical orientalist perspective in the documentary films.

## **1. Orientalism and International Documentary Film Festival Of Amsterdam (IDFA)**

Orientalism refers to the way in which Eastern countries and cultures are analyzed and defined in various works from a Western perspective. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a Western school of interpretation that has made the East its own material (Said, 2017). The West's way of establishing authority over the East, structuring the East, and dominating the East led to the emergence of orientalism. To this day, orientalist representations have continued to exist in many artistic fields, including literature, painting, music, photography, and film, with their stereotyped formulas through constant repetition (MacKenzie, 1995).

The concept of "Eastern societies" has emerged as a fundamental concept in classical studies of the East-West contrast. The divergence of the two societies is based on religious and cultural differences. The phenomenon of religion has influenced many things in social life, from works of art to legal texts. The existence of different religions and civilizations within Eastern societies is obvious. For example, countries such as China and India belong to the Eastern civilization, but they have different religious beliefs. According to Edward Said, what is meant by Eastern societies in the orientalist discourse are the Middle Eastern societies with the Islamic faith (Said, 2017). Europe and the United States, which we can call Western societies, and the Islamic countries, which we can define as Eastern societies, constitute two different deep-rooted civilizations due to their neighborhood relations with these countries, their location in the same basin (the Mediterranean), their different religions born in the same geography, and the great wars that have taken place from past to present. From the Crusades to 9/11, Eastern countries have been presented in literary texts and artistic works as an "exotic/authentic" geography. In the post-9/11 conjuncture, the East is presented as a "chaotic and uncanny" geography. In the Orientalist discourse, the difference of the Other is emphasized in order to emphasize the uniqueness of the East/West. According to this discourse, Easterners are portrayed as far from being individuals, underdeveloped, deviant, primitive, false, inferior, passive, immoral, ignorant and terrorist, while Westerners are portrayed as superior, advanced, humanitarian, active and creative individuals.

Said's concept of orientalism has led to the development of a critical school of thought called postcolonialism and "decolonialism". Many thinkers such as Anibal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Homi K. Bhabha, and Abdelkebir Khatibi have developed ideas critical of colonialism. According to Quijano, the beliefs, ideas, images, symbols, and knowledge of the colonized were subjected to "systematic repression" in the pre-coloniality period. The people's "forms of knowing, production of knowledge and perspectives, their images, image systems, symbols and ways of meaning" were repressed and the forms of expression of the dominators were imposed on them. Quijano argues that this system of domination became structuralized and diffused over time, becoming a "universal cultural model". In the next stage, coloniality emerged as a continued and deepened form of colonialism. According to Quijano, coloniality is "the most general form of domination in the world today". According to this paradigm, while the Western subject is an individual, the Eastern people, whom he objectifies as the other, have no identity at the ontological level because they are outside of current scientific knowledge. Consequently, they can only be the "object" of European knowledge or domination because they are "different/unequal and inferior" (cited in Buhari, 2021). According to him, the way out of colonialism is epistemological decolonization, because if this can be done, a new intercultural communication will begin and the freedom to choose between different cultural orientations will emerge. In this context, Dignolo, in his work "Local Histories/Global Designs", argues that the hegemonic knowledge created by Western countries must be overcome with the concept of "border thinking". According to him, Western civilization considers world history "its own property" and has constructed its own history with this mentality. He notes that universal history has been explained only from a local perspective for five hundred years, the Western perspective, and that Western civilization has been constructed as the final stage of the human species. In other words, what Dignolo emphasizes is that the West has gained epistemic power through the monopoly of definition and signification, and through the narrative it has constructed on that basis. This is where border thinking comes in, revealing the invisible functions of the discrimination between local histories and global designs. In this context, modernity, which was established by colonialism, is not independent of colonialism, nor can it be separated from it. Today, the myth of a universal history based on ancient Greece and Rome is also being questioned. Dignolo states that his problem is the "imperial belief" in the subjugation of the non-Western part of the world to Western cosmology, arguing that this is the underlying factor behind the success of the West's epistemic management in politics and economics. In order to reach border thinking, one must first break with the "hegemonic epistemology" that is seen as "absolute knowledge" and that is implanted in our minds through repetitive patterns. (Dignolo, 1999). According to him, colonialism continues to live under the guise of modernity and this is where the major problems of the world we live in originate. He argues that a deeper look is needed to end colonization. For example, instead of taking poverty as a given and trying to explain how and why it happens, he wants to explain how to fight it.

Abdelkebir Khatibi discusses the concept of "border thinking" through the concepts of "double criticism" and "other thought" (Khatibi, 1977). Khatibi's concept of double criticism envisages a critical approach to fundamentalist forms of thought in both the West and the Islamic world. While criticizing the colonial ideologies of Western countries, he argues that the fundamentalist metaphysics of the Arab-Muslim world, consisting of patriarchy, charisma, and theology, must be deconstructed. For these fundamentalist features are the faulty foundations of the system that has kept Islamic societies in the grip of Western "othering" for centuries. With the concept of "other thought," he argues that the development of cultures by preserving their own characteristics without being affected by assimilation will contribute to universal progress. In this way, it will be possible for humanity to live together in the process of being torn apart by the mentality of discrimination. He explains this idea by comparing it to the mechanism of "weaving. In weaving, there is a movement that can move a thread back and forth indefinitely to connect, overlap, and transcend different objects. Like weaving, multiple cultures, each with their own characteristics, can interact with each other to form harmony and contribute to each other in a polyphonic way.

Abdelkebir Khatibi' is critical of fundamentalist modes of thought both in the West and in the Islamic world, stating that the West should be neither centered (Eurocentrism) nor marginalized (fundamentalism), but confronted through original and critical thought, thus providing a decolonial transmodern response to Eurocentric modernity (Khatibi, 1977).

IDFA is recognized as one of the oldest and most prestigious festivals in the world, having been held for thirty-five years. In addition, this documentary film festival is funded by the Bertha Foundation, which is a Western organization. Within the festival, the selection committees play a decisive role in the selection, the presentation, and the delivery of the content to the audience. In other words, it is known that the organizations that organize festivals and the financial resources that support these organizations are known to play an active role in determining the content of the films presented to the audience. In the first year of this festival, which has been organized for 35 years, a total of 36 films received awards, as 2 films received the best award in the feature film category. Thirty-two (95%) of the documentary directors were Westerners. Among the Western directors, two are citizens of Western countries of Eastern origin. The 4 (5%) directors of Eastern nationality are from Iran, Korea, Israel, and India. Of these films, 13 (36%) are documentaries about Eastern societies and 17 (48%) are documentaries about Western societies. The remaining 6 (16%) documentaries are about Central and South Africa and various island countries. While the number of documentaries filmed in the East is 13, 7 (54%) of them are set in communities in the Islamic geography and 6 (46%) are set in countries such as China, India, Myanmar, and Korea. Among the directors of films about the East, the directors of 7 films shot in the Islamic geography are Western citizens. Two of them are Western citizens of Eastern origin (Lebanon and Iraq). Among the 6 directors of films about the East outside the Islamic geography, 4 are Western citizens and the



remaining 2 are Indian and Korean. In line with these data, it can be concluded that the majority of the feature films that won awards at the International Documentary Film Festival were again produced from a Western-centered point of view.

The awards given at documentary film festivals supported by Western foundations and organizations and the objectivity of the films are still debated today. One of the questions to be researched is the criteria by which the subjects of documentary films are selected, how they are shaped, and with what kind of mentality they are transformed into films by the directors as a representation of truth in cinema. It is debatable to what extent Western films about Eastern societies are influenced by international politics and to what extent they represent the truth. In light of these debates, this research is important in terms of revealing the orientalist elements in the narratives of documentary films awarded at a Western film festival. This research aims to reveal how the East is represented in the narratives of IDFA award-winning documentaries that deal with the East and Eastern cultures. In this context, the research is important in terms of contributing to the development of a more nuanced and accurate portrayal of the East and Eastern cultures in media and cultural representation, free of stereotypes.

## **2. Analysis Of Orientalist Representation In IDFA Award-Winning Documentaries**

### **2.1. Population and Sample of the Study**

A total of 36 films have been awarded in the feature film category of the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival since 1988, when the festival was first organized. All these films, which constitute the universe of the research, were watched and 13 films about the East were selected. Among the selected films, 7 films with orientalist elements are set in the Islamic geography. 6 films are about the topics of the non-Islamic geography of the Far East. Therefore, a purposive sampling group was included in the research and the analysis was carried out on the following films:

Films made in the Islamic geography and representing the East

- 1991 - Dreams and Silence, Omar Al-Qattan, Belgium
- 2001 - Family, Phie Ambo & Sami Saif, Denmark
- 2003 - Checkpoint, Yoav Shamir, Israel
- 2004 - Shape of the Moon, Leonard Retel Helmrich, The Netherlands
- 2010 - Position Among the Stars, Leonard Retel Helmrich, The Netherlands,
- 2016 - Nowhere to Hide, Zaradasht Ahmed, Norway/Sweden,
- 2020 - Radiography of a Family, Firouzeh Khosrovani, Norway, Iran, Switzerland

Films made outside the Islamic geography and representing the Far East:

- 1996 - Atman, Pirjo Honkasalo, Finland /Germany
- 2008 - Burma VJ – Reporting from a Closed Country, Anders Østergaard, Denmark
- 2009 - Last Trein Home, Lixin Fan, Canada
- 2014- Of Men and War, Laurent Bécue-Renard, France/Switzerland
- 2011 - Planet of Snail, Seung-jun Yi [ko], South Korea
- 2018 - Reason, Anand Patwardhan, India

Of Men and War, one of the selected films, was made in the United States and tells about the psychological conditions and family relationships of soldiers fighting in Iraq. The film Planet of Snail tells the story of a visually and hearing-impaired man's efforts to hold on to life with a disabled woman in a humanistic style. There are no visual representations of orientalism in these two films.

## 2.2 Research Methodology

The method of research is content analysis, which is a quantitative and qualitative research method. Considering the elements that indicate the visual codes of Orientalism, the main question of the research was determined as follows: What orientalist elements do documentary films use to represent the general social appearance, gender relations, rituals, places, and clothing of the East? In accordance with this question, the analysis data on the orientalist features identified in each film were compiled in a single general table in the following section, taking into account the limitations of the study. The determination of the categories in the table is based on the stereotypes identified in the orientalism studies conducted so far (Resource: Said, 2017; Shaheen, 2000; Kabbani, 1993; Thornton, 1985; Khatibi, 1977; Hörner, 2001). The table of analysis is divided into two main categories. The first category is social codes and conventions. The subcategories of social codes and conventions are representations of general social appearance, women, men, and rituals. The second major category, physical codes and conventions, includes the subcategories of clothing and space. Under the subheadings, the most common orientalist qualities appropriate to the theme are listed in order to provide concrete data for analysis. In the table, a total of 37 codes were identified in 6 subcategories, and it is important to determine how often these codes are mentioned in the films in order to provide systematic data. Thus, the most recurrent stereotypical qualities can be numerically identified separately by three coders. Thus, after processing the raw data into the coding table, the consistency of the data is checked in terms of the reliability of the research. The quantitative data are very important for the correct interpretation of the films and for the consistency of the findings.

Qualitative methods are more appropriate for making inferences about the problem addressed by the research or for more in-depth investigation. Attempting to explain ever-changing and complex human behavior, social events, and phenomena through

measurements and observations is inadequate in some situations. Measurements and observations, which are not sufficient to determine the cause of any behavior or event, can only answer questions such as how many people behave in a certain way. In this direction, qualitative research allows to explain the causes of individual behaviors or social phenomena and events. Qualitative analysis can also identify hidden meanings that remain in the background and reinforce the narrative through the salient data in the film text. In this way, the message that the documentary is trying to convey, the meaning of the content, and the focus are determined.

### 2.3 Findings

**Table 1:** Orientalist codes and conventions<sup>1</sup>

Social Codes and Conventions	Eastern Society	Primitive/Backward	42%
		Fatalistic	3%
		Far from individualism	15%
		Anti-Democratic	10%
		Pro-violence	30%
		Other	-
	Eastern Women	Oppressed	58%
		No public space	14%
		Waiting for rescue	28%
		Lustful	-
		Other	-
	Educational Status of Eastern Women	Educated	7%
		Uneducated	28%
		Uncertain	65%
	Eastern Men	Brutal	20%
		Prone to violence	65%
		Stupid / Irrational	10%
		Womanizer	15%
		Other	-
	Educational Status of Eastern Men	Educated	27%
		Uneducated	13%
Uncertain		60%	
Eastern Rituals	Salaah	29%	
	Azan	10%	
	Praying	16%	
	Zikir/Ritual	26%	
	Other (burials, physical training,	19%	

<sup>1</sup> This table was developed from Hudai Ates's PhD thesis. (Ates, 2023)

		etc.)		
Fiziksel Kod ve Konvansiyonlar	Eastern Space	Desert	15%	
		Slums	30%	
		Village and Town	10%	
		Market Places	9%	
		Mosque/Minaret	20%	
		Church	7%	
		Synagogue	-	
		Other (Buddhist temple, etc.)	9%	
	Eastern Clothing	Women	Bed Sheet	32%
			Traditional Clothing (Entari, Shalwar, etc.)	16%
			Veil	8%
			Headscarf	42%
			Accessories (Miscellaneous jewelry)	2%
			Other items	-
		Men	Religious clothing (robes, Buddhist monk clothes etc.)	10%
			Cellabiye	23%
			Fez	5%
			Skullcap	16%
		Turbans	35%	
		Accessories (Dagger, Rosary, etc.)	11%	
		Other items	-	

In the table above, orientalist elements are categorized and the frequencies of these orientalist elements in the films are shown as percentages. The frequency of orientalist elements in a film was determined by both visual and auditory codes, and then the distribution of these codes in the films was determined as a percentage.

## 2.4. Social Codes And Conventions

### 2.4.1 General Social Outlook

Almost all of the documentaries analyzed portray the communities living in the Eastern geography as extremely primitive and violent. While many images that documentary filmmakers intentionally or unintentionally place in the film show the backwardness and primitiveness of the society that is the subject of the film, filth is also emphasized. In this way, the director reveals the difference between East and West by focusing on the bad and negative conditions in Eastern societies. For example, in one of the images in *Dreams and Silence*, the director makes a tilting movement upward from the garbage on the ground,

showing how dirty the ground along the street is and that people can easily throw their garbage anywhere. In the film *Shape of the Moon*, as the camera follows one of the main characters, Bakti, outdoors, it shows that a stall in the market sells dentures and people are trying them on in their mouths. Again, Bakti is carrying poultry in a sack on his back. Many scenes support the stereotype of the primitive East, such as the fire in a house in Bakti's neighborhood that is extinguished not by the fire brigade but by people carrying buckets of water.

In *Position Among the Stars*, the sequel to *Shape of the Moon*, the director shows close-ups of rats eating the leftovers in the food containers, cockroaches falling into the cooking pot, all kinds of insects and lizards crawling on the walls of the house to show that people live in an unsanitary environment. Again, the scene where Bakti's wife feeds her child after an insect falls into the cooking pot in their house is especially shown. What the director wants to focus on with these shots is primitiveness and filth. In the film *Family*, Sami Saif lives a modern life in Denmark and travels to Egypt in search of his family. In Egypt, images of the desert, old and dilapidated houses, people dressed in local clothes, unpaved roads, and shabby places contrast with the modern people and well-kept cityscapes in Denmark.

In *Atman*, another film that portrays Eastern societies as very primitive, a man with congenital paralysis of the legs makes a 6,000-kilometer pilgrimage from the Ganges River to the holy city of Haridwar in the Himalayas in memory of his deceased mother. This film shows the primitive living conditions of Indian society in many ways during the pilgrimage. Basically, this film depicts a spiritual journey but paints a social atmosphere dominated by primitiveness and filth. In *Last Train Home*, people working in filthy, underdeveloped, and crowded conditions in a sewing factory with sewing machines among piles of scattered cloth, children sleeping on tables, and crowded public vehicles far from cleanliness are the most obvious examples shown in the film.

In *Dreams and Silence* and *Nowhere to Hide*, the fact that children are uneducated because of war in their countries is often mentioned, creating a judgment that future generations may be ignorant. In the film *Position Among the Stars*, the reason why children do not read is poverty. The grandmother, the protagonist of the film, provides financial support for the education of her grandson; according to her, it is only through the education of her grandson that she will be able to save her family from poverty.

In *Nowhere to Hide*, the health facility where the character Nori works is shown in the documentary as a place devoid of all kinds of equipment and materials. The floors are full of human blood stains and lack of cleanliness. The fact that children, women, and men are treated in the same place under difficult conditions shows the extent of backwardness.

As a result of the analysis of the documentary films, the second most dominant element of social representation is that Eastern societies are violent. Particularly in films that focus on the Middle East, such as *Dreams and Silence*, *Checkpoint*, *Men and War*, *Nowhere to Hide*, and *Radiography of a Family*, the East is depicted as intertwined with violence. In

terms of the historical roots of Orientalism, we can see that especially after September 11, Eastern societies are more often associated with terrorism and violence. For example, in *Men and War*, the conflicts of American soldiers in Iraq are not depicted directly, but through the psychological devastation of the soldiers after the war. In *Dreams and Silence*, the protagonist, Haifa, was forced to migrate from her native Palestine to Jordan as a victim of war. In *Checkpoint* film, every Palestinian who crosses the Israeli border is treated as a potential terrorist by the soldiers guarding the border. *Shape of the Moon* and its sequel, *Position Among the Stars*, both by the same director, tell the story of an elderly Christian woman and her family living in Indonesia at a particular time, but both films show the support of violence by Muslims in the social environment through street demonstrations. Although not directly related to the theme of these films, the actions of fundamentalist Islamic groups are interspersed, mostly as interludes. In the opening scenes of *Shape of the Moon*, uniformed Muslim men living in Indonesia demonstrate in large groups in the streets in support of Osama Bin Laden after 9/11. At the forefront of the demonstrators are young men carrying guns. In mosques, the masses perform Salaah and pray for the mujahideen fighting for their religion in Afghanistan, Palestine, and Iraq. In the film *Position Among the Stars*, large crowds demonstrate in squares, shouting war cries, and calling for jihad for Islam. Crowds also perform Salaah en masse, dressed in white. Rather than contributing to the story of the film, these images serve to show the radical fundamentalist characteristics of the Islamic community. *Nowhere to Hide* depicts many victims of terrorism as people who have lost loved ones and been injured or maimed. It also shows bomb explosions, dead bodies, destroyed buildings, and vehicles used in the attack.

The image of the East created through the language of images is precisely the center of terror. In *Radiography of a Family*, the audience is informed that after the Iranian revolution, society was terrorized and the streets were the scene of clashes. In *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country*, the saffron revolution against the military regime in eastern Burma (Myanmar) is depicted with hidden cameras, and the film shows crowds of people constantly demonstrating. The hidden camera footage shows people being beaten, and guns exploding, and portrays an eastern country that is trying to get rid of oppression. The film *Reason*, set in India, also shows crowded demonstrations, people being beaten, tortured, hanged from trees, people walking through the streets armed with guns, vehicles being burned, and the carcass of a cow, considered sacred, being left to rot. In this film, India is shown as a primitive country, dominated by violence and fear, which has lost its sacred values. 9 of the 13 documentaries analyzed associate the East with terrorism and war, and the uncanny stereotype of the East as the center of terrorism stands out as a prominent stereotype.

Another characteristic of Eastern societies that is coded in the films according to the orientalist perspective is that Easterners are far from individuality, they think of society rather than personal needs, and they act in masses. Documentaries often show Muslims performing or praying in large groups. On the other hand, the documentary also shows that

large groups are sometimes led and directed by a single person. In particular, the phenomenon of the family is given priority over individual desires and needs. This applies to all films, but the most striking examples are *Shape of the Moon* and *Position Among the Stars*. In these films, the main characters are shown to prioritize the expectations of family members and society over their own needs. On the other hand, the documentary *Checkpoint* shows how people act collectively rather than interacting with one another for fear of harsh intervention by soldiers. In *Shape of the Moon*, *Position Among the Stars*, *Nowhere to Hide*, and *Radiography of a Family*, Muslims are uniformly dressed and perform actions and prayers in crowds. Fighting in the name of religion is shown to be more important than individual safety.

In documentary films, indicators such as the situation of opposition groups within society and the attitude of governments toward opposition groups provide data about the social structure in terms of despotism. This is evident in the documentaries *Dreams and Silence*, *Radiography of a Family*, *Reason*, and *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country*. In *Dreams and Silence*, Haifa and her son watch an interview on television about Saddam Hussein's regional decisions. Haifa tells her son that he should fight on Saddam Hussein's side if the US declares war. In this context, we see that the rhetoric of US democracy is not convincing to ordinary people. The documentary *Radiography of a Family*, while expressing the suppression of dissent in the country, shows how anti-democracy in these societies is supported by Khomeini supporters. It explains that after the Iranian Revolution, political bans began, civil rights were violated, and dissidents were not allowed to organize. On the other hand, one of the anti-democratic structures shown in the documentary is the patriarchal nature of Iranian society, which limits the role of women and restricts their access to political and economic power. The film shows how her life is shaped by the changes brought about by the Islamic Revolution and the expectations placed on her as the daughter of a privileged family. The film also explores the role of media censorship and control in limiting access to information and stifling political dissent. On the other hand, the democratic structure in Europe is explained through the director's father, who lives in Europe, and the film shows the audience that protest marches criticizing the government are allowed when necessary. In *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country* and *Reason*, the violent acts of dictatorial tyrannical regimes against opposition demonstrators are shown.

#### **2.4.2 Representation of Gender**

An analysis of the Eastern male characters in the documentaries shows that while uncertainty is generally prevalent, there are fifty percent more educated characters than uneducated ones. Educated characters include the religious scholar in *Dreams and Silence*, the teacher in *Checkpoint*, the journalist in *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country*, Nori in *Nowhere to Hide*, and the director's father in *Radiography of a Family*.

Clear information about the education of the male characters can be found in their professions. Since the female characters in the documentary films do not take part in social life and are mostly seen at home, either events are shown to the audience that clearly show that they are uneducated, or this situation remains unclear.

According to the analysis of protagonists and supporting characters, the predominant educational status of Eastern female and male characters is unclear. The educated men outnumber the uneducated women by about three to one. In *Dreams and Silence*, the main female character, Haifa, was unable to receive an education because of the war. Despite her advanced age, Haifa attends classes to learn to read and write. Analyzing the educational processes in Eastern societies, it can be concluded that in *Dreams and Silence* and *Radiography of a Family*, girls are veiled in accordance with Islamic beliefs. Only female teachers teach girls, and education is religiously oriented.

In the film *Position Among the Stars*, the protagonist old woman and her granddaughter are dressed in modern clothes. In the school, female teachers teach a mixed group of boys and girls, while Muslim students wear hijab.

As in the characters' educational lives, there are uncertainties in their working lives, and the characters are largely unemployed. The working characters, both male and female, are in professions such as teachers, clergy, and health workers. In *Family*, the film's female director appears in two scenes. In *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country*, we are informed that the person using the hidden camera is a journalist, but he/she is not seen. In the film *Dreams and Silence*, it is noteworthy that the clergyman and the doctor interviewed in the film *Dreams and Silence* are educated. In *Checkpoint*, there is a chaplain, and only in this documentary do soldiers work. In *Nowhere to Hide* and *Radiography of a Family*, one of the characters is a trained health worker. The education of the characters in *Atman* is unclear. In *Last Train Home*, the education of the textile worker characters is unclear, but they work as textile workers in another city so that their children can study and have better living conditions.

The films focus on the characters' family roles, not their professions. The men's roles as fathers and sons are at the forefront. For example, Haifa's son in *Dreams and Silence* is seen more as a son than as a public figure. Sami's brother in the documentary *Family* is more prominent in his role as a father, as seen in the images and dialogues in the house. In the movie *Checkpoint*, two of the men trying to cross the border fight for their children. These two men, who argue with Israeli soldiers when necessary for the health of their children, speak on their behalf, and try to cross the border for their children, draw attention to their role as fathers. Another man in the same movie tries to cross for his wife and talks to the soldiers about her. Therefore, he also plays the role of a husband in the movie. Bakti in the movie *Shape of the Moon* stands out in the role of a son. Bakti is in constant dialog with his mother as a character who longs to get married. In *Position Among the Stars*, Bakti's irresponsibility towards his wife is emphasized. In *Nowhere to Hide*, Nori



appears as a father who cares for his children. In *Radiography of a Family*, the male protagonist's relationship with his wife is constantly depicted, and his photographs with his wife are included. Therefore, his prominent role in the documentary is as a husband.

Women in documentaries are usually seen as mothers and wives. The character of Haifa in *Dreams and Silence* is often shown in relation to her son, emphasizing her role as a mother. In the film *Checkpoint*, women taking care of their children and trying to cross the Israeli border with their children also come to the fore with the role of motherhood. The grandmother in *Shape of the Moon*, on the other hand, questions her son's conversion process. Her conflict with him and her concern for his future show that her role as mother is dominant. Similarly, in the sequel, *Position Among the Stars*, the grandmother maintains her maternal role by trying to mend the relationship between her son and daughter-in-law and by providing financial and moral support to her grandson. In *Nowhere to Hide*, Nori's wife is mostly shown doing routine household chores such as cooking, cleaning, and washing dishes.

Bakti, one of the male characters in *Shape of the Moon* and *Position Among the Stars*, wants to brutally fight all kinds of animals to earn money, reinforcing the notion of Eastern men as "wild" from the orientalist perspective. Among the orientalist elements that attract attention in male characters, the most common one is "being active against those weaker than oneself". The film *Checkpoint* shows Israeli soldiers dominating unarmed people trying to cross the border. Similarly, the character Bakti in *Shape of the Moon* and *Position Among the Stars* is shown to be violent against those who are weaker than him, both in his slapping of his nephew and in his rude, abusive behavior toward his wife. Another prominent characteristic of Bakti is that he is stupid and lazy. The profile of the stupid Eastern man seen in classical fictional films is clearly shown through Bakti. Bakti, who does not work at a real job to support the family and spends the little money they have on gambling, is an example of stupidity. The "womanizing" characteristic of the Eastern men is supported by male traits such as the two border soldiers in *Checkpoint* who verbally harass young women trying to cross the border, Bakti's willingness to change his religion for the sake of marriage in *Shape of the Moon*, and Haifa's husband's one appearance in *Dreams and Silence*, where he sits on the balcony of his house and expresses his pleasure in watching the women pass by.

There is no element that foregrounds female sexuality in terms of nudity or sexuality in any of the films analyzed. In the film *Dreams and Silence*, when the character Haifa argues with her husband, the husband dominates and silences Haifa, showing the passive role of the woman against the man in marriage. At the same time, the fact that Haifa does not go to the hospital alone and that her son follows the procedures shows that she is "not present in the public sphere" throughout the film. In the film *Checkpoint*, the fact that the three women never interact with the soldiers at the Israeli border and that their identity documents are given to the Israeli soldiers by their husbands shows that they have a more passive personality than their husbands. In *Shape of the Moon*, the fact that Bakti does not

listen to his mother in every argument he has with her and acts according to his own ideas shows that Bakti is active, while his mother is a passive woman who cannot control her son. In the sequel, *Position Among the Stars*, Bakti puts pressure on his mother, his wife, and his adult niece, making these three characters passive. In *Nowhere to Hide*, Nori wants his wife to stay home for safety reasons. In this context, she is both passive and waiting to be rescued.

When we look at the relationship between Eastern men and violence, the religious official's statements about the concept of jihad in Islam in the film *Checkpoint* are a call to violence. Men demonstrating in the streets being beaten and guns exploding in the film *Burma VJ - Reporting from a Closed Country*, and crowds of men walking through the streets armed with guns, people being beaten, tortured, hung from trees, and burned vehicles in the film *Reason* show that Eastern societies are intertwined with violence. In these images, Eastern men are portrayed as violent and ruthless perpetrators of violence.

According to the analysis of the relationship between Eastern women and violence in the documentary films, it is understood that they can be subjected to verbal and physical violence as well as state oppression. In *Dreams and Silence*, which tells the story of being a woman in the East, the audience is told at the beginning of the documentary that Haifa escaped from Israeli persecution and began living in Jordan. In all the films, women are responsible for household chores because they belong to the domestic sphere. The films set in Islamic geography show men and women as uniform in their social position and appearance according to the rules set by religion. *Radiography of a Family* shows that before the Islamic revolution in Iran, both men and women conformed to Western standards in terms of clothing and lifestyle, but after the revolution, the mother moved away from the Western lifestyle and became a religious woman. The film *Atman* shows that in India, which is outside of Islamic geography, there is no distinction between men and women in social life, men and women wear traditional clothing, and women wear traditional styles of clothing instead of covering up in the name of piety. In *Last Train Home*, while women and men in China struggle together as equals under harsh working conditions, only women perform household chores. The women both work in the sewing factory under harsh conditions and take care of the children and the house. *Planet of Snail* approaches two disabled people living together in South Korea with a narrative style that is far from sexist. As a result, it is found that gender discrimination is most prevalent in films set in Islamic geography.

#### **2.4.3 Eastern Rituals**

Images of various religious rituals are very important for the construction of group image and identity in documentary films. While cultural representations created through rituals are used in the construction of the "other," differences are revealed through the image obtained. Rituals of the Islamic religion predominate in the documentary films analyzed in this study. The documentaries *Nowhere to Hide* and *Planet of Snail* do not

include religious rituals. Although the film *Checkpoint* takes place between Israel and Palestine, there are no rituals related to Judaism. On the other hand, in *Shape of the Moon*, the grandmother prays as a Christian in only one scene. The film *Atman*, on the other hand, includes Buddhist prayers and rituals. While the main character's long pilgrimage in memory of his mother constitutes worship itself, there are scenes such as bathing in the Ganges to wash away sins with prayers, rituals involving riverside fires, various funeral rites, and scenes of ascetic men smoking marijuana or torturing their genitals in compartments reserved for them to discipline their souls and bodies in the name of religion.

While there are many rituals of the Islamic faith in documentary films, *salaah* is the most important of these rituals. To emphasize the differences, the directors show characters praying alone or with their spouses, as well as in crowds. Often, just before or after *salaah*, crowds of bearded and turbaned men and veiled women are shown demonstrating and shouting threatening slogans.

Another stereotype created about the East is the foregrounding of Eastern mysticism through religious rites. In the opening scene of *Dreams and Silence*, a baby is circumcised and his name is called out with the *azan*. In another scene, a group of men are shown in a *dhikr* ritual, shaking their heads and bodies in ecstasy to percussion instruments such as the tambourine and hymns. This *dhikr* scene, which is shown 6 times in the film from different angles, shows the diversity of beliefs in Muslim societies and creates a mystical atmosphere that emphasizes the fundamentalist difference for the viewer. *Position Among the Stars* shows a mass circumcision of children by the state. The film *Atman* begins with a male dancer performing a cosmic dance with spiritual meanings, which is shown three times at different points in the film. Women in traditional dress sit on the floor of the temple and chant while the protagonist faints while trying to join them. On the other hand, as people bathe in the Ganges to wash away their sins, images are inserted to draw attention to the animal carcasses thrown into the river. A boat is taken down the river, hymns are sung, and rituals are performed by lighting candles and torches by the river. A funeral cremation is shown with torches and rituals. All these different rituals take place in the films as interstitial images, independent of the stories of the films, as narrative elements used in the construction of the East-West contrast.

The *Azan* is recited to call Muslims to prayer. The *Salaah* after the *Azan* continues with prayers for the success of Muslims in wars in other countries. At the same time, the *azan* is used as an auditory code to remind viewers that they are in an eastern geography.

## 2.5. Physical Codes And Conventions

The image of the desert is at the forefront of the images representing the East. Deserts, which give the viewer a sense of infinity, also show the helplessness of the characters. In the documentaries *Family and Nowhere to Hide*, there are images of the main characters feeling helpless in the middle of the desert. Most of the time, it is shown how bad the living

conditions are in the slums of the cities between these deserts. That is why slums are one of the most common locations in documentary films. Except for Planet of the Snail, all the documentaries show people trying to survive in filth between makeshift houses. The slums, with houses full of bomb and bullet holes, are a symbol of disorder and chaos, a testament to the East, a region known for war, civil strife, and terror. Last Train Home specifically shows the miserable living conditions in the city's slums. While old worn-out minibusses and trucks are usually shown in traffic, wheeled vehicles, and ox carts carried by people are also included in the Atman film. One of the most common places depicted is the marketplace. These marketplaces are always very crowded, vegetables and fruits are thrown on the ground, and they are dirty and disorganized. Villages and towns are also shown as one-room, unfurnished places where people sit on the floor in primitiveness and disorder. At the beginning of Radiography of a Family, the director shows a very modern, high-ceilinged, luxurious, large bedroom furnished with Western furniture before the Iranian revolution. Over time, the changes in the country are reflected in the home of two married people. After the Iranian revolution, the modern furniture in the room completely disappears and only floor cushions are placed and the floor table is shown being prepared.

According to the analysis of the distribution of images of places of worship in documentary films, mosques, and minarets are shown more often than other places of worship. After the images of mosques and minarets, the most common images are of churches. While the documentaries do not include images of synagogues, only the film Atman includes Buddhist temples. The fact that the documentaries mostly show mosques as places of worship creates the impression that Islam is the dominant faith in the East.

### **2.5.1. Representations of Eastern Clothing**

Clothing is also a part of identity and an element of social culture. While cultural differences are evident in clothing, the parts of Eastern people's clothing preferences reflected in documentary films also reveal these differences.

In the analysis of Eastern women's clothing in the documentary films analyzed, the headscarf is in the forefront as a basic element of the Islamic way of dressing. Chadors, which are worn as another form of female veiling and cover the entire body with a single color (usually black) fabric, are the most frequently shown garment in the documentaries after the headscarf. These women in chadors are not the main characters in the documentaries, but are placed in the film as an intermediate image to show difference and create mystery. After the chador, one of the most common garments worn by women is the traditional robe. Especially Eastern women who wear the headscarf wear the robe, which is a long, loose, one-piece dress. Like the chador, the robe is in a style that does not reveal body lines.

The veil, which we are accustomed to seeing in fictional films, is the least common style of clothing in documentary films. Some of the women who wear headscarves also wear veils to hide their faces. In Orientalism, the veil also represents the mysterious and undiscovered

aspect of the East. For this reason, veiled women are shown in some scenes in documentary films, especially with short intercut images, even though the main characters are not wearing veils.

The turbans worn on the heads are the most prominent feature of Eastern men's clothing. In addition to the main characters, masses of men are seen wearing turbans. The fact that turbans appear in all documentaries set in Islamic geography shows how much Eastern men prefer this accessory. One-piece men's clothing, called cellabiye in some regions and kandura in others, is the second most common garment in documentary films. Just like women's clothing, men's clothing is long and loose so as not to reveal the body lines. In addition to the scorching weather of the East, it is seen that Muslim men prefer these clothes because of their beliefs.

The skullcaps that Eastern men wear on their heads after the turban are among the most distinctive pieces of clothing. Simpler in appearance than the turban, the skullcap is an accessory used by men to cover their heads during worship rather than for everyday use. The fez, another head covering that we are accustomed to seeing in fictional films, is only seen in one film. In *Shape of the Moon*, the fez is the first piece of clothing worn by the main character, Bakti, after he becomes a Muslim. Thus, the fez appears in the documentary as an indicator of a change of faith. Among Eastern men's clothing, the fez is the least common. Unlike the cellabi, open-front robes are usually worn by clergymen.

In the context of the Islamic faith, the rosary is also shown as an accessory. In *Dreams and Silence*, the rosary in the hands of the cleric being interviewed is shown in detail in close-up. The dagger, an exotic accessory in documentaries, is seen only in *Family*, which shows it at a distance on the hips of men walking in the street. The image of men with daggers serves no other function than to make the film more interesting as an orientalist. Another accessory of the Eastern man is the keffiyeh. These accessories, worn around the neck, come in different colors and are used for different purposes depending on the season. In the film *Atman*, women and men in Indian social life are represented with traditional clothing, ornaments, and accessories specific to Indian culture. In *Last Trein Home and Planet of Snail*, men and women are depicted wearing modern styles of clothing.

In Islamic geography, the factor of religion is effective in the representation of clothing. Therefore, in the Islamic geography, the dress codes of the Eastern people who live in a faith-centered life are depicted with clothes for the purpose of "veiling," while in India they are depicted as traditional clothes rather than for the purpose of veiling. In films set in Korea and China, regions far from the Islamic geography in the East, people are shown in modern clothes. In this context, especially regarding Islamic geography, clothing, just like location, becomes a signifier in the documentary narrative as a means of marginalizing.

## Conclusion

According to the research data, IDFA award-winning documentaries about Eastern countries have features that contribute to the reproduction, continuity, and reinforcement of orientalist knowledge. In films about Islamic countries, China, India and the Far East, special shooting strategies are used to create the perception that primitivism, ignorance, oppression, terrorism, chaos and poverty are everywhere in the East. To reinforce this perception, the films include close-ups and intercut images that do not contribute much to the main theme, but are specifically designed to perpetuate orientalist stereotypes. In this context, the perception is created that Eastern societies need Western civilization to learn to live in humane conditions and to get rid of oppression and chaos. These films, through the filter of Western or Eastern directors with an orientalist point of view, consist not only of films from the farthest corners of the world, but also of films that reflect living conditions and fundamentalist beliefs that are farthest from Western understanding and lifestyle. According to the politics of the time, the selected films emphasize exoticism, authenticity, and chaotic situations.

The most prominent orientalist element in Eastern male characters is that men are violent against those weaker than themselves, uneducated, religious, pro-terrorist, brutal, stupid, and womanizing. Women, on the other hand, are mostly passive, uneducated, absent from the public sphere, and waiting to be rescued. With the exception of Planet of Snail, the protagonists in the films are either uneducated or their level of education is uncertain. Personalities are portrayed with fatalistic identities, far from individuality, defined by family relations, social traditions, and living conditions. Rituals such as collective dhikr and salaah are performed to raise group consciousness. In the films, certain clichéd images of Eastern places, such as neglected streets, ruined buildings, unorganized traffic on crowded streets, and unkempt and dirty marketplaces, are repeated often enough to prejudice the viewer about how backward Eastern societies are. In the representations of clothing, the religiously mandated way of dressing in Islamic geography for veiling has generally uniformed men and women. Traditional dress has an exotic appearance in the films set in India, one of the countries of the Far East.

If we evaluate the results of the research from the perspective of Hatibi's double critique, we see that in addition to poverty and primitiveness, fundamentalist actions and religious rituals are shown as negative orientalist features in the films as images that are specifically selected and inserted into the film independently of the story. In this context, the fundamentalist characteristics of Eastern societies continue to function as negative representational material for Western orientalist understanding. Eastern countries have to reconstruct their own metaphysics of patriarchy and fundamentalist theology in order not to be used as material for Western interests through these negative representations.

As a result, IDFA award-winning documentaries have, from the beginning, contributed to reinforcing the perception of otherness by reusing orientalist codes previously

established in other art forms. This marginalization of Eastern societies is based either on highlighting certain aspects of the existing reality or on a completely constructed reality from an orientalist perspective. In line with these findings, it is important that our study contributes to decolonialism studies and raises awareness of orientalism in the award criteria of festivals.

In recent years, the IDFA has shown its sensitivity to decolonization with a selection of short, medium and feature-length films under the slogan "Decolonize!" with the desire to think and make us think about the reflections of the colonial past on the present or the various forms of the colonial past that still exist today. In this context, it aims to bring together powerful films that provoke changes in the forepassed power relations in societies, cultures, and minds. In order to be able to analyze the films in this selection in the future, this study will contribute to the literature on decolonialism in order to see how far we have come.

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