# Converting Bart to Badr : Reviving Cultural Imperialism in The Simpsons

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## ABSTRACT

This study concerns the Arabized version of *The Simpsons* in the context of the debate on Cultural Imperialism. Renamed *Al Shamshoon*, the satirical comedy was translated and given an Islamic flavor to attract its Arab audience. Despite efforts to localize the cartoon, Al Shamshoon flopped. Concurrently, despite coming under fire in the 90s, scholars such as Gray (2007), Harindranath (2003), and Tomlinson (2003) have called for reestablishing Cultural Imperialism. The legitimacy of Cultural Imperialism decreased due to developments of the Active Audience Theory, which challenged Cultural Imperialism's argument that local audiences internalize western ideologies that the global media disseminate. Gray (2007), Harindranath (2003), and Tomlinson (2003) argue that this theory remains significant because it does not only critique the global media effects on local cultures, but also the political and economic disparities between developed and developing nations. This is because, developed nations continue to dominate mass media ownership globally, thereby controlling the flow and content of media production. In this essay, we argue that while the active audience is capable of resisting western ideologies, their resistance to western influence is not all-encompassing. Cultural domination occurs in various forms.

Keywords:  *cultural imperialism, mass media, audience, Arab/Islamic culture*

## INTRODUCTION

Cultural imperialism as a paradigm in mass media studies came under fire in the 90s (Harindranath, 2003), but is gaining prominence again at present. The validity of cultural imperialism diminished because of developments on audience research. The active audience theory debunked cultural imperialism's argument that local audiences internalize western ideologies that the global media disseminate. Furthermore, it resulted in global media

conglomerates' localization or hybridization of marketing strategies and media production to attract more audience. Despite these developments, a number of scholars have called for reviving cultural imperialism (Gray, 2007; Harindranath, 2003; and Tomlinson, 2003). They argue that this theory remains significant because it does not only critique the global media's effects on local cultures, but also the political and economic disparities between developed and developing nations. Developed nations continue to dominate mass media ownership globally, thereby controlling the flow and content of media production. These scholars contend that contemporary mass media research must address the critiques of cultural imperialism in order to reestablish its validity. In the present study, we argue that cultural imperialism persists because the dominance of the Western media in local cultures reproduce colonial legacy embedded in discursive practices.

## *AL SHAMSHOON,* CULTURAL IMPERIALISM, AND THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE THEORY

First making its appearance more than 20 years ago, the Simpsons is popularly known as "the longest-running scripted show in television history" (The Simpsons on FOX - Official Site, n.d.). The show revolves around a family and the community living in a small town called Springfield. Main characters from the family include Homer (the dopey father who works as a safety inspector at a nuclear power plant, Marge (the peace-loving, sensible matriarch), Bart (the 10-year-old wicked trouble maker), Lisa (the highly intelligent 8 year old vegetarian), and Maggie (the youngest in the family who communicates via pacifier sucks). The secret formula to the success of this show is said to be in its team of writers - many who are graduates from ivy leagues. For instance, Ken Keeler obtained his PhD in applied mathematics from Harvard University, and Jeff Westbrook - a former associate professor at Yale, obtained his PhD in computer science from Princeton (Mathematical writers from *The Simpsons* and *Futurama,* n.d.). Due its popularity, the Simpsons have won numerous awards including "a Peabody award, 27 Emmy Awards, 29 Annie Awards, five Genesis Awards, nine International Monitor Awards and seven Environmental Media Awards" (The Simpsons on FOX - Official Site, n.d.). The icing on the cake came when Homer's irritated grunt "D'oh!" was added into the Oxford English Dictionary. In view of the awards, it is not surprising that the show's success has resulted in several translated versions especially catered for the non-American audience. One such example occurred in early 2005, when MBC1-- a satellite station in the Middle East, aired the Arabized version of *The Simpsons* to its Arabic-speaking viewers. In this essay, we specifically examine this Arabized version and the discourse surrounding the localization of this popular American satirical comedy on the Middle East television network in the context of the debate on cultural imperialism. Through a combined textual analysis of *Al Shamshoon* and thematic analysis of the local producers' comments and the audience's response to the localization of *The Simpsons*, we find three themes associated with colonial legacy. These themes are *Americanization, homogeneity,* and *dependency.*

Unlike its Italian version *I Simpson*, *Al Shamshoon* flopped in the Middle East. Ferrari (2009) highlights the popularity of *I Simpson*. She argues that translating the language alone is not sufficient to appeal to the local audience due to *The Simpsons*' cultural and political reference to the American culture. In *I Simpson*, the Italian producers also altered the program to fit into the cultural fabric of Italy. Besides assigning different accents to the characters, the producers also adapted the jokes and stereotypes of *The Simpsons* to the Italian culture.

Although the language and culture of *I Simpson* was considered "localized", the attributes/personalities of the main and secondary characters remained the same. For example, Homer was still depicted as a loyal beer drinker and Bart was still depicted as a rebellious brat. For Ferrari (2009), the success of the localization of *The Simpsons* in Italy weakens the cultural imperialism framework used on mass media studies. Dubbing provides a rich array of tools that allow national media industries to domesticate distributed television texts for national audiences. This empowers the audience in the sense that the producers customize the program according to the interests of the audience. It also empowers the national media rather than the foreign media.

However, the failure of *Al Shamshoon* requires a second look at whether localization indeed suggests a waning of cultural imperialism. When The Simpsons was transformed to *Al Shamshoon* (Poplak, 2007), Homer became Omar, Marge became Mona, and Bart became Badr. By Arabizing the show, the network did not simply dub the cartoon or change the language. Instead, the widely watched American show was even given a "cultural facelift" in the hopes of gaining acceptance and popularity among its Arab audience. Homer drinks soda instead of beer, he does not eat bacon, and eats *kahk*, an Arabic pastry, instead of donuts.[1] Although the show debuted on prime time (during the holy month of Ramadhan), included the best writing talent in the Arab world, and involved three major Egyptian movie stars, the project was not well received. The response was mediocre and the show did not continue another season.

By examining how *The Simpsons* reinforces colonial legacies in a non-Western culture, we integrate culture with politics and economics. According to Harindranath (2003), cultural imperialism must be examined from the intersectionality of politics, economics, and culture. Historically, cultural imperialism evolved from colonialism (Elasmar and Bennett, 2003). Colonial masters trained colonial subjects for self-governance and thus, created a culture of political and economic dependency in the colonies. In addition, we are conceptualizing contemporary cultural imperialism "as a continuation of colonial relationship" (Harindranath, 2003). We implicate local television producers as subjects who are prone to the influence of a higher power, the global media. Local television producers are currently among "the intellectual elites" who function as "cultural translators" (Harindranath, 2003: 163). The intellectual elites of the colonial past depended on subjugating the masses and, at the same time, their exploitation by colonial masters in order to maintain their privilege. In our study, we examine how the local producers of *Al Shamshoon* perceive the cultural adaptation of *The Simpsons* to the Arab culture. Harindranath argues, "a more constructive way of conceptualizing contemporary forms of cultural imperialism is to think of it as a continuation of the colonial relationship, in which television and other media have taken over the role of the nineteenth century novel in the discourse of power" (p. 163).

Cultural imperialism, according to Tomlinson (2003), is concerned with the unequal control of cultural production and distribution of cultural products. It translates to media imperialism because the mass media, according to Schiller (1979), have become the means through which culture is reproduced and distributed (Tomlinson, 2003). Domination occurs not only through the ownership of the media, but also through the media's influence on cultural values. Since media agencies are primarily owned by Western multinational corporations or transnational corporations, Western ideologies are predominantly transmitted

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[1] For a glimpse of the Arab version of The Simpsons, go to http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L7Eyyz-kGzc or search "Arab Simpsons".

globally to local audiences. Their reproduction, then, are woven into the cultural fabric of local audiences (Tomlinson, 2003).

Elasmar and Bennett (2003), in tracing the origin and evolution of cultural imperialism, specifically point to television as the Western medium that transports Western ideologies. After WWII, theories on the effects of mass media developed. The timing coincided with the popularity of t.v. in the U.S. and the primary role of the U.S as producers of audio-visual commodities. Transnational corporations aided the U.S. in transmitting programs to foreign television. Studies on mass media effects at that time found that exposure to t.v. programs will create a homogeneous audience.

The mass media effects theory, however, was challenged when the active audience theory emerged (Harindranath, 2003). The active audience theory argues that the audience does not simply absorb mass media messages. In addition, the audience interprets messages differently. The active audience theory, in general, has humanized the audience. Croteau and Hoynes (2003) view audiences as individuals with lives, histories, and social networks. They state that "proponents of active audience theory argue that the media cannot tell people what to think or how to behave in any direct way (even if state run media may be trying to do just this) because people are not nearly as stupid, gullible, or easy to dominate as the media indoctrination perspective would have us believe" (p. 266). The active audience theory, thus, problematized cultural imperialism. According to Croteau and Hoynes (2003), while it may be true that American programs are easily available in other countries, the responses or the ways in which viewers interpret media products vary. This is because interpretations are influenced by social class, age, gender, race and other identities.

Straubhaar and Duarte (2005) even extend the power of the audience. They critique cultural imperialism because they argue that the audience influence global media practices rather than vice versa. For example, U.S. media conglomerates are forced to adapt programs to the local culture in order to attract more audience and increase profits. Adaptation strategies include "language translations, production and co-productions at the local markets, multiple transmission feeds and repackaging of programmes and graphic vignettes" (p. 217). Furthermore, the authors argue that cultural adaptation is a sign "that seemingly dependent countries do have the potential to talk back" (p. 217).

Tomlinson (2003) explains the problem with Schiller's (1979) media imperialism argument further. Schiller simply made an assertion on the media effects on culture. He did not do an audience research. While Tomlinson agrees that media messages and texts are not powerful due to the influence of our lived experience on our interpretation of texts, he calls for the revival of cultural imperialism. He argues that the mass media are simply one factor or institution that mediate our lived experiences.

Likewise, Harindranath (2003) calls for reviving cultural imperialism. Harindranath argues that cultural imperialism is still a significant theory because it critiques the unequal power relation among nation-states that was established through colonialism and perpetuated through discourse. Colonialism did not only subjugate cultures, but also controlled territories through political domination and economic exploitation.

Gray (2007) also notes that "while the existence of active audiences points to a key blind spot of the cultural imperialism thesis, and somewhat deflates its at-times alarmist rhetoric, such audiences alone are not enough to discount the theory in its entirety" (p. 132). Researchers should combine textual analysis and audience research. In order to revive cultural

imperialism, Gray argues that scholars must complicate this theory. Cultural imperialism posits that the foreign media influence the cultural values of the audience. According to Gray, it is important to note what kinds of program the foreign media are exporting. For example, in the US context, which American culture are we exporting? The term "American" is contested because of the presence of various cultures in the U.S.

Gray has analyzed *The Simpsons* in English and international students' response to the program. Gray argues that the program portrays America negatively rather than glorify it. The program, for example, "highlights racism and xenophobia" (p. 136) in the episode "Much Apu About Nothing". It shows the citizens of Springfield blaming undocumented immigrants for higher taxes, explicitly expressing their desire to deport them, and exposes the hypocrisy of what the Statue of Liberty symbolizes. It also satirizes the American Dream and consumer capitalism. Analyzing the reaction of audiences from the different regions of the world to *The Simpsons*, Gray finds that they are aware that the program satirizes America. They are aware of its critique of ideologies. Thus, *The Simpsons* did not influence their cultural values.

## METHODOLOGY

Costing more than $1 million per episode and labeled the "longest-running prime-time animated series in television history", *The Simpsons* is one of the most sought after show, "reaching millions of viewers in more than seventy countries per week" (Knox, 2006)

Given the popularity of *The Simpsons*, it is not surprising that the Arabized version generated a substantial amount of comments and feedback from both Arab as well as non-Arab audiences. In order to compile responses from the audience with regard to the Arabized version of *The Simpsons,* we used the search engine Google. We typed in the following keywords: "Arab Simpsons response", which generated 363,000 results, and "The Simpsons + Arab version", which generated 4,110,000 results. Due to the massive amount of data generated, for both search results, we limited our selection to the first 100 sites. These sites include links to online articles, clips of the show, and blog entries. From these links, we compiled 22 written comments related to our research.

Additionally, we also searched in YouTube. Thirty-nine comments were posted in response to "Simpson in Arabic". Out of the 39 responses, 7 were negative (the audience did not find humor in the Arabized Simpsons) and 2 were positive (supportive of the Arabized version). The rest of the comments that we did not select were too general, nonsensical, or Islamaphobic. We also included statements and comments from those involved in the production and Arabic translation of *The Simpsons* as well as other commentators in or from the Middle East. Afterwards, we sorted the smaller sample obtained from the Google search and combined them with the comments we sorted from YouTube for thematic analysis. Byrne (2008) used thematic analysis to gather a smaller sample from a large amount of data collected. By doing so, Byrne succeeded in explaining the relationship between public discourse and civic engagement. Similarly, Roberts and Pettigrew (2007) used thematic analysis to screen messages in food advertisements featured on Australian electronic media.

Instead of focusing on an episode, we analyzed the general translation of *The Simpsons* to Arabic. We examined how the transformation of Homer and the Arabic translation of the program represent the Arab culture. Afterwards, we placed our findings under the themes that resulted from our analysis of audiences' and local producers' and commentators' responses.

## ANALYSIS
### Americanization

A number of themes were identified in the research texts. The first theme highlighted here is Americanization. Americanization is manifested through preference for the English version of The Simpsons. Smith (n.d.) argues that the English language plays a key role in assimilating people into the dominant American culture even though these people do not reside in the U. S. She states, "In fact, English, and particularly spoken English, is so essential for our social and political development that is being more and more recognized as the key to participation in American life. Our neighbors of other nationalities and their children become good citizens in direct proportion to the degree with which they identify themselves with American ideals…But if they learn our language, mingle with Americans, accept civic obligations and talk of American interests, they really become participants in American customs and American institutions." (p. 370)

*Days108* exemplifies Smith's argument that those who speak the English language embrace American ideals as well. She says, "I am talking as an Arabian person and as a Muslim, and I like to say that I hate the Arabic version of the Simpsons and didn't watch it at all, I only like and watch the real Simpsons (the English version)" (YouTube). This statement resonates with American nativists' argument that immigrants should speak English only as the English language represents American identity.

Embracing the American ideals also shows through the bloggers' direct expression of hate for the vernacular version of *The Simpsons*. Doctor MustafaSaad, for example, calls such translation "stupid." *Bad0or* and *days 108* again express their "hate" for the translated or Arabic version of *The Simpsons*. When the U.S. colonized the Philippines, it promoted America as an ideal society through the free public school system (Bonus, 2000). In these public schools, American teachers taught the English language (Bonus, 2000).

Americanization is also manifested through preference for American programs rather than programs within one's culture. For example, As'ad Abu Khalil, a professor at California State University, Stanislaus, writes, "It was just painful....The guy who played Homer Simpson was one of the most unfunny people I ever watched. Just drop the project, and air reruns of Tony Danza's show instead" (from http://www.whiterose.org/pete/blog/archives/008924.html).

### Dependency

Cultural imperialism is not only concerned with the global media effects on local audiences. According to Croteau and Hoynes (2003), cultural imperialism also argues that the concentration of ownership and control in the hands of U.S. corporate media perpetuates other nations' dependence on the U.S. for cultural production. While the active audience theory has challenged cultural imperialism's argument that the global media contribute to the erosion of local cultural values, it has ignored cultural dependency. The following statements suggest that local producers depend on Western cultural production to meet their needs.

"We do not have our own cartoons, unfortunately, that are as strong as the ones coming from the West," points out Shahira Khalil, editor in chief of Samir magazine and an expert in children's press. "Here, the idea is we can show things from other cultures, but the problem is that we fear our children will imitate. This is an Islamic culture - we do not encourage alcohol. It is not our culture" (Reworking 'The Simpsons' for the Arab world). Instead of developing their own cartoons that would compete with those from the West, this statement

suggests that the Islamic culture borrows from the West and modifies them to adapt to their culture. It also implies that the Islamic culture prefers Western cartoons over Islamic cartoons. In this case, the Western media have conditioned the Islam faithful to depend on them for cartoon production.

Cultural adaptation also reinforces dependency by providing already made television programs to local producers. Michel Costandi, MBC's business development director in Dubai, states, "MBC is looking to find programs suitable for young adults and teenagers... We've always thought of new ideas that are entertaining-introducing new genres. The dubbed version of the program fit nicely with our objectives" (Salama, 2005).

This response from a blogger on the Arabizing of The Simpsons confirms that Arab local producers depend on Western programmes most of the time to show to audiences. *FAN* says, "sweet princess...ur so right! i hate it when arabs copy western programmes. they ent good at it! every show we watch is copied...cant they think of anything themselves? i am proud to be arabic of course...but would like 'arab' channels to design something themselves! (from http://waleg.com/archives/001650.html)." The Arab television networks copy so much Western programmes that she has become sick and tired of them.

## Homogeneity

By transforming Homer into a masculine figure who does not drink alcohol, does not eat pork, and eats *kahk* instead of donuts, *Al Shamshoon* has represented Arabs as Muslims. While Arabic countries are dominated by Muslims, not all Arabs or those who identify as Arabs are automatically Muslims. Christians and Jews also exist in the Middle East. Rmz989 responds to Al Shamshoon, "*worst report ever…a build on the stereotype that all arabs are muslim…*(YouTube)."

## Implications

The present study has implications both to cultural imperialism and the active audience theory. It shows that cultural imperialism still occurs despite the local audience's capacity to resist the influence of the Western global media. The domination of the Western global media in terms of controlling the production and distribution of global commodities may not have an effect on the audience. However, based on our findings, they influence the behavior of local producers. As our research shows, local t.v. networks simply depend on the Western media for cultural products that they would like to sell to local audiences instead of producing local t.v. programs or cartoons. Dependency is rooted in colonialism, on which cultural imperialism was founded. By reinforcing this culture of dependency, both the Western global and the local mass media legitimize cultural imperialism.

The present study also shows that localization of Western programs does not signify that the Western media perceive the audience as active. The local producers of *Al Shamshoon* simply dubbed *The Simpsons* in Arabic and Islamized Homer because they thought that would be enough to attract the local audience. In other words, they took for granted that local audiences who are likely to watch *The Simpsons* are informed audience. *The Simpsons* is a satirical comedy. As such, it has features that make it unique as a type of political comedy. One of satire's features is a knowledgeable audience. According to Caufield (2008), "good satire demands an informed audience to engage in the experience of the satire and arrive at the conclusions on their own" (p. 9). An informed audience will understand what is being critiqued and why it is being critiqued. In this regard, playfulness will have meaning and draw laughter.

Based on the responses gathered, a large majority of the audience who disliked theArabized Simpsons have seen the original version on other networks or channel. Due to their previous exposure, the audiences have a basis of comparison, or another standard which they can hold the Arabized version against. Snell (2006) speaks of this in her essay on Schema Theory and humor. In her paper, Snell touched on the topic of a comedy show, which she claims to satirize British society. She defines "schema theory" or "schemata" as the "organized packages of knowledge based on previous experiences of objects, events, and situations, and stored memory" (2006, p.59). According to this theory, meanings are derived when an interpreter compares a text with his or her background knowledge. In other words, one has to have previous experience or knowledge about the given subject matter to be able to "get" the humor. What is made funny does not necessarily have to be explicit. In the case of the Arabized Simpsons, viewer's "schemata" about what made the show funny was no longer apparent in the Arab version. They could no longer see the humor in something that is totally different from what they are used to.

In Snell's study, she looks at two recurring characters in the show *Little Britian* as examples of how the theory may be applied. The two characters Snell spoke of (Vicky Pollard and Emily Howard) show that humor is derived by capitalizing on social stereotypes. What made Homer Simpson funny was his stereotypical characteristics. Snell (2006, p. 63) contends, "The wide appeal of *Little Britian* is evidenced by its being broadcast to a number of countries outside Britian, including the USA, Japan, Estonia, and Iceland. There are many people, both in Britian and outside it, however, who do not appreciate its humour… According to the theory, the process of interpretation involves a combination of textual factors and background knowledge. Because people have distinct kinds of background knowledge and beliefs, it is possible for different people to construct quite different interpretations of the same text. Of course, groups of people may have very similar schemata which explains why they can extract shared meaning from a text." In this essay, we argue that, *The Simpsons*' Arab audience had sufficient knowledge about the American version to find humor in the text. When the producers translated it, the humor did not transcend the new boundaries.

## CONCLUSION

Despite coming under fire in the 90s (Harindranath, 2003) and lessening in relevance due to developments in audience research, scholars such as Gray (2007), Haindranath (2003), and Tomlinson (2003) continue to argue that cultural imperialism still persists in today's discursive practices. Further, Ott and Mack (2010) remind us that one of the consequences of contemporary ownership of media patterns contributes to cultural imperialism. They contend that cultural imperialism helps us comprehend the unequal flow of media content between the United States and countries with less-developed media. In the present essay, we concurred with the said scholars and argue that cultural imperialism, which occurs through the Western global media's domination in mass media ownership as well as production and distribution of cultural commodities, remains significant to mass media studies. While the active audience theory has debunked cultural imperialism's claim that the Western global media erode the cultural values of local audiences, it has not challenged the other assertions of cultural imperialism. One of these assertions the active audience theory failed to address was that cultural imperialism perpetuates political, economic, and cultural dependency of non-Western nations on the West. By implicating The Simpsons as an example in this

discussion, we hope to reaffirm claims relating to the relevance of cultural imperialism in today's media context. Ultimately, situating cultural imperialism in the context of colonialism and dependency cannot be and should not be ignored.

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