

*Original Paper*

# Imaginative World Cup: The Discursive Construction of the Arab Community

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## **Abstract**

*The utility of cultural encounters acquires a meaning that contributes to the understanding of the significance of cultural differences. The attempt to know certain people with their cultural specificities spares the embarrassment of misunderstanding cultural contexts whose topicality stems from the cultures and geographies of others. For the sake of achieving ideological purposes, however, textual and cultural encounters become a double-edged sword that works in complicity to produce different perceptions and value judgments about peoples and cultures. This situation is emblematic of Qatar's hosting of the World Cup 2022, where the negation of the Arab land preoccupies different western voices that determine the process of constructing imaginative Arab space to draw a kind of exoticism to such a worldwide event. This imaginative space has become a western product that measures the mechanisms of understanding and constructing the Arabs. The effect of cultural encounters, in this regard, plays a vital role in determining one's difference and undertaking an investigation of this western representation that is intervened by the presence of Western fans in Qatar to give it new dimensions and meanings from different positionalities.*

## **Keywords**

*Qatar World Cup, Imaginative Geography, Cultural Encounter*

## 1. Introduction

Not surprisingly, the World Cup 2022 has attracted millions of people and turned to be identified as a popular social sport and a prime-time show to view. This fact has encouraged Qatari's organizers to remodel "the mechanical reproduction", to use Walter Benjamin's phrase, of this event to make it more sophisticated, ubiquitous, and exceptional. The cultural significance of this occasion has become an outlet through which issues can be framed and disclosed and from which ideologies and cultures can be attributed and seep out different political backgrounds, social principles, and religious beliefs. As such, some Western perspectives have gone so far as to stage quite multifarious forms of images a fact that still links the Third World in general, and Arab in particular, to old ages when there were no signs of modern civilization. In this regard, the relevance of history to the ongoing debates about the representations of the Arab world in the western mindset is strongly imperative. It lies in the contestation for drawing the line between fantasy and reality.

## 2. Method

The geography of Arab land has been represented by the west in a way that has contributed to the construction of a fixed perception of "other". To examine this process of constructing Arab land, a meticulous examination is required that not only involves a comprehensive analysis of the historical and cultural context but also ruminates over the socio-political aspects that shape the region. Therefore, this paper strongly advocates for a qualitative research approach that employs a multidimensional framework, which involves an analysis of news reports to gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play and to uncover the various dimensions of imaginative geography and its impact on shaping people's perceptions of other's landscape. These reports will form the corpus of the paper and will be analyzed using content analysis. This approach draws upon premises appertaining to the cultural and postcolonial theories and helps to understand how the geography of Arab land has been represented, and how this representation has contributed to the construction of Arab space.

## 3. Imaginative Construction

The first imperative concern of these western perspectives lies in the creation of an imaginative geography for both the West and the Arab world to stress their differences and separation. The importance of discussing the significance of space is set in the contention that space is a marker of difference and expressive of social and cultural meanings, as some critics have put it, "in all these cases, space itself becomes a kind of neutral grid on which cultural difference, historical memory, and societal organization are inscribed" (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992). In this regard, the question of the Arab land in western imagination tends to be framed within a fixed image inherited from earlier Western circulated discourses that depict, for example, the desert, camels, and arched turquoise doors as if they are the only markers of the Arab geographical staples. Taken as such, Qatar as an Arab land is framed as a "dematerialized landscape" (Lefebvre, 1991) where the western media can insert, modify and mold

things, people, and lands in the desert according to the earlier forms and narratives of Orientalist discourses. Justin Lawrence, in one of *Dailystar* website articles, announced, “Fans travelling to watch the World Cup in Qatar have been given a stern warning to steer clear of camels as they’re carrying a disease which is deadlier than covid-that has no vaccine” (Lawrence, 2022). Moreover, headlines continue to stress the “camel” display on the show of the World Cup coverage. For example, *National Public Radio* reported the importance of Camels in “the history and culture of the Middle East. They’re also very popular with many of the 1 million tourists visiting Qatar for the World Cup” (National Public Radio, 2022). These examples stress on picturing Qatar in an exotic way to fit the Orientalist frames of earlier writings about the backward Orient. This kind of representation has made the Arab space to be understood in terms of an abstract space, as Lefebvre would have it, subject to transformation and ordering. In this sense, the Arab space is made:

Homogeneous in appearance (and appearance is its strength), abstract space is by no means simple. In the first place, there are its constitutive dualities. For it is both result and container, both reproduced and productive [...] For, while abstract space remains an arena of practical action, it is also an ensemble of images, signs and symbols. It is unlimited because it is empty, yet at the same time, it is full of juxtapositions, or proximities (“proxemics”), of emotional distances and limits. It is at once lived and represented, at once the expression and foundation of a practice, at once stimulating and constraining, and so on... (Lefebvre, 1991).

The characterization of abstract space as encompassing a host of opposites is of importance given that through such represented contradictories that this abstract space is made recognizable and tempting. In other words, the abstract space constitutes a way of looking at the world the way its constructors want it to be introduced to their audience, not the way it is. The audience aspires to have spaces made exactly the way they fancy when looking at moving pictures on TV screens. Therefore, the function of representation in an abstract space “entails a series of substitutions and displacements by means of which it overwhelms the whole body and usurps its role. That which is merely seen is hard to see—but it is spoken of more and more eloquently and written of more and more copiously” (Lefebvre, 1991).

#### 4. Reporting the Oriental Region

Some Western headlines in the newspapers introduce Qatar land in a way that may reflect it as outdated and dangerous driving people to disapprove of Qatar hosting the world cup. Geoffrey Skelley in his “How Americans Feel About Qatar Hosting The World Cup” avers that,

Most other Western nations didn’t think Qatar hosting a major athletic event was acceptable: Majorities of respondents (which again included a mix of fans and non-fans) in France, Germany, Spain and the U.K. said it was unacceptable, though 46 percent of Italians said it was acceptable (Skelley, 2022).

This disavowal is built on an imaginary image created of other’s land characterized by its exoticism, violence, barbarism, and misogyny. Skelley once again states that “the host country has drawn scrutiny for not only the allegedly corrupt manner in which it won hosting rights, but also for its human rights practices” (Skelley, 2022). In this sense, life in Arab land is pictured as being inhumane as people live by the force to which they have the saying of the strong beats the weak. *Amnesty International* organization reinforces this vision when standing against Qatar hosting the World Cup to describe it as the “Qatar World Cup of shame” where migrant workers “are being exploited. Some are being subjected to forced labour. They can’t change jobs, they can’t leave the country and they often wait months to get paid” (Amnesty, 2022). However, FIFA president Gianni Infantino considers these reports and western criticism as “just hypocrisy” (Lawton 2022). Moreover, Infantino claimed that “the media were essentially ‘spitting’ on the Arab tournament hosts and daring to compare his background as an Italian migrant in Switzerland to the plight of the migrant workers who have suffered—indeed in many cases died—building the World Cup venues” (Lawton, 2022). Moreover, FIFA president Infantino’s words on western history reflect that the western attack on the Arab hosting of the World Cup aims at concealing its colonial oppression and normalizing its imperial territorial expansions overseas. Infantino said, “I’m European. I think for what we Europeans have been doing for 3,000 years around the world, we should be apologizing for the next 3,000 years before giving moral lessons to people” (MacInnes, 2022).

This current western criticism evokes the way the Orient is represented in western mindsets. This unsecured territory reflects the savagery of the Arab settlers- settlers in dire need to be “civilized”. This image gives a sense of legitimacy for the West to claim the right of western interference and defense against human rights violations. Moreover, the disavowal is based on people’s imagination rather than “participant observation”, as Skelley admits, “many Americans don’t have an opinion, but the increase in net opposition to Qatar’s host status... suggests a large section of the public is critical” (Skelley, 2022).

Moreover, ascribing aggression and barbarism to the Arabs is not necessarily an innovative fact; it began to appear in Renaissance European writings about Islam, a religion for most Arabs (Lewis, 1993). The attempt to stigmatize the Arabs as “Barbary” aims to label them as an uncivilized population and uncultured. The term then is likely to be pejorative in the sense that it connotes the exclusion of this category of people from the human sphere. However, Paul Baepler, in his “White Slaves, African Masters”, states that:

*Barbary* had not only pejorative connotations but a sense of commercial and cultural resistance; Africans were called “barbarians” because they refused to communicate and were reluctant to cooperate. The Barbary corsairs themselves originated in part from the need to defend North Africa from European aggression (Baepler, 2003).

This act of perceiving the other as “barbarian” evokes the colonial pretext that the Arabs needed to be civilized. In other words, the colonial authorities have attempted to couch the real intentions behind laying their control over the other within a set of euphemisms, such as protecting, modernizing, and civilizing. Therefore, this idea of barbarism was meant to assert itself “only if there was a concept of the civilized to oppose it” (Ashcroft et al., 1995). Moreover, the construction of Qatar as different from the West is an attempt to label the other as being different from those who descend from the West. This perception seems to preserve the Western stereotypical way of exploring and representing others’ land as unsecured territory.

This process of repeating the same discourse about Arabs is a part of the Western desire to, as Homi Bhabha states, “emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry-through a process of writing and repetition” (Bhabha, 1994). The repetition of what is already said is an attempt to give profundity and credibility to the representation of the unified image of the other and to create a space that “stigmatizes” it in order to make this representation more familiar and real. In this sense, the Arab land is exposed to the western audience, via these reports, as a place that collocates threat. Shaheen, in his *Reel Bad Arabs*, states: “Arab men threaten Westerners and accommodate annihilators. North Africa appears as a filthy, inhospitable area, complete with dark alleys and terrifying desert sandstorms” (Shaheen, 2001). These circulated perceptions about others are most confronted with rejection and condemnation, which question their source of creation. Shaheen has responded to this equivocation and states:

Obviously, filmmakers did not create the stereotype but inherited and embellished Europe’s pre-existing Arab caricatures. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European artists and writers helped reduce the region to colony. They presented images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces and slimy souks inhabited by the cultural “other”—the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim. The writers’ stereotypical tales were inhabited with cheating vendors and exotic concubines held hostage in slave markets (Shaheen, 2001).

Accusing Qatar of a human right violation recalls the attribution of violence to Arab people in the bulk of Western representations of spaces thereby turning them into mere connotations of darkness and danger. Such representation finds its terms of reference in a large number of earlier Orientalist (Note 1) writings. In keeping with the legacy of re-representing earlier images the nowadays reporters have taken the venture to reproduce these images in their works in more enmeshed and modern ways. In support of this, Jack Shaheen states,

We inherited the Arab image primarily from Europeans in the early days, maybe 150 years, 200 years ago. The British and the French who traveled to the Middle East and those who didn't travel to the Middle East conjured up these images of the Arab as the oriental other—the travel writers, the artists who fabricated these images and who were very successful as a matter of fact. And these images were transmitted and inherited by us. We took them, we embellished them and here they are (Shaheen, 2001).

In this sense, the perception the west has about Qatar hosting the World Cup is caught within the parameters of different characteristics framed within a fixed image inherited from earlier western circulated discourses. Reproducing the image of Arabs in the mode of “fixity” becomes an intuitive knowledge that requires no proof to be justified in western mindsets. In the same context, Homi Bhabha confirms, “An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’ in the ideological construction of otherness” (Bhabha, 1994). Therefore, the images of Arab exoticism in western discourse are merely replicas of the already production of the *Arabian nights*’ industry.

If any comment has to be made on the authenticity of these ready-made western perceptions about the Arabs, the answer lies in the encounter made between the western fans and the Arab culture in the Arab land. This cultural encounter is referred to as a “contact zone”, to use the Mary Louis Pratt adage, wherein, the western characters are brought to contact with an exotic experience. The first tension between the Arab Tradition and western culture lies in Qatar’s decision to ban Alcohol, as “the only drinks that will be on sale to fans at games will be nonalcoholic” (Panja, 2022). Many visitors to Qatar felt disappointed at such news they heard “only after their flights had landed in Doha” (Panja, 2022). Many consider this news as a disaster and terrible, since “it’s part of the environment of the stadium, the beer” (Panja, 2022). However, many may consider this “shock” reinforces the representations and judgments about Arab peoples and cultures, as it raises a conflict between West and East, modernity and non-modernity, civilization and no-civilization, bringing to the fore the question of binarism as a vital force of most relations. However, classifying cultures as being civilized/modern and discriminating others as being non-civilized/non-modern conduces to the segregation of societies and humanities. This fact questions the extent to which cultural differences can promote “understanding between cultural, racial or religious groups, with the aim of fostering tolerance, inclusion and positive diversity” (Bolaffi et al., 2003).

## 5. Towards a World Cup of Coexistence

As an attempt to decipher this possibility of coexistence between cultures, races, and religions, scrutinizing the experience of western fans within an Arab context remains a convenient angle through which one can measure the degree of accepting Arab traditions and cultures. Undeniably, banning Alcohol has a traditional and religious impetus. Abdulla Murad Ali, a Qatari citizen announced to Aljazeera, “Qatar is an Islamic country, and alcohol is ‘haram’ [forbidden] in our religion. All we ask is for the world to show some ‘ehtaram’ (respect) for our culture” (Adil, 2022). Moreover, many broadcasters have reported surprising statistics on the history of British fans who “make it through World Cup with no arrests for the first time in history”. Metropolitan Police Chief Constable Mark Roberts believes that,

One of the key factors in ensuring that fans remained on their best behaviour throughout the tournament was the difficulty in obtaining alcohol, which is banned in many Middle Eastern countries with only limited availability at the 2022 World Cup. Much of the trouble at previous finals has been attributed to drunkenness. At Qatar 2022, no serious incidents occurred among the thousands of British fans who travelled to the tournament” (Espina & Hall, 2022).

In this sense, this culture has a positive impact on the safety of western people, especially women. Philip O’Connor and Helena Williams wrote an article on *Reuters* about the experience of some western women titled “Female fans feel safe at Qatar World Cup thanks to reduced alcohol consumption” (O’Connor & Williams, 2022). In this context, England fan, Ellie Molloson, told *Reuters*, “I was expecting a very dangerous place for women. I didn’t think I was going to be safe here ... from coming here that’s not been the case, as a travelling female fan I can say that I have felt very safe” (O’Connor & Williams, 2022). This testimony proves the idea that things can be sometimes abhorred but never detested. It is a part of human nature to feel nervous about decisions that do not meet their standards of appreciation. Still, people do not, most of the time, tend to give up believing the idea that things might change and thereby acquire better meanings in their minds. Qatar was pictured by the perception of western fans as a place of harsh living conditions. However, the cultural encounter redefines this vision in a constructive outlook providing new dimensions to the representation of Arab land that is shaped in the form of “negotiation” rather than “negation” and turns it to be a scene of fascination rather than an attestation of backwardness.

The significance of differences among societies is apparent through the variety of visions toward cultural practices and practical judgments. Noticeably, without a such difference, people limit themselves to certain discourses that might confine their frame of mind and, thus, produce a stereotypical discourse to stigmatize some people at the expense of others. The fact that the Arab people are attached to their cultural heritage does not mean that they are far from being civilized at the level of social amenities and activities. They are also a part of this world and a part of its progress. The

success of Qatar's World Cup refers to the fact that "the desert land", with its silence and wilderness, is far from being passive and stagnant, as western fans have not expected to come across any 'civilizational' sign or trace in such a Gulf spot.

## 6. Conclusion

The cultural encounter continues to prove the fact that the Arab refutes the claim of the western ready-made discourses. The Arab land is a mysterious world that cannot be perceived without a practical investigation and participant observation. Therefore, the process of discovery has a great effect on one's view towards the "unknown" in order to produce intact knowledge that might not be biased, as Homi Bhabha states: "The knowledge of the people depends on discovery" (Bhabha, 1994). In this sense, western fans' inquiry into Arab society is established as a transition in western vision that occasionally views the other from a narrow scope and a fixed angle that is usually based on imagination rather than reality; Nathaniel Harris in his *Atlas of the World's Deserts* said, "their understanding of desert regions sometimes owed more to imagination than reality" (Harris, 2003). Giving the space for the other to express itself and voice out its difference brings the question of "positionality" into the scene of representation. This positionality contributes to the emergence of multi-dimension views that might be given to a single cultural form.

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**Note**

Note 1. According to *Dictionary of Race, Ethnicity and Culture* (2003), the orientalist form two main historical movement: first, “the scholarship and administrative practices of members of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in the latter part of the eighteenth century” that believed that the “British East India Company should govern India in accordance with perceived Indian traditions”. The second group “the nineteenth-century French artists who painted scenes, real and imagined, of North Africa and the Middle East”. Later, “the period of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century saw a major reevaluation of Orientalist practices” (Bolaffi et al., 2003).