

## **The Politics of Torture in the Post September 11 Context: An Analysis of *Rendition***

**Dr. Sheeba K**

*Movies are part of the discursive social practices that reflect the conditions and structures of society. Among the broad category of movies, popular film always remains a potent cultural artifact; the most resonant and compelling capitalist art form that enables us to know about the turbulent social and political climate of the time. No national event has been more cinematic than the planes hitting the twin towers, one after the other, their fall to rubbles in an instant on September 11, 2001. The World Trade Centre had undoubtedly been the iconic image of the New York skyline which had appeared in many Hollywood movies as the backdrop. At this outset, the paper intends to analyze the film *Rendition* against the background of the political zeitgeist of the time after the September 11 attack. The paper proposes to closely analyze the cinematic narrative techniques that corroborate the emotional and ideological effects of the film. The paper follows the technique of close analysis of shots and sequences. The paper attempts to address the questions like how the dominant ideology influences films, how sequence analysis and shot analysis help in bringing out the nuances of representation and the politics of torture. The paper, in short, strives to decode the political ideology inherent in films by means of the methodology of technical analysis.*

**Key Words:** September 11, Muslim Representation, Ideology, Sequence Analysis, Torture, Rendition, US Patriot Act

9/11 has clearly demarcated all the spheres of the socio-cultural life of the US and that has an inevitable reflection in movies also. Films, pre and post 9/11 have become two distinctive categories in American film history. Films do much more than reflect the cultures in which they are made; they contour a dialogical relationship with them and even influence the public's perception of the events they portray. Thus American film plays a fundamental role in more than just reproducing national fears and fantasies, but rather in shaping them, restructuring how audiences viewed the war on terror as an aftermath of 9/11. The post September 11 film category resonates the decade's uncertainties, traumas, insecurities and sociopolitical and economic conflicts.

Siegfried Kracauer's classic *From Caligari to Hitler: a Psychological History of the German Film* contends that the German films of the interwar period expose "a highly authoritarian disposition to submit to social authority and a fear of emerging chaos. For Kracauer, German films reflected and fostered anti-democratic and passive attitudes of the sort that anticipated the rise of Hitler and paved the way for Nazism" (Kellner 39). Kracauer's close analysis of films provided one of the first coherent studies that revealed the "historical-political allegorical dimension of film". He strongly believed that films are compelling art form to study since they are "never the product of an individual" and films are always made for mass consumption. As mentioned earlier, as a product of cultural industries, films cater to the dreams, fears and fantasies of the mass. He asserts that the repetition of common motifs which become popular by way of reception in the theatres throws light on the collective unconscious. He states, "Persistent reiteration of these motifs marks them as outward projections of inner urges" (Kracauer 8). Thus cinema in the context of September 11 incidents becomes a collective space where history and global politics are imagined, mediated and circulated among the public.

The paper introduces how cinematic narrative techniques corroborate the emotional and ideological effects of the film. This study, following the patterns of close analysis of shots and sequences, proposes to closely analyse the formal and technical devices like shots,

frames, cuts and sequences of the movie *Rendition*, along with the thematic content. As Steve Nolan underlines the objective of the Editors of *Cahiers* that “reading actively means regarding the film as a text over-determinedly related to the ideology that produced it, making films ‘say what they have to say *within* what they leave unsaid ... (it) is not a case of finding ‘secret meaning’, but of revealing the, always displaced, ‘structuring absences’” (59). The attempt in this paper, thus in terms of Nolan, is to find out the ideology that produced the cultural products and to find out the “absent” presences of such ideology. The paper intends to follow a syntagmatic study of the movie *Rendition* in its linear sequencing of events as they occur in the films’ narrative.

“Rendition” is short for “extraordinary rendition,” a CIA-program instituted under the Clinton Administration that permits the CIA to extradite and detain “suspects” against international law to/in secret prisons outside of the United States. The plot of the film *Rendition* revolves around “extraordinary rendition” of the main protagonist, an Egyptian citizen and U.S. Green Card holder Anwar el-Ibrahimi (Omar Metwally). Anwar, an engineer, is unlawfully extradited to a secret prison facility in North Africa after U.S. authorities suspect him of assisting an Islamist group in a terrorist attack. After his arrival in North Africa, Anwar is stripped off his clothes, interrogated, and tortured. The subplot focuses on a suicide bombing which is stationed in ‘North Africa’, no country specifically mentioned. “The term “North Africa,” as used in the film, as well as the production practices thus ultimately reproduce a geographic imaginary of the Arab world that is akin to the “Orient” that Edward Said discussed in *Orientalism* – a culturally uniform, pre-modern, and ahistorical landscape that harbors mystery and violence” (Lehnguth 133). It serves as a framing device for the plot and it is shown twice; first in one of the opening scenes and in one of the concluding scenes. It establishes the circular nature of violence that the film unfolds and as it is shown in the film, violence begets violence and that too is confined to North Africa while America remains unaffected.

The initial frames of the movie place Anwar el Ibrahimi in his bright side of his career, well praised for his mettle. He is married to

an American woman Isabella (Reese Witherspoon) and settled in Chicago with his kid and mother. A happy American family, with a pregnant wife waiting for her husband from his overseas business trip, playing soccer with their son, watched by Anwar's mother, is disturbed by the "extraordinary rendition" of Anwar. The torturer is Abasi Fawal (Igal Naor), an Arab official observed by the CIA agent Douglas Freeman (Jake Gyllenhaal) who does not support this system of torture and he firmly believes that the torture may only create more enemies.

The film offers diverse Muslim representations that includes a secular Westernized Muslim like Anwar, Islamic radical who became a suicide bomber like Khalid (Moa Khouas), a strict patriarchal father figure like Abasi, and a playful lover like Abasi's daughter Fatima (Zineb Oukach). Instead of the one dimensional portrayal of Muslim characters, the film has taken efforts to add more human aspects to the characters. Moreover, a closer analysis raises some poignant questions regarding the political content of the movie. The first ten minutes of the movie introduces all the major characters in the movie with frequent cuts showing different frames set in Cape Town, Chicago, North Africa and Washington D.C. At the eleventh minute, immediately before the rendition of Anwar, an eleven second shot places the time of the film. The frame includes a moving plane and a tower like building in the skyline. In the later frames the plane approaches the tower in the skyline, passes it with the horrendous reminding of 9/11 and the plane passes relieving the audience from an imminent reenactment of 9/11 attack. The time reference is not suggested anywhere else in the movie except in a scene which tells about Douglas joining the service on September 12.

Anwar is shown in an establishing scene of twenty seconds duration among a group of passengers walking out of Washington DC air port. It has three shots of short durations which frame a microcosm of the US multicultural society; Whites, colored men and women, Muslims with skullcaps; men and women of all walks of life, executives, business men, dressed in casuals, and tees. Deep focus is used to show the passengers which do not foreground Anwar. The image shows how Anwar amalgamates with the group of Americans.

The assimilation of all races and ethnicities are well placed. Anwar is an ordinary man with no visible signs of his ethnicity or religion. Still he is taken. Later Anwar is singled out.

Who is Anwar el Ibrahim is a poignant question to be asked here. Anwar, though the name indicates his Muslim identity, is not *any* Muslim. He is a New York University post graduate who speaks good English and can easily pass off as a White man. He is married to a white woman. Like any other American citizen, he knows his rights. He demands to meet his lawyer immediately after his rendition like any other American citizen. He represents not just a Muslim, but an upper-middle class American who has to get out of his comfort zone only because he is a Muslim. It is only after rendition that his Muslim identity comes to the fore front. The leading character Douglas Freeman is supposed to observe the torture and elicit answers for their questions regarding his association with terrorists. The thriller takes a turn when Freeman, the white hero, like in any other action super hero movies, rescues Anwar from the tormentors. The name “Freeman” obviously is suggestive of the mythical nature of a Hollywood character engaged in the activity of freeing the under privileged from the tyranny of the “dark” world.

The interesting part is that the US officials make use of Arabs as instruments of torture and repeatedly chant the words of President Bush that “US does not torture”. Abasi Fawal who is in charge of the torture camp very well knows his job and he thinks it is sacred. The most successful form of colonization is the one which makes the colonized carry the message of the colonizers. He echoes the words of the CIA head Corrine Whitman (Meryl Streep) when he says that torture saves lives. Whitman in another scene says the same to Isabella’s friend in DC, Alan Smith (Peter Sarsgaard). The dominant ideology of the 9/11 scenario represented by Whitman is taught to the Arab torturer Abasi Fawal and he is made to believe that torture saves lives and that torture is sacred. They echo the words of former presidents Bush and Donald Trump: the latter has said in his election campaign that torture “works” (Jacobs “Donald Trump”). Thus, the film has a nuanced perspective of a demonized Muslim torturing an American; though the torture images evoke the media images of Abu

Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prisons widely circulated on media. Thus there is an obvious role reversal: it is not US torturing an Arab but an Arab tortures an American. Oppression gets inverted: the oppressor becomes the victim who tries to defend his nation. The terrorist is tortured for what he may know and to save many lives.

The movie came out in the political context of redefining and altering the language of the law. Rustom Barucha argues quoting Tzvetan Todorov that torture gets redefined. He says,

Detainees at detention centres like Guantanamo and the former Abu Ghraib prison can no longer be considered ‘tortured’ if they are ‘regularly raped, hung from hooks, immersed in water, burned, attached to electrodes, deprived of food, water or medicine, attacked by dogs and beaten until their bones are broken.’ ... All these ‘deprivations’ are better designated as ‘abuse’, not ‘torture’, as the former Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, confirmed in his equivocal response to the atrocities at the Abu Ghraib prison.

(5)

Thus such inherently blatant crimes are euphemistically named as abuses or “enhanced interrogation technique” not tortures (Zizek *It's time*). When the language is changed, the atrocious violence performed by the state is made publicly acceptable. That is why it is repeatedly affirmed in the movie that “US does not torture”. The political and moral correctness of the state is asserted.

The film’s trailer came as a desperate wife’s quest for her disappeared husband. The trailer of the movie talks about the political message they intend to deliver, to stop torture and detention centres. The film is noted for the good cast with four Academy Award winners coming together with a larger propaganda against the war on terror. The interviews with Jake Gyllenhaal and Reese Witherspoon, the lead actors of the movie, also suggest the pertinence of its political content in times of war on terror, broadly speaking and racial profiling and intolerance faced by American Muslims after 9/11, to be specific (Sterren; Archive).

But a close analysis of the movie deconstructs the political message that the film is said to deliver. *Rendition* becomes another

action thriller where one man is suffering in the hands of the tormentors and a white man comes to his rescue. This is not forgetting the fact that it was the US who runs the detention centres and officially running this programme of extraordinary rendition. But the tormentor has a power to elicit answers at any cost and there is no space for doubt or humanity in the tormentor and the film strategically places an Egyptian Muslim as the tormentor who victimizes Anwar, a middle class American. Language plays a great role in fixing the identity and for its reassertion. Abasi Fawal is apparently a nonnative speaker of English who speaks Arabic at home. Though fluent in English, he has a heavy accent. In sharp contrast, Anwar does not leave a trace of his Egyptian identity in his highly accented English. In one scene, he talks to his son over phone in English which suggest his preference of English to Arabic. Throughout the three torture scenes, Anwar answers in English except for once. After enough tortures, he speaks in Arabic only to confess an act of crime that he has not committed. The conversation of this sequence is as follows (the embedded English subtitles are marked with underlines and italics):

(Anwar is tied up and electrocuted with the tormentor and the observer on both his sides)

ANWAR: Please! Please! Please! God! No more!

ABASI: I want to know what else Rashid is planning.

I want name. I want addresses.

I want to know about future attacks. Do you understand?

ANWAR: I don't know.

ABASI: If you died here today, right now, who would miss you?

Your wife would eventually remarry. Your son would call another man "father". Why are you doing this to yourself?

(Abasi makes to a gesture for electrocution)

ANWAR: No, No, No, No, No.

DOUGLAS: Enough! Enough! Enough!

ABASI: This is my interrogation. You observe, Douglas, nothing more.

Put the gag on. Put the gag on.

ANWAR: No. No. No. No. No. No

Wait! Wait! Wait! He contacted me a year ago

ABASI: *Who contacted you?* (in Arabic)

ANWAR: Rashid

ABASI: *How?* (in Arabic)

ANWAR: *He called me on my cell phone.* (in Arabic) (*Rendition* 1:19:17–1:22:00)

The remaining conversations are in English where Anwar narrates how he has passed the information regarding chemical composition to increase explosive power for forty thousand dollars and he gives a list of names who have been aides to Rashid. He thus embraces an Arab identity through his language only to admit the crime that *he has not done*. Thus violent crime/act of terror is subtly equated to Arab identity; thus conforming to the mainstream dominant ideology of violence and crimes associated with the intolerance of Islam as a religion and Muslims in general.

In the movie *Rendition*, the first scene of torture is strategically placed along with the first meeting of radical Islamists. Two sequences are intermittently spliced together by way of cross-cut: one that of torture and the other the meeting of the radical Islamist group. Cross-cutting is usually used to build suspense. It can also be used to show the relationship between the different sets of actions. This cross-cut is spliced together with a split edit. Sloganeering of “Allahu Akbar” which has been so problematic after 9/11 connects the shots.

These sequences play a major role in the narrative of the movie. One sequence shows the meeting of the radical Islamists for the first time and the involvement of Khalid in the group. The other shows Anwar getting ripped off in a brutal manner, making him ready for the first scene of torture in the film. Both scenes take place in a claustrophobic environment. The cross-cutting technique employed in the sequence highlights the connection between these two sequences. They are balanced and symmetrical. The dissolve used further helps in smooth transition as opposed to the cut. It connotes a similarity between the two spaces or events. The highly contrasting lighting is used in both the sequences. The scene of meeting is in broad day light or realistic light; whereas the scene of torture takes

place in a darkened room, dimly lit with special focus light on Anwar. The position of these segments gives further meaning to the sequences bringing along torture as a penalty for terrorism.

The sequence of the Radical Islamists' meeting dominates in the beginning which later subtly dissolves into the torture sequence. Throughout the ripping scenes the diegetic sound of the talk of the Islamist leader continues. This links both the scenes. The frame also includes a child, a woman in burqa and a man with a gun in the background which gives more meaning to the shot. It signifies that the shot is placed inside the courtyard of a home. In later scenes also the presence of women are made more visible. It conveys a potent meaning of the presence of terrorists everywhere and the happening of radical thoughts and their dissemination inside a family; whereas the scene of torture is set in a basement of a clueless place. The military installations of the US in other countries which are used as detention centers and torture houses are reminded of.

Slavoj Zizek writes about the depiction of torture in Kathryn Bigelow's movie *Zero Dark Thirty* in a neutral way as an endorsement. He establishes his argument using two comparisons: one of holocaust and the other of rape. Zizek argues that "a documentary that depicted the Holocaust in a cool, disinterested way as a big industrial-logistic operation, focusing on the technical problems involved (transport, disposal of the bodies, preventing panic among the prisoners to be gassed)" embodies either a deeply immoral fascination for the topic, or it may create dismay and horror in the viewers by the neutrality of its style (Zizek "Zero Dark Thirty"). The neutralization or normalization of torture in filmic representations has to be viewed seriously as such normalizing tendencies consciously or unconsciously support the dominant state mechanisms. Zizek further parallels torture to rape and he questions, "what if a film were to show a brutal rape in the same neutral way, claiming that one should avoid cheap moralism and start to think about rape in all its complexity?"

The first torture scene is significant in determining the perspective and the viewer's complying with the perspective of Douglas. The sequences do not address the spectator directly. The

montage of the interrogation scenes creates an impression that the narrative is watched by the viewer from Douglas' point of view. During the interrogation, Abasi and Anwar repeatedly look at Douglas (the camera) and thus the point of view is established and Douglas's perspective becomes the dominant one. The silent presence and observation of Douglas aligns with the presence of the spectator who does not have any role in the human rights violations unfolding before the eyes. It denotes the American silence and unaffected distance from the human rights violation around the globe and at the same time, its complicity to it. Both Douglas and the viewer maintain a safe distance from the torment that Anwar goes through.

Mr. Smith, who is a friend of Isabella El Ibrahim and a senator, elaborates about rendition in the movie. He says that CIA calls it 'extraordinary rendition'. Its history dates back to the authorisation by President Bill Clinton in the mid-90s to dismantle the militant Islamic organizations of the Middle East. It was originally to move suspected terrorists without having to formally apply for extradition in extraordinary circumstances. But after 9/11 it took on a whole new life. The Bush administration expanded the policy after 9/11. It has been used as a tool in the US led "war on terror". Basically the government has authorized the seizure and transfer of anyone who is suspected of being involved in terrorism to secret prisons outside the U.S. US Patriot Act came into being as an immediate after effect of September 11 attacks on 26 October 2001. Evelyn Alsultany summarizes the US patriot act thus:

The USA PATRIOT Act, passed by Congress in October 2001 and renewed in 2005, 2006, 2010, and 2011 legalized the following (previously illegal) acts and thus enabled anti-Arab and Muslim racism: monitoring Arab and Muslim groups; granting the U.S. Attorney General the right to indefinitely detain noncitizens whom he suspects might have ties to terrorism; searching and wiretapping secretly, without probable cause; arresting and holding a person as a "material witness" whose testimony might assist in a case; using secret evidence, without granting the accused access to that evidence; trying those designated as "enemy combatants" in military

tribunals (as opposed to civilian courts);and deportation based on guilt by association (not on what someone has done). (5)

All these have obviously added trauma to the already stricken and sidelined people. The trauma added with the suspicion from the public has excluded the ‘other’ from the mainstream even from the act of grieving (Alsultany 5). After the 9/11 incident, many Americans started asking the question “Why do ‘they’ hate us?” and the answer was given without further thought by the then President George Bush that “They hate us for our freedom” which was widely circulated on the media (“Address to a Joint Session”). The trouble with this answer is that it foreclosed all the other possibilities of discourses about the US foreign policies and their impacts around the world, the prevailing social injustices created by the proxy wars sponsored by the US and the creation of Al Qaeda which longed back to the cold war era.

This discourse of ‘they hate us for our freedom’ provides enough justification for the implementation of antiracist domestic and foreign policies on the ground of suspicion and while limiting the freedom of the Arab, Muslim US citizens or immigrants, it contradicts itself. This situation of detention of Arabs and Muslims in post 9/11 scenario can be compared to the American history of the internment of Japanese-Americans after the Second World War, immediately after the attack of the Pearl Harbor in 1942. From February 19, 1942 to March 20, 1946 around one lakh Americans of Japanese origin were incarcerated in internment camps and these camps are regarded as one of the worst violations of constitutional rights in American history. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter kept a commission to investigate the camps and concluded that the incarceration had been the product of racism and recommended that the government pay reparations to the internees (Glass).

History repeats itself. It is interesting to find that Donald Trump administration’s proposed travel ban imposed on Muslims, which was first proposed in 2017, draws parallel to the internment of Japanese Americans. The Supreme Court also upheld Trump’s travel ban after a year of legal battle. The comparison between this new policy of the US to the internment camps is well pointed out in the documentary

*And Then They Came for Us* (2017) by Abby Ginsberg and Ken Schneider. The reason for such a comparison is that the Roosevelt administration's Executive Order 9066 which ordered the internments is being used as a precedent by President Trump's administration as a basis for the current Muslim travel ban and immigration policies. It is highly paradoxical that the US Patriot Act contains a section that condemns discrimination against Arabs or Muslims (Alsultany 12). This is perfectly how post-racist era of political correctness works; how the discourse of multiculturalism in America comes as a resolution.

Douglas Freeman after witnessing a series of interrogation and brutal torture led by Abbasi Fawal realizes that torture triggers a vicious circle, creating more number of new enemies (1:31:33). The narrative structure too takes a different approach. After witnessing the very second day of torture, when Douglas Freeman reports his higher authority that Anwar doesn't have any relevant information, the film reveals the humanitarian aspect of the white man which is absent in the Muslim tormentor. The more perilous thing is, as Stuart Hall has suggested earlier, deluding one to the knowledge of the dominant ideology. Here Abasi fawal believes strongly that torture is sacred and it saves lives. He echoes the words of the US governmental policies to place and target the enemy outside, forgetting the war of terror implemented by the state. The President of US has already casted the roles of heroes and villains within the post September 11 political discourse as "Us" versus "Them". The political rhetoric further takes a step when it is said "If you are not with us, you are with the terrorists." Forced choice is forced upon one – one is free to decide, on condition that one makes the right choice. This dichotomous formulations perpetuate the "clash of civilizations" developed by Samuel Huntington and propagated by Bernard Lewis in academic discourses.

Jon Wiener's 2005 article in *The Nation* examines the basic ideological division between the conservative and liberal perspectives in the context of how 9/11 is being taught in history courses. He says, "George Bush and other conservatives maintain that the attacks were acts of evil; liberals, while they condemn the attacks, see them as having a social and political context that we need to understand"

(Wiener). This conservative perspective clearly justifies the position adapted by George Bush as the then President asking nations to choose sides. In an address to a joint session of Congress, nine days after the attacks, he vehemently announces the ‘war on terror’: “[W]e will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism. Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists” (“Address to a Joint Session”). In the same speech, Bush explained that the reason the terrorists had targeted the United States was because they hated the American way of life, its freedoms and its democracy.

Mosque, Quran and prayers are often shown as a part of mis-en-scene in movies before. Often, the terrorists were portrayed with a Quran in one hand and a semi automatic rifle in another shouting “Allahu Akbar”. In many films like *United 93*, the terrorists are visually imagined as praying immediately before and during their act of hijacking or suicide attacks. Such stereotype images have become an everyday phenomenon and nobody seems to be bothered about them. But such images strategically or unconsciously associate terrorism to the religion Islam. The persistent visualization of such images through popular culture, media, comic books and TV series emphasizes ‘Islamic Terrorism’. The Egyptian immigrant Anwar is covertly arrested and taken to a North African town when a CIA operative is killed unintentionally in a suicide bombing. Stripped naked, slapped and put in a “hole”, Abasi tries water boarding and electrocution to gather information regarding his association with terrorists. This main plot is linear in narration but the sub plot of the romance of Abasi Fawal’s daughter Fatima with Khalid, a terrorist and the suicide bombing of Khalid are not linear in narrations. But it complements well with the main plot. Khalid’s plot reveals how a terrorist is born. But the causal relationship that is established between the terrorism/suicide bombing and torture by splicing the shots in dissolves to make it a sequence is quite a misleading one.

Post 9/11 movies become a category of its own which disseminates the current dominant ideology. Thus any product of reproducing ideology ends up in succumbing to it though it has the potential to subvert it. The movie *Rendition* completely invalidate the

totality of the geopolitical context which culminated in 9/11. The absence of political content and context deliberately manipulates and recreates history. Though the movie *Rendition* claims to protest the US foreign and domestic policy on torture and widely acclaimed as an anti-torture movie by content, the sequence analysis has proved otherwise. The film joins the chorus of the dominant power order in asserting that torture saves lives and US does not torture. The act of torture, depicted to save human lives, naturalizes and neutralizes the violence in it.

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**Dr. Sheeba K**

Associate Professor

Research Department of English

Government Victoria College Palakkad

Pin: 678001

India

Email: sheeeees@gmail.com

Ph: +91 9497630626

ORCID: 0000-0003-3403-5546