

Your Turn

The news media's Arabs: Facts, or fictions?

By Carmen Sanchez Sadek

There are moments in life one can never forget. For me one of these moments happened on an August day in the summer of 1961. I was a student at the University of Florida and had a part-time job as a telephone switchboard operator at the university's television station. My working hours coincided with the lunch break, and I was glad that during my shift few calls came through, since I could hardly speak English.

On that particular August day, I shall never forget, I was alone in the small reception room where the switchboard was located. A red light began to flash, indicating someone wanted to dial outside. I connected my line to the extension in need of assistance and inquired in my very best English:

"Whata number joo wich too dial, pleece?"

The voice at the other end spoke fast and with a British accent. I understood little. I begged the gentleman to repeat the number but instead he ordered me, enunciating very slowly, to stay on the line until he could come to the reception room. A few seconds later I heard steps rushing down the stairs adjacent to the room. A tall, blond, very tanned man bordering on 30 burst in and stared at me. His eyes soon dismissed me as he began searching for someone or something else. Convinced I was the only switchboard operator in the room, he

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approached me.

"Where is the Spanish girl who just answered my call?"

His British accent confirmed that he was the person to whom I had just spoken, so I identified myself as the Spanish girl he had asked to wait on the line. He looked at me in disbelief:

"You cannot be Spanish. Spanish girls have dark skin, dark hair, beautiful black eyes and voluptuous bodies!"

Well, if all Spanish girls fitted his description, I could not be one! But I was — even though I had (and still have) light brown hair, green eyes, fair skin and a body which is a far cry from voluptuous.

Since that August day in 1961, many have tried to guess my ethnic background but few have succeeded. Their failure may be due to the fact that their predictions were based on stereotyped images rather than on accurate descriptions of Spanish people.

The media are giving the public an image of the Arabs that is at best incomplete and, in many cases, distorted. The Arab character most often portrayed is the extremely rich sheik, who has a minimum of four wives and an ample supply of concubines. In general, Arab characters display malicious intentions, little intelligence and extreme cruelty. The extremely poor and ignorant peasant is another Arab character often presented, especially in movies of the '50s and '60s. Arab women are generally presented as veiled servants, belly dancers or as exotic princesses, whose only aim is the erotic display of their bodies to entice their masters to bed with them.

One of my best friends in the Arab

world, Nuha Irani Wazzan, recently sent me a copy of her master's thesis, which deals with the stereotyped image of the Arabs in contemporary English literature. Ms. Wazzan found an unflattering and untrue depiction of Arabs in the works of the British and American writers she analyzed. She found, for example, that English fiction writers, such as Lawrence Durrell in *The Alexandria Quartet*, and Morris West in *The Tower of Babel*, portrayed Arabs very negatively.

Durrell, according to Ms. Wazzan, presents Arabs as submissive, superstitious, drug addicted, lacking moral sense, naive and ignorant. He compares Arabs to savages and animals in many ways, and portrays Arab women as devoid of feelings and resigned to lead an animal-like life.

Ms. Wazzan also points out that Morris West juxtaposes Arab and non-Arab characters (Europeans, Americans and Israelis) in similar situations to compare their patriotism, motives, ability for logical reasoning, sense of responsibility to their people and sense of humanity.

Nuha Wazzan hopes for "more literature written about Arabs, but by people endowed with an objective and clear view which is free from political affiliations and cultural and religious prejudices." I join Ms. Wazzan in her hopes and extend them to include all media in their portrayal of all ethnic groups.

Dr Carmen Sanchez Sadek teaches foreign languages at California State University, Los Angeles. She is Cuban and is married to an Arab. She has never met any Arab like the ones presented in the media.

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