

## The Curse of Postcolonial (Mis)representation in Universal's *The Mummy* Franchise

In 1932, Universal Pictures released the third major film in Universal's branded monster films: *The Mummy*. Along with its contemporaries *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931), *The Mummy* enjoyed decent box office success and provided a strong foundation to aid in the release of an entire franchise of Universal monster movies ("The Mummy Films 1932-2017"). However, *The Mummy* was especially unique in that it was the first of those Universal monster films to be set in a non-European country: Egypt. The image of a bandage-wrapped mummy emerging from a sarcophagus seared itself into popular Western culture for years to come and the film itself provided more than enough financial incentive for Universal to release five direct follow-ups from 1940 to 1955, a reimaged *The Mummy* trilogy from 1999 to 2008 (and a subsequent spinoff series centered around popular *The Mummy* character *The Scorpion King* from 2002 to 2015), and a reboot of *The Mummy* in 2017, which was designed to kick off a cinematic Universal "Monster" Universe known as "The Dark Universe" (Bendis). Because of *The Mummy*'s appeal as a franchise and its dominant interpretation of mummification in general over a period of eighty five years, *The Mummy* as a franchise warrants thorough critical analysis. But beyond its significance as an everlasting piece of pop culture, *The Mummy* has deep roots as a film reflecting on Egypt and Egyptian portrayal in film from colonialism to postcolonialism. One might expect the colonial set and produced *The Mummy* (1932) to contrast heavily with the most recent, modern *The Mummy* (2017). The change in decades and Egypt's progression from subject to autonomy could manifest on-screen with changing cinematic attitudes and representations of Egyptian life, culture, and mythology. However, the expected shift is as not as significant as one might think. Acting as a parallel for Western cinema, both the oldest and most recent *The Mummy* films exist as colonial products by reinforcing exotification, cultural stereotyping, and portrayals of African countries and their citizens as backwards and uncivilized.

While *The Mummy* (2017) does trend towards a more outwardly progressive form of Egyptian cinematic portrayal, both it and the 1932 film perpetuate Western stereotypes through the use of intentional cinematic aesthetics such as the diminished presence of African characters, story beats regarding the barbarity of the continent of Africa, exotification of Egyptian women, music selection wherein regional instrumentation is framed by Western sensibilities, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the historical meaning behind mummies themselves.

Before analyzing *The Mummy* films individually, it is useful to gain an understanding of what mummies in general are and how they are significant to Egyptian people and culture. By definition, mummification is simply the “process of preserving a body by desiccation” (Robinson) to protect against the natural process of decomposition wherein tissues of the deceased gradually soften and liquefy. The earliest known mummies underwent mummification around 5000 BCE and were found in northern Chile, where the Chinchorro people dismembered, disemboweled, and dried the body before reassembling it with straw, plant fibers, and mud as a way of remembering the dead (Robinson). Due to mummification’s close proximity with death, it has developed strong religious connotations in many cultures that practice it, including Egypt.

The burial practices of Ancient Egypt are particularly famous, but the religious reasons behind mummification are less recognized. Egyptians believed in “the ka, a duplicate of the body [which] accompanied the body throughout life and, after death, departed from the body to take its place in the kingdom of the dead” (“Egyptian Mythology”). The ka was linked to the physical body and could not exist without it; thereby creating the need to preserve bodies to the best of ancient Egyptians’ abilities (“Egyptian Mythology”). As early as 3000 BCE, Egyptians practiced mummification whereupon they removed all internal organs except the heart, filled the body with various solutions and stuffed the empty corpse with cloth, all over a forty period day period. After this, the subject would be “wrapped in several layers of linen” and placed inside a

sarcophagus (Robinson). However, this was not the only important burial practice of the Egyptians. In addition to mummification, Egyptians placed “wood or stone replicas of the body” in the tomb, as to provide a fail-safe spare body for the ka in case the mummy was destroyed (“Egyptian Mythology”). But perhaps most importantly, tombs were furnished with a copy of the *Book of the Dead* (either in scroll form or painted in hieroglyphs on walls), which “contain[ed] magical formulas, hymns, and prayers believed by the ancient Egyptians to guide and protect the... ka in its journey into the region of the dead” as that journey was fraught with danger and demons, and ka needed as much help as they could get (“Book of the Dead”). These burial customs were practiced on not only the pharaohs and the elite, but also the rest of the Egyptian populace and animals (although only the wealthy could afford the full process) (Robinson).

To put it bluntly: mummies were extremely important to ancient Egyptians and even today act as a cultural touchstone for modern Egyptians. Quite literally, mummies are preserved pieces of the past and as such they command a certain amount of respect for their historical, cultural, and religious significance, even if Ancient Egyptian religion has fallen into mythology and mummification is no longer practiced on a wide-scale. With all of this in mind, it is time to examine the first *The Mummy* (1932).

The film centers on a team of British archaeologists who unearth the tomb of Egyptian Imhotep and accidentally bring him back to life with the aid of a magic scroll. Imhotep then tries to kill the half-British, half-Egyptian Helen (who Imhotep believes to be a reincarnated version of his deceased lover) so that he can mummify Helen’s corpse and resurrect her with memories of her past life. Already in a mere two-sentence description, mummification appears misrepresented. While mummies themselves did have ties to resurrection in a sense, mummies were never meant to be resurrections of the physical form; instead they were anchors for the ka to continue living in the world of the dead. In this way, the very conception of a resurrected

mummy is a potential misreading of the Egyptian ideas of resurrection. However, *The Mummy* (1932) was not the first piece of media to come up with this concept.

University of London professor Roger Luckhurst traces the zombified, cursed nature of the mummy back to the 1890s from prominent writers like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in “Lot No. 239” and Bram Stoker in *Jewel of Seven Stars* (Luckhurst). These stories saw mummies come back from the dead with the aid of magic in order to wreak vengeance despite not giving any Egyptian mythology or lore to draw this basic conception from. In this way, *The Mummy* does not adapt Egyptian mythology as much as it builds upon European work about Egyptian mythology.

This reliance on European or colonial accounts to describe a colonized place harkens back to postcolonial theorist Edward Said’s views on the Orient. In his influential book *Orientalism*, Said describes the vision of the Orient as “a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences” (Said 67). The Orient, or rather the dominant perception of a vast chunk of the East, is in large part influenced and created by Western, colonial observers who play up the mystique and exoticism of the foreign land even when this representation is not an accurate one. Said goes on to use the example of novelist Gustave Flaubert’s “encounter with an Egyptian courtesan [which] produced widely influential model of the Oriental woman... [though] she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history” (Said 72). Flaubert, a “foreign, competitively wealthy...male” spoke for this woman in a dominating fashion that removed the autonomy of the subject and created a false representation of an entire group of people who existed outside Europe (Said 72).

Said’s criticism can be directly applied to this version of the mummy as it seems that an entire false mythology of mummies was built by European authors and American filmmakers

solidifying this strange, dangerous, magical, and historically unprecedented version of the mummy. The colloquial counterargument to this is that there has to be some historical precedent in accounts of the mummy's curse since real explorers suffered mysterious deaths after discovering mummy tombs (Price). However, according to Luckhurst, Egyptologists have “found very little evidence for [the curse's] actual existence in Ancient Egyptian culture” (Luckhurst). The curse—or what is known as “threat formulae” by researchers—does not exist in terms of “an indifferent vengeance launched at all [tomb] transgressors;” in fact, these threat formulae when present at all outlined curses “in complex patterns of praise and blame” (Luckhurst). This definition makes sense as “most professional Egyptologists note that Egyptians longed only for their name to be remembered” as evidenced by Pharaohs building massive monuments, structures, and tombs for self-enshrinement while censoring and removing the names of other pharaohs and enemies past (Luckhurst). In short, for as much as Egyptians prized the maintenance of the body, they also wanted to be remembered. The ka may have literally meant a spirit duplicate surviving after death when the body dies, but it also doubles in meaning. In a sense, highly elaborate tombs and even the barebones graves of paupers were designed not to hide the bodies from discovery as the curse of the mummy would imply, but rather to act as a physical anchor to remember the deceased. In this way, these graves provide sustenance for the spirit or ka to symbolically live on far after death because the living could see the graves and never allow the memory of the deceased to perish.

In fact, threat formulae really only applied when the tomb was desecrated or the bodies removed or destroyed for ill-purposes. In fact the only “historical” precedent for misfortune in mummy tombs occurred in the ill-fated expedition that discovered Tutankhamen's tomb in 1923. Members of this expedition suffered a string of strange deaths from rare illnesses, deadly infections, and suicides (Price). However even this stemmed from a a form of Euro-centric

mummy mania as the expedition and the publicity surrounding it was encouraged by the popular mummy novels preceding it (Luckhurst). In essence, the fate of this tragically unlucky expedition may not have been attributed to a mummy's curse at all had the expedition embarked even forty years earlier. But because of the timing and the popularity of western mummy media, this real-life situation became concrete evidence of the existence of the mummy's curse. Spurred by the international attention caused by the Tutankhamen expedition, Universal greenlit production for *The Mummy* (1932) and cemented the misunderstood, occult nature of the mummy and its curse.

But *The Mummy*'s issues with representation go farther than the representation of mummification. The film also depicts the Egyptians in it as uncivilized, untrustworthy savages with Imhotep essentially blackmailing the British into a deal and also physically kidnapping Helen so that Imhotep can make her his queen. In their essay on postcolonial African films, academics Florence Ayisi and Catalin Brylla surmise that Western film often portrays "Africa as the other world, the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization... provid[ing]... Europe with a contrasting view of its self-image as the civilized (Ayisi 126). As the only named Egyptian character in the film, the portrayal of Imhotep as a blackmailer and kidnapper is especially damaging. Imhotep has no redeeming qualities; he appears as pure evil and stands for chaos and barbaric practices that the British protagonists would never stoop to. He is demonized not just because of his role as the antagonist but also because he represents a culture that is fundamentally different than that of the colonizers.

This leads into another issue with the consent of representation. Said states, "the Orient was Orientalized because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental... [with] very little consent" (Said 72). When taken to film, this concept of Orientalism comes into being when the non-Western subjects of a film have little to no say in how they are portrayed on film.

Unfortunately, *The Mummy* (1932) does not make the effort to include Egyptians behind the scenes or even in front of the camera. Imhotep is played by Boris Karloff, an English actor raised in London who got the job as *The Mummy* not because of any hidden Egyptian heritage but because he played another classic movie monster—Frankenstein’s monster—a year prior to the mummy (“Karloff, Boris”). His 1932 interpretation of ancient Egyptians came to be one of the first popular representations of Egyptian characters and culture to Western audiences, and much like the fictionalized notion of the Orient, Karloff’s portrayal reflects less of the realities of Egyptians than it does Karloff’s previous monster work. Even the extras were not authentic Egyptians and at least one featured extra appeared to have donned blackface for a role (Freud).

Finally and perhaps most perplexingly, *The Mummy* (1932) has a unique relationship with its music. While film score might appear to be one of the least divisive aspects of any film, researcher Robin Armstrong calls attention to a technique called musical framing. According to Armstrong, Western filmmakers employ framing in a fashion where “a familiar set of ‘normal’ musical sounds precede, follows, and accompanies a different set of ‘other’ sounds” (Armstrong 4) from non-Western cultures for the sake of contextualizing foreign sounds, rhythms, and scales within traditional Western sounds. This is problematic for a number of reasons and is quite prevalent in modern film. However, before this, films like *The Mummy* would make use of an even more overt form of musical framing by simply making the soundtracks purely Western. In the case of *The Mummy*, the first thing viewers hear is Pytor Tchaikovsky’s “Swan Lake.” This auditory accompaniment is decidedly not Egyptian (Tchaikovsky was Russian) and frames the film in a familiar, Western wrapping that does not authentically represent the Egyptian subjects or locale of the film. However, it does succeed in coloring the actions of on-screen Egyptian characters with an ominous and recognizable Western piece rather than complementing those actions with a representative and subtler Egyptian piece, thereby gain reinforcing fictionalized,

dangerous vision of the East.

The 1932 *The Mummy* is a problematic on a number of levels as it is subjected to the whims of colonial forces and the Western, predominately white film studio that financed and produced it. Despite all this, it is important to keep in mind that Egypt was still not technically physically free from colonial forces at the time of *The Mummy*'s production and was occupied by the British until Gamal Abdel Nasser "successfully negotiated the evacuation of British forces from Egypt in 1954" ("Egypt"). Because of this, we might not expect *The Mummy* (1932) to be the most progressive in its portrayal of ancient Egyptian history and traditions, but it would be fair to assume the most recent version of *The Mummy* (2017) to correct some of those mistakes and demystify some of the Orientalized perceptions of mummification in general.

Interestingly, *The Mummy* (2017) is predominately set in modern day Iraq (where the mummy's tomb is found) and England rather than Egypt. This time, two American soldiers and a British archaeologist stumble across the Mummy's tomb, but it is the American male Nick who becomes the Mummy's chosen. Also, the Mummy is now a woman—Princess Ahmanet—and wants to sacrifice Nick in order to grant a body to the Egyptian god Set. On the surface, this film makes some significant improvements over its predecessor. Princess Ahmanet is played by Sofia Boutella, an Algerian-born actress ("Algerian-born Sofia Boutella 'terrified' by 'The Mummy'") and the film does not contain a cast of white actors playing Egyptian extras. However, the film has another problem in that it decides to move away from Egyptian characters and locations in general, creating a situation in which *The Mummy*'s titular Egyptian character is actively marginalized within her own film.

In his postcolonial analysis of another African-set film without many native African characters—Disney's *Tarzan*—researcher Oyinkansola Fafowora surmises that the lack of presence of authentic African characters and the emphasis on Tarzan's primitiveness contribute

to how “Disney implicitly reproduces this idea Africa produces savages just as the savage defines Africa” (Fafowora 5). Tarzan represents Africa as a savage and wild place, even though Tarzan himself is not natively African and actual Africans do not live with gorillas or crave the civilizing force of colonial expedition teams. Ahmanet is similar to Tarzan in that she is the only named Egyptian character in a film full of Western characters and therefore is the only representation of African and Egyptian culture. Also like Tarzan, Ahmanet’s character should not be wholly indicative of Egyptian culture as Ahmanet is an ancient being who does not reflect the culture and values of ordinary, modern Egyptians and instead misrepresents Egypt as savage, untrustworthy, and evil. While it is fair to say that since Ahmanet is the antagonist and is therefore justified to commit morally dubious acts like killing civilians, the film never provides additional Egyptian characters or scenes of modern Egyptian culture to counterbalance Ahmanet. All of this evil, destruction, and disregard for society are the only aspects seen of any Egyptian character, and therefore reinforces the colonial stereotypes of non-Western individuals and cultures as savage when the reality is far from that construction.

Here, *The Mummy* (2018) could have taken cues from domestic Egyptian films, which like much of “the cinema of North and sub-Saharan Africa... has endeavored to marginalize Hollywood’s weight in the domestic market” (Salhi 297). These films are shot, produced, and distributed in Egypt and combat “the images and ideas in the works of... European[s]... [which] established ideological visions that triggered the circulation of a highly stereotyped and oppressive portrayal of Africa” through strategies like emphasizing “mundane, everyday life events and routines” of normal African people (Ayisi 126). In this way, Egyptian film is not held to a Western-style “exoticism of the other” (Ayisi 126) and instead gets a chance to showcase authentic Egyptian culture and people. In essence, even if there was an authentic Egyptian film about an evil ancient mummy coming back from the dead, there would be screen time devoted to

modern, ordinary Egyptians to help offset the notion that the evil mummy is representative of all of Egyptian culture. In *The Mummy* (2017), the lack of this Egyptian representation again only enforces the notion and Western view that the one evil Egyptian—Ahmanet—is representative of all of her culture, especially since there are no other Egyptian characters to compare her to.

Furthermore, Ahmanet's character is far more than savage; she is also heavily sexualized. Several scenes involve a strategically mummy-wrapped or completely naked Ahmanet performing satanic rituals, murdering innocents, and seducing Nick to give himself up so that she may sacrifice him. This harkens back once again to Flaubert's portrayal of Oriental women; specifically to his own fascination with indigenous women's lives, which he wrote were "devoted to sensual pleasures even to death" (Rexer). Flaubert effectively created and popularized an idea of the exotic non-Western women that was obsessed with sex; despite that "exoticism of the veil aside, the erotic excess of the Orient was not all that different from Flaubert's life in France" (Rexer). Flaubert's description of these women was again done so without the consent of the women he portrayed and created a false image of the excessive sexuality in the East. In this same fashion, Ahmanet's overt sexuality is not representative of the Egyptian people, nor is it representative of actual mummies, which suffice to say, stay very much wrapped in accordance with the Egyptian wishes to preserve the body as long as possible. Instead Ahmanet's sexuality stems from a long line of Western constructs about Eastern women. Rather than challenge this, Ahmanet's portrayal reinforces the construct and propagates traditional colonial values in place of a more accurate and less fetishized representation of Egyptian women.

In terms of music, this film does better than the 1932 version's "Swan Lake," but it still cannot break out of modern musical framing. In her case study for Disney's *Moana* (2016), Robin Armstrong argues that the filmmakers and composers frame "Polynesian musical traits

like heavy drumming and male chorus chanting” with common Western instruments like violins and brass... instruments that are not inherently present in traditional Polynesian music in such a way that Western audiences will feel comfortable within their exposure to a non-Western culture (Armstrong 4). *The Mummy* (2017)’s score (composed by Brian Tyler) falls in line with this concept of musical framing. It utilizes classic Egyptian instruments like two-reed flutes, harps, the double clarinet, and the lute while also utilizing the classically Egyptian diatonic scale (Sellers 13-14). While these instruments have the melody in the majority of tracks, their melody is accompanied and often doubled by Western instruments like cellos and violins. Tracks like “The Lost Tomb of Ahmanet” and “The Mummy” even double these Egyptian instruments and their melodies with a choir, and in that way superimpose the literal voices of Westerners on top of authentic Egyptian sound.

But perhaps one of the most glaring issues of *The Mummy* (2017) is its portrayal of mummification and ancient Egyptian culture and religion. This *Mummy* film shares a lot of the same problems with the 1932 version in that it still relies on the evil, magic mummy premise and implicitly enforces the Western construct of the mummy’s curse. But beyond this, a new problem in mythic representation arrives with *The Mummy*’s portrayal of the god, Set. In the film, Set is described as an evil god of the dead who grants powers to Ahmanet in exchange for her help to give him a human body which he can use to rule all civilizations. However, the actual mythological Set was not evil, but rather the embodiment of “the necessary and creative element of violence and disorder within the ordered world” (“Seth”). In addition to this misrepresentation of the concept of Set, *The Mummy* (2017) concludes with a scene where Nick (played by Tom Cruise) decides to sacrifice himself in order to become Set. Set/Nick then leeches Ahmanet of all life and discards her. Naturally, this leads to severe issues with Egyptian representation as one of the most popular American actors in the world, Tom Cruise, portrays an incredibly significant

Egyptian deity. While this is not technically white-washing in that the character of Nick is not Egyptian-descended and only gains an Egyptian spirit, it removes another opportunity for Egyptian character to embody their cultural past. In addition, if a native, modern Egyptian played the character who embraced Set instead of Tom Cruise, their decision to align with the past and destroy Ahmanet would be hailed as a progressive metaphor. The obliteration of Ahmanet, who as established is the face of an orientalist construct, could then come to represent Egyptians breaking free of Western constructs. Instead, the mere fact that this character is Tom Cruise, who is embodying a religious figure and destroying the only Egyptian character in the film, robs the story of a chance to "free [the cinematic depiction of Africans] from the bondage of the Western regime of memory, consciousness, and order within which Africa's subjectivity as a modern construct is enmeshed" (Ayisi 138).

Furthermore, as problematic as this new version of *The Mummy* (2017) was, it received little backlash from the public in the form of online essays, response videos, and boycotts. This is especially curious as other films that took more steps to avoid the appearance of Orientalism took on far more criticism. For instance, when creating *Moana*, Disney reached out to Pacific Islanders to create an Oceanic Story Trust comprised of "artists, cultural practitioners, academics, and community leaders, all of whom possessed expertise in various parts of Pacific Islander culture, history, and language" who would "provide critical feedback and... help guide the project in the right direction" (Tamaira 312). This approach aimed to mitigate the criticism of imperialism as it satisfied Said's observation that "the Orient was Orientalized because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental... [with] very little consent" (Said 72). Disney hired "culture natives to grant cultural authority to offset criticism of imperialism" (Armstrong 3) but at the end of the day, *Moana* was still created for one reason: to make the Western studio money, as "ultimately mainstream productions are designed for entertainment and are

deliberately superficial and escapist and their success is measured by box office sales” (Tamaira 313). The decidedly Western Disney company brought the tale of the titular non-Western woman to the big screen in order to make a profit, and that fact alone is one of the major reasons why so many people feel strongly about *Moana*’s portrayal of indigenous Polynesian culture; in effect, it is another instance of the West profiting off a non-Western culture.

*The Mummy* (2017) could also be criticized as a studio attempt to commodify and profit off a non-Western culture; however, perhaps due to *The Mummy* (2017)’s predominately English setting and status as a remake of the 1932 *The Mummy*, the film’s lack of an advisory story trust of Egyptians and deficiency of Egyptian characters was met with ambivalence rather than criticism. Part of the reason is that *The Mummy* (2017) never claims to be representative of Egyptians and indeed its lack of an Egyptian setting, overabundance of European and American characters, and status as a remake of another film seems to enforce that view. However, the filmmakers do not understand that by merely appropriating Egyptian culture in title and premise and refusing to challenge the Western stereotypes and inventions that come with it, they are implicitly reinforcing decades of misrepresentation and abuse of the Egyptian people at the hands of the Western system... a system that the modern filmmakers are now a part of. This in turn leads to a mistaken assumption: because the story is not outwardly Egyptian, the filmmakers do not need to take extra steps to include Egyptians in production or carefully consider the portrayal of the Egyptian elements that are present. However, it could be argued that it is exactly these sorts of films that suffer from more subtle forms of Orientalism that need the most attention and review.

The entire goal of postcolonial cinema is “recovering or reinventing local aesthetic and narrative traditions as opposed to the homogenizing the impulses of Hollywood and its domination of markets and normative standards” (Salhi 297) and that means making sure that

films provide the opportunities for previously colonized cultures to “retriev[e] these lost identities... reclaiming cultural imperatives from a pre-colonial past” (Salih 300). While it takes a lot of work and resources to assemble a story trust or bring in indigenous people to help on a film project, history-based, monoculture Disney films like *Moana* should not be the only places that receive this attention to detail. Films lacking that attention—like *The Mummy* (2017)—may still address the outstanding criticisms of cultural appropriation, but they also reinforce an outdated colonial norm in which the colonized are not afforded the chance to represent themselves. Instead, the non-Western cultures must rely on a predominately Western creative force to represent their culture, no matter how fictitious or invented that representation is.

In essence, what the entire film of *The Mummy* (2017) comes out to is a modern repackaging of traditional orientalist ideas and attitudes. Gone are the more overt colonial remnants from *The Mummy* (1932) like black-face, white-washing, European music selection, and a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of ancient Egyptian traditions and customs; now, these colonial attitudes are conveyed through a lack of foreign characters, framed musical selections, and the transference of power and autonomy of ancient Egyptian figures to non-Egyptian characters. All this is done under the guise of remaking a classic older film and never claiming to be representative of Egyptian culture, but the creation of the film itself rides on the back of an invented conception of Egyptian religion, mythology, and culture. It never provides the opportunity for Egyptians to weigh in on the creative process and thereby robs Egyptians of their autonomy. In essence, while on its surface, *The Mummy* (2017) may appear as a vast improvement on its 1932 predecessor, it has simply changed the methods of oppression and imperialist thought to be more acceptable in the modern day. The symptoms have changed, but the sickness remains the same, and in that way, both the old and new *The Mummy* continue to enforce an imperialist norm at the expense of the culture and character of Egypt.

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