

## Reframing the Representation of the Arab in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962): Sherif Ali's Metamorphosis

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**Abstract:** *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) stands as a timeless work of art renowned not only for its technical and aesthetic brilliance but also for its profound thematic significance. It delves into cultural intersections and addresses contentious matters regarding the depiction of Arabs. While numerous critics argue that the film perpetuates orientalist stereotypes, portraying Arabs as greedy, brutal, and fragmented tribal societies incapable of peaceful coexistence and reliant on European intervention to govern their homeland, this paper seeks to highlight the positive representations, particularly in the character of Sherif Ali. Initially introduced as a typical Arab stereotype, a ruthless killer, Ali undergoes a remarkable transformation through his encounters with Lawrence. By the film's conclusion, Ali emerges as a figure of reason, peace, and diplomacy, actively seeking to learn the intricacies of politics with the hope of ushering in democracy in Arabia. This portrayal of Ali's character is brought to life through a range of cinematic techniques, which this paper aims to illuminate, demonstrating their role in shaping his character.

**Keywords:** Cinematic Techniques, Lawrence of Arabia, Metamorphosis, Orientalist Stereotypes, Sherif Ali

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### Introduction

David Lean's war classic, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), is most often dubbed as grand in every sense. Upon its release in theatres in 1962, it won 7 Oscars, including best picture of the year. This historical epic's intricate and concise screenplay was based on T. E. Lawrence's biographical account, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and wartime recollections; it was adapted by Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson. Beside the formidable Peter O'toole who played the role of T. E. Lawrence, a set of international stars and prominent actors such as Allec Guinness (Prince Feisal), Anthony Quinn (Auda Abu Tayi) and Omar Sharif (Sherif Ali) starred in Lean's masterpiece (IMDb). It is worth mentioning that this 1962 influential motion picture coincided with a politically tense period characterized by the Arab-Israeli wars and the increasing Anglo-American hunger for the Arabian oil.

*Lawrence of Arabia* consists of two parts that are divided by an intermission. The first part opens with Lawrence's death in a tragic motorcycle accident. Action then moves to a cathedral where Lawrence's memorial service has been held. As the funeral concludes, controversy arises about whether he was an important figure, or just a minor person doing small missions in Arabia. The aforementioned argument can be considered as the premise of the epic. The funeral sequence ends, and the story moves from England to Cairo only to realize that the entire movie is, in fact, a flashback. Lawrence is sent to Arabia by Mr. Dryden to assess Prince Feisal's potential revolt against the Ottomans. His charisma and wit help him earn Prince Feisal's approval and respect, and later Ali and Auda's after crossing the deadly Nefud desert and taking Aqaba. He unites the war-ridden Arabian tribes and leads an Arab revolt against the Turks. On the way to Aqaba, Lawrence's character knows an important turning point. He turns from a humanitarian and reasonable peacemaker to a barbarous and cruel murderer. He enjoyably executes Gasim, the same guy he saves from certain death in the Nefud desert, to not mar the peace he barely established between the quarreling Harith and Howeitat tribes.

In the second part, Lawrence leads a set of raids on Turkish railways, derailing and plundering trains and causing significant casualties among the Turks. Lawrence's inclination toward violence became evident when he commanded his army to eliminate all the Turks without taking any prisoners, in response to the Turks' massacre of the villagers from one of his men's villages. Lawrence fails to find a compromise between the different tribes comprising the Arab National Council and gives up Damascus' vital utilities to the British as a result of the Council's deficiency. As his usefulness to both Feisal and the British army comes to an end, he is promoted to colonel and immediately dismissed back to England as Prince Feisal tells him, at their

meeting with General Allenby, that “there is nothing further for a warrior here. We drive bargains. Old men’s work” (*LoA* 3:38:47). While the disillusioned Lawrence is driven away in a staff car, a motorcycle passes by as a reminder of the film’s opening; thus the story comes full circle.

In 1991, *Lawrence of Arabia* was selected for preservation in the United States Library of Congress National Film Registry and added to a set of classics deemed worthy of preservation. According to a 1991 article by Robert M. Andrews on the “Los Angeles Times”, David Lean’s masterpiece was chosen among films that “had and will continue to have cultural, historical or aesthetic importance”. Unlike, a number of critics, including Jack Shaheen, who contends that the stereotypical hostile, looting, cutthroat image of Arabs as Bedouins who cannot coexist is highly emphasized throughout *Lawrence of Arabia* (Shaheen 289), this paper will focus on Sherif Ali’s favorable portrayal as he notably develops from a “greedy, barbarous and cruel” Bedouin to a man of compassion, peace and reason.

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### Initial Characterization of Sherif Ali

Sherif Ali is first introduced as a ruthless and cold-blooded killer in black robes who guns down Lawrence’s guide for drinking from his tribe’s well, giving him the image of a cruel villain. This particular scene is the first instance which emphasizes the stereotypical image of Arabs as “greedy, barbarous and cruel” tribal people who distrust each other, and thus cannot coexist (*LoA* 33:34). He is also portrayed as a determinist who believes that future is already written by Allah and man’s will cannot change it. He also doubts Lawrence’s ability to adapt with the harsh conditions of the desert. The latter proves him wrong after rescuing Gasim from certain death in the impassable Nefud desert and succeeds in crossing “the worst place God created”. Consequently, Lawrence earns Ali’s appraisal and respect as he gives him the white robes of a sherif of the Beni Wejh along with Bedouin salaams. This is a major turning point in the characterization of both Ali and Lawrence. On the one hand, Ali’s friendship and appreciation of Lawrence’s qualities fuels the latter’s delusion of being an invincible god-like figure. On the other hand, Ali starts developing from a determinist ruthless Bedouin who impulsively shoots first and asks no questions later to a more diplomatic man who calculates his moves before acting, hence the imminence of a politician.

### Sherif Ali's Transformation

This notable change can be seen over the course of the film. After taking Aqaba, Ali suspects Lawrence’s endeavors in Arabia, as the latter asks him to not let any Bedouin turn to Cairo to inform the British generals about Aqaba’s success. Apparently, Ali figures out that Lawrence has started to believe that he is the Arab revolt in flesh and blood. Moreover, the now humanitarian Sherif Ali urges the blood-thirsty Lawrence to not push the few Bedu warriors left beyond their limits, in a pointless attempt to take Deraa with twenty men. On the road to Damascus, he even pities Turks being under artillery fire and asks God to “help the men who lie under that” (*LoA* 33:15:26). In addition to this, he begs Lawrence to stop the slaughtering of Turks who massacred Talaal’s village as the latter is indulging in this bloodbath: “Enough! Enough! Make them stop!” (*LoA* 3:22:10). But before the Arab army charges the Turks, Ali tries his best to stop Lawrence from straying from their initial goal which is pushing for Damascus. The following dialogue demonstrates how Ali’s character changed in comparison with Lawrence’s:

- Ali to Bentley (who is looking at the bodies of the slain Turks and saying “Jesus wept!): Does it surprise you, Mr. Bentley?
- Ali: **Surely, you know that the Arabs are barbarous people.** (looking at Lawrence)
- Ali: **Barbarous and cruel.**
- Ali (still looking bitterly at Lawrence): **Who but they?** (Says it twice)
- Bentley to Lawrence: Oh, you rotten man.
- Bentley: Here, let me take your rotten bloody picture.
- Bentley: For the rotten bloody newspapers. (*LoA* 3:24:23-3:24:49)

Ali reminds Lawrence of the words he told him at the well scene: “Sherif Ali! So long as the Arabs fight tribe against tribe, so long will they be a little people, a silly people. **Greedy, barbarous and cruel, as you**

are” (LoA 33:34). He assumes the role of the peaceful, reasonable and diplomatic man who resents violence, while Lawrence is lost in delusions of greatness and grandeur and indulges in wreaking havoc and bloodshed. At this point, Ali’s undeniable favorable portrayal is highly stressed. This positive representation comes full circle in the Arab Council scene at the end of this epic, especially when Ali tells Lawrence that he is going to stay in Damascus to learn politics. Therefore, Ali finally believes in the possibility of uniting the warring and resentful Arabian tribes under one flag. This idea is best expressed in Ali’s conversation with Bentley about politics:

- Bentley: “What are you learning from this?”
- Ali: “Politics.”
- Bentley: “You’ll be a democracy in this country? You gonna have a parliament?”
- Ali: “I’ll tell you that when I have a country.” (LoA 2:37:04- 2:37:13)

### A Technical Analysis of Key Sequences

To highlight Ali’s development from a barbarous and cruel Bedouin to a man of compassion, peace, reason and diplomacy, director David Lean employed a set of cinematic techniques to make the audience notice and appreciate this character’s development in comparison to other characters, mainly Lawrence. To provide a thorough insight into this technical and aesthetic side of *Lawrence of Arabia*, this paper’s focus is going to be on two sequences: Ali and Lawrence’s first encounter at the well (28:30-34:50) and the Arab Council scene (3:27:28-3:35:11).

Technically, the first sequence begins with a series of extreme long shots that depict Ali as a danger emanating out of a mirage, riding his camel and dressed in black robes like the frightening Nazgul from *The Lord of the Rings*. The use of such shots stresses the harshness of the environment in which the action is taking place and gives the scene a touch of thrilling Oriental adventure. In general, long shots were extensively deployed throughout this movie to enable the audience to embark on a psychological journey in the fiery unfathomable Arabian Desert.

The long shot below (Plate 1) presents Sherif Ali as a greedy, barbarous, ruthless and cruel tribe-leader who lives by the desert version of social Darwinism. The low angle gives more depth to this representation. In a hellish place such as the Arabian Desert, survival is all that matters. Thus, water is everything. As a result, we are left with the body of the dead Tafas right down the frame and a terrified Lawrence. The high key lighting puts the audience in the desert’s glowing atmosphere. A set of medium shots and two-shots were used also to zoom in on Ali’s face and give a sense of tension and hostility to Ali and Lawrence’s encounter. It is worth mentioning also that there is no use of music or any kind of sound effects in this scene. As a result, the scene is given a touch of realism.



Plate 1: Ali tells Lawrence that the Hazimi may not drink at the Harith’s wells (LoA 33:24).

The sequence of the Arab National Council begins with a low angle close up shot of some Bedouins setting up the Council’s flag at the town’s hall, or what seems like a conference hall. The camera pans to the left showing the chaos pervading in the conference hall and a high angle shot shows the arguing hordes of Arabs. Ali and Auda are shown arguing, using a two-shot. Lawrence, put at the centre of the frame, orders the different tribesmen to keep quiet and reminds them that they are here neither Harith, nor Howeitat, nor any other tribe, but Arabs.



Plate 2: Lawrence pleading Ali to avoid bloodshed (*LoA* 3:28:55).

In the medium shot above (Plate 2), Lawrence asks Ali to ignore Auda in an attempt to avoid bloodshed. Sherif Ali reminds Lawrence that he is the last person to speak to him of bloodshed. He puts his newly acquired diplomatic attitude into practice and asks pardon of Auda. A set of high angle shots is used again to stress the inaptness and deficiency of the Arabs who have left the town's vital utilities to the British.

### Conclusion

In the final analysis, *Lawrence of Arabia* is a timeless piece of art which is not only technically and aesthetically distinguished, but it is very significant and highly influential at the thematic level. It is pregnant with cultural encounters and tackles many controversial issues as far as the representation of Arabs is concerned. Many critics claim that this epic vilifies the image of Arabs through reproducing a set of orientalist stereotypes that demonize Arabs and represent them as greedy, barbarous and cruel, yet deficient and warring tribal peoples who cannot coexist and always need the assistance of the European to rule their own land. However, this paper is an attempt to shed light on the favorable representations and portrayals of Arabia and Arabs, especially Sherif Ali's interesting character. Ali is first presented to the audience as just another Arab, a ruthless killer. Yet he undergoes a notable change over the course of his experiences with Lawrence. By the end of the film, Ali becomes a man of reason, peace and diplomacy who endeavors to learn politics in hope of establishing democracy in Arabia in the future. A set of cinematic techniques were employed to materialize Ali's positive portrayal, and this paper tries to cast light on some of them and demonstrate how they contribute in the characterization of this character.

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