

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

The objective of this paper is to undertake **a review of Omar The Epic series from a media perspective as well as from a Quran/ Hadith learnings perspective**. The paper would also **mirror certain themes that were derived from the class discussions on the movie The Message**. The scope of this review covers Episode 1 to Episode 7 out of the 30 series production. As a reference point, Episode 10 is when the Hijra took place and this is comparable to the first half viewing of *The Message* in class.

By way of background, *Omar the Series* was co-produced by MBC1 and Qatar TV and directed by Hatem Ali¹. It was released to the public in 2012 which is 36 years after the screening of *The Message* in 1976. There are two clear distinctions underlying these two production:

- **Focus of character:** *The Message* is focused on specifically the life of the Prophet S.A.W whereas *Omar The Epic* series is focused on Omar Al-Khattab R.A., the 2nd Caliph Al Rashidin.
- **Duration:** *The Message* spans just a little under three hours whereas *Omar The Epic* Series goes for 45 minutes per episode over 30 episodes.

It can be reasonably expected that *Omar The Epic* series would have included a more refined and rich storyline and content. Listed below are the relevant themes that I have found to be worthy of a mention.

- 1. Contrasting the level of authority governing the two pictures** – at the start of *The Message*, the movie showed the following message right at the centre of the screen “The scholars and historians of Islam – The University of Al-Azhar in Cairo and the High Islamic Congress of the Shiat in Lebanon have approved the accuracy and fidelity of this

¹ http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2063241/synopsis?ref_=tvt_ov_pl

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

film”. It can be seen that **this statement is required at the get go as a manner to enlist credibility and verify its authenticity.** This is my view was a definite requirement especially given that the film had quite a number of foreign to Arabia and non-Muslim elements to it. **Omar The Epic series, on the other hand, not only did not have such a disclaimer within the film but it also did not seek for the approval from the said authority bodies.** In view of that, it is to no surprise that the Series actually drew a lot of criticism. In the same year of the launch of the Series, a representative from Al-Azhar had quickly stated that the series had not been referred to them for approval. Mohamad Othman, a member of the Al-Azhar Islamic Research Academy further commented that if they had come for approval, the series would have been prohibited because it depicted the four caliphs and the ten companions of the Prophet S.A.W. who had been promised paradise². This was their firm stand and we can see this stand being upheld in the Message.

2. **How the Prophet S.A.W. was depicted in the movie** – in *The Message*, the Prophet S.A.W.’s presence in a scene is accompanied by a soft high pitched sound in the background. The Prophet S.A.W. will also be the camera view i.e. when people address him, they will speak to the camera. In *Omar the Series*, the camera view approach is the same but I noticed some enhanced variation:

- A scene with the Prophet is typically played in front of the Prophet S.A.W.’s home
- Within the home, the Prophet S.A.W would be in the room and there will be a curtain slightly covering a small portion of the view. The Prophet S.A.W. would

² “Omar ibn Al-Khattab TV series raises controversy”, Al-Masry Al-Youm, <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/omar-ibn-al-khattab-tv-series-raises-controversy>

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

then typically walk out towards the speaker. The camera view is kept at the eye level and is sort of intentionally allowed to sway a bit i.e. unsteady.

In my view, it was quite apparent that the production's ability to depict the four caliph's and the companions had given them more opportunity to have scenes with interaction with the Prophet S.A.W. Credit must be given to *The Message* for managing to convey the message with such limited resources.

3. **How different characters and language used impacted the two productions** – if I remember correctly, *The Message* had to make do with only some of the companions such as Bilal, Zayd, Ammar and the Prophet S.A.W.'s enemies to bring the picture to life. *Omar The Epic* series on the other hand had the luxury of almost all the key characters. This certainly helps convey additional messages from a media perspective to the viewers which to me *The Message* did not:

- **The characteristics and the socio political dynamics of the Arabs at the time** – the earlier episodes of *Omar the Series* focused solely on the traditions of the Arabs such as their privilege position of the Quraish within the Arabian peninsula due to their role as custodians to the Kaaba, their strong sense of tribalism (this was the real mafia in my view as it does put *The Godfather* to shame) and how “hard” the Arabs were as a society. The scene of all the Arab leaders congregating in an open hall just outside the Kaaba to discuss their daily affairs spanning from trade strategy, the threat to society brought by the Prophet S.A.W. the standing of the slaves.
- **Love for poetry and the beauty of the Arabic communication exchange** – the script and screenplay of *Omar the Series* had successfully portrayed the beauty of the Arabic language and their strong appreciation for poetry. In a way, this is a

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

very critical background required to understand how Islam spread, which was verbally. The Arab poetry and had beautiful and witty exchanges in conversation. This is why when the Quran came down, they were unable to resist the sweetness of the Quran that they actually had to resort to launching a propaganda campaign against the Prophet S.A.W.

- **The Arabic language and dialogue discourse (as oppose to in English) helped in setting the stage for instances when some ayah's came down** - One example of this was when Abu Lahab had an angry exchange with Abu Talib as he was unloading filth in front of the Prophet S.A.W.'s. The scene happened just after Sura Al Massad came down when Allah sent down verses regarding Abu Lahab. Abu Lahab was an uncle to Prophet S.A.W. and given their strong society focus on lineage and family ties, Abu Talib said "Abdul Mutallib (their father) would have been heartbroken to see this. People usually say you can have a brother from another mother. But they have never said that you can have an enemy born by your mother."
- **Lost in translation** – there was one very strong incident in the movie which I felt was lost in *The Message* due to the use of the English language. This was the scene when Bilal was being tortured and a huge stone was placed on his chest. In *The Message*, he called out "God is One". In *Omar the Epic Series*, he says it is Arabic which is "Ahadun Ahad". This phrase, "Ahadun Ahad" would go on to also become the battle cry when the Muslim's went out to the epic wars such as Battle of Badr and Battle of Uhud.

4. **How revelation and the Quran was depicted** – there are strong similarities in both productions here. The revelation which came down from angel Gabriel was done by a

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

strong, deep and booming voice. The scene for the first revelation was almost identical in the sense that it involved Ali R.A. and Waraqah ibn Naufal speaking to the Prophet S.A.W. Sura Iqra and Sura Mudatthir was recited in the background. One thing to note that in Omar The Epic Series, given that the movie is in Arabic, the quranic verses were distinguished by them starting the verses with “Bismillah...” and ending it with “Saddaqallah...”. Both films had documented the verses in the forms of nasyeed and also parchments. This was seen in the scene when Omar found Islam – he caught his sister in her home reciting the quranic verses and had taken the parchments and read it himself. It was Sura Taha. There was also a scene when the Abu Sufyan caught the Muslim’s in sajdah praying outside of Makkah.

5. **How the message was spread** – This was one of my biggest take away from Omar the Epic series. I could see from a media perspective in terms of how the Quranic verses were spread amongst the Arabs. They had linked the coming down of specific verses to pinpoint occasion as to why the said Sura came down or was used. Following are some of the examples from the series that I’ve noted:

- **Surah Mudatthir [11-3 to 11-26]** – this Sura came down in relation to Al-Walid ibn Al Mughirah, the most eloquent of the Arab leaders. The Quraish tribe had sent Al Walid to the Prophet S.A.W. to make sense of the beautiful and piercing versus that had entered the hearts of all those who have heard it. While he was convinced himself, the Sura describes how he plotted and resorted to calling the Prophet a Sorcerer.
- **Surah Ar-Rahman [55-1 to 55-20]** – in this scene, Abdullah ibn Masood R.A., one of the companions wanted to do his part in spreading the message. This occurred approximately a year before the Hijra. He went to the Kaaba, in front of

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

the defying Quraish and recited loudly Sura Ar-Rahman. I've always wondered as to why Sura Ar- Rahman repeated the following verse thirty one times out of the 78 ayahs.

“Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you both (jinns and men) deny?” [English translation by Mohsin Khan, iQuran III v3.3]

The context is clear now, the Prophet S.A.W. had been preaching for close to 10 years now as we are approximately a year before the Hijra. It has been a long, painful and challenging time for the Muslims in spreading Islam as they faced non-stop persecution from the Quraish. This sura from a media perspective almost has a cheeky ‘what more do you want’ of a tone to it. True enough, Abdullah Ibn Masood was immediately beaten and taken down by the non-believers.

This had given a different level of understanding pertaining to the importance in understanding context, i.e. the when, the why and the how surrounding a quranic text or a sunnah.

6. **Other matters:** It has to be noted that Omar The Epic Series had benefitted from CGI technology. They are able to place a bit more geographical into the minds of the viewer's when they depicted Makkah at the time and the surrounding powers i.e. the Persians and Egypt. I have to say that the music score coupled with the CGI elements makes it similar to the opening introduction of Games of Thrones. Amazing effort.

Conclusion - I believe Omar The Epic Series is an amazing series. I believe despite not having the supposedly expected regulatory body approval, they have managed to incorporate and present a fairly detailed account of the events surrounding the Prophet S.A.W. and the beautiful message. The Message, on the other hand, did achieve its goal by ensuring its

Project 1: Review of *Omar The Epic* series and Selective Comparison to *The Message*

efforts were recognised and was able to see the light of day. One thing is for sure, the public has become more open and willing to explore and accept new ways to understanding Islam. The enhancement in media technology and creative perspective from a content delivery angle definitely has a role to play in spreading the message.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21M.289 Islam/Media
Spring 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.