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## The Politics of Representation: Muslim Women in the Western Media - An Islamic Feminist Perspective

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines the portrayal of Muslim women in Western media channels from 2015 to 2020, exploring how religion shapes narratives about their personalities, rights, and status. By analyzing media depictions, this research reveals how limited and inaccurate representations restrict Muslim women's economic opportunities and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. In contrast, Islam advocates for women's rights and empowerment. This study fills a significant gap in understanding the impact of Western media on public opinion and Muslim women's experiences. By challenging biases and misconceptions, this research aims to provide an authentic understanding of Muslim women's empowerment. It emphasizes the responsibility of researchers to develop accurate narratives, addressing prejudices and promoting a more just and impartial society. This study's findings will inform strategies for inclusive representation, challenging stereotypes and promoting social change.

**Keywords:** Western media, Muslim women, Stereotypes, egalitarianism, Islamic feminism.

### 1. Introduction

The media's portrayal of Muslim women has long been a contentious issue, shaping public opinion and perpetuating harmful stereotypes. This study investigates the global misrepresentation of Muslim women and its impact on their social status. By identifying and challenging common misconceptions about Islamic teachings and women's rights, this research aims to promote accurate representation and empowerment. Beyond social standing, authentic representation can have far-reaching economic benefits, unlocking Muslim women's potential to contribute to economic growth and development in times of uncertainty.

Muslim women are often subjected to negative portrayals in the media and other platforms, fueled by prejudices and misconceptions. These biased representations perpetuate harmful stereotypes, contributing to discrimination and marginalization. Contrary to popular belief, Islamic teachings actually support women's rights, as many experts have found (Hashim, 1999). While some may view Western feminism as incompatible with Muslim culture, the Islamic argument for women's equality offers valuable insights for feminists, challenging the notion that Islam restricts women's freedom.

This paper showcases a groundbreaking Pakistani initiative that empowers women in traditional, tribal, and religious contexts. The Mainstreaming Gender and Development (MGD) approach harnesses community strengths, mitigates resistance, and fosters a network of female activists by engaging families and communities in the development process (Paterson, 2008). The author highlights the importance of collective action, prioritizes skill over socioeconomic status, and demonstrates women's empowerment potential in challenging environments.

Contrary to pervasive stereotypes, Muslim women are often depicted as subdued and subservient, adhering to rigid traditions or male-dominated norms, lacking autonomy and a voice. These portrayals perpetuate established preconceptions, reducing Muslim women to objects and symbols of a perceived 'other' culture, overlooking their diverse experiences, choices, and individuality. This reinforces harmful stereotypes, perpetuating the misconception that Muslim women are fundamentally different from others.

The media's portrayal of Muslim women often focuses on their religious attire, such as the headscarf, overlooking their diverse identities and contributions. This narrow representation can perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes, obscuring the complexity of Muslim women's experiences. Moreover, when media coverage associates Muslims with violence or terrorism, it often perpetuates a harmful and inaccurate narrative that all Muslims, including women, are the same. This sensationalism fuels Islamophobia and chauvinism, creating a climate of fear and suspicion. The media's tendency to spotlight violent incidents committed by individuals who identify as Muslim, while ignoring the broader context, reinforces harmful stereotypes and perpetuates discrimination against Muslim women. This perpetuates a cycle of prejudice and hostility, further marginalizing Muslim women.

Muslim women in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia are forced to wear veils due to government-imposed laws and practices that align with their interpretation of Islam (Ullah, Mahmud, & Yousuf, 2013). This has led to their bodies being perceived as either repressed or a threat to national identities, perpetuating hegemonic messages through Western media. Muslim women are often depicted as submissive and oppressed, while their veils are seen as a symbol incompatible with Western values. These narratives are linked to concerns about Muslim minorities' assimilation in the West. However, Islam is a holistic way of life that encompasses all aspects, including business and entrepreneurship, with guiding principles based on the Al-Quran and Hadith. Muslim women have a long history of engagement in business activities, with many *sahabiya* accompanying the Prophet (ﷺ) and engaging in permissible business pursuits. The Holy Qur'an and Sunnah encourage legal gain through labor for both men and women, making women's entrepreneurship permissible. It's essential to adopt a multifaceted approach to combat stereotypes and foster understanding, denouncing biased media perspectives on Muslim women and recognizing their rights and responsibilities granted over 1400 years ago, which surpass those of many women in the West.

### **1.1. Statement of the problem**

The misrepresentation of Muslim women in Western media persists causing a significant hurdle to their social inclusion. Muslim women are consistently portrayed in a stereotypical and inaccurate manner, perpetuating harmful and oppressive narratives that reinforce their marginalization. These depictions often associate Muslim women with terrorism, extremism, and repression, ignoring the

diversity and complexity of their experiences (Arti, 2007). By perpetuating these stereotypes, Western media reinforces a distorted view of the East and its cultures, hindering efforts to promote social inclusion, diversity, and accurate understanding. This misrepresentation has far-reaching consequences (Zempi, 2014), contributing to the marginalization and stigmatization of Muslim women in Western societies, and reinforcing harmful stereotypes and biases.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

1. To identify and debunk fallacies about women's rights perpetuated in patriarchal culture, particularly the myth that women are economically powerless due to their portrayal.
2. To provide recommendations to accurately represent Islam's egalitarian stance on women's rights, as dictated by Islamic Shariah, and challenge misconceptions.

### 1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the prevalent myths and stereotypes about women's rights in patriarchal society, and how do they impact women's economic empowerment?
1. How do these myths perpetuate gender-based discrimination and limit women's potential?
2. What remedial measures can be taken to challenge and refute these myths through education and awareness campaigns?

### 1.5 Research Significance

The significance of this research lies in its potential to challenge harmful stereotypes and biases perpetuated against Muslim women, promoting a more detailed understanding of their experiences. By highlighting their contributions and achievements, this research fosters a more inclusive environment, inspiring Muslim women in particular and the women worldwide, in general, to assert their rights and challenge patriarchal norms. Moreover, it informs policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality and challenging discrimination. This research enriches feminist scholarship by exploring the intersections of gender with religion, culture, and identity, and enhances interfaith understanding by showcasing the Islamic perspective on women's empowerment. Ultimately, it provides a platform for marginalized voices, amplifying the experiences of Muslim women and promoting a more equitable society. By combating stereotypes and promoting understanding, this research has the potential to make a significant impact, contributing to a more just and inclusive world.

## 2. Literature Review

In order to better understand how Muslim women are portrayed in the worldwide media and how this affects their identity, position, and rights, a literature evaluation was done for this study. It was discovered that dominant media outlets reinforce perceptions of Muslim women as oppressed, silent, and backward, frequently relating their dress regulations and veiling to cultural and religious differences. This presentation of the veil and hijab as symbols of ignorance and oppression promotes the Western discourse of integration as a solution to the perceived threat of Muslim immigration. As a result, Islamophobia and xenophobia are exacerbated in Western nations by the media's dichotomous portrayal of Muslim women, who are either repressed and without a voice or terrorists and suicide bombers. However, these stereotypical portrayals fail to portray Muslim women's unique experiences, autonomy, and contributions to society.

Women's contributions to society are recognized in a variety of ways. Women, for instance, have a significant influence on the next generation through their contribution to the development of human capital through childrearing. They help to increase GDP per capita when more of them enter the work force. This list might continue forever. Women and their empowerment have been a focus of development-focused NGOs and government initiatives because of the significant and varied roles that women play. (Azid & Ward-Batts, 2020)

Said (1978) coined the word "Orientalism" to refer to Western researchers, artists, writers, and film makers' misrepresentations of Eastern civilizations. He claims that Western depictions of the East are built in a way that distinguishes between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the exotic (the Orient, the East, "them"). He also stated that the West developed the image of the East based on their dominance over the East.

In line with Said's concept of "otherness and political vision," Agenda Setting Theory proposes that media selectivity is driven by corporate interests. According to the principle of selective exposure, the media exposes certain pictures to the public while disregarding others (Griffin, 2010, p. 378).

Terrorists, suicide bombers, and authoritarian, violent spouses and dads are all stereotypes of Muslim men (Arti, 2007; Kozlovic, 2007; Said, 1978).

The last decade has witnessed a proliferation of research on this topic, characterized by diverse perspectives and methodologies. Shah & Khurshid (2019) reviews the literature on Muslim women's empowerment, highlighting the various approaches and perspectives on the topic. Mahmood argues that empowerment is a complex and multifaceted concept that cannot be reduced to a single definition or framework. Satiti (2017) examines how Western media misrepresents Muslim women who wear the veil, perpetuating stereotypes and portraying them as a threat to secular values and freedom. Stack (2020) examines the works of Islamic feminist scholars Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Riffat Hassan, analyzing their arguments, methods, and contexts as they interpret Islamic texts to advocate for women's equal rights in Islam, showcasing their leadership in defining and clarifying Muslim women's rights. Paracha & Khalid critically examines the arguments and methods of prominent Islamic feminist scholars Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, and Riffat Hassan, who advocate for women's equal rights in Islam through their interpretations of religious texts and historical context.

Unlike the existing research, this research aims to bridge the gap between the prevailing stereotypes and biases against Muslim women and the Islamic notion of women's empowerment, which emphasizes equal worth, spiritual equality, education, economic independence, political participation, social justice, and protection from oppression. By exploring the experiences of Muslim women and challenging harmful stereotypes, this study seeks to reclaim the Islamic narrative on women's empowerment, highlighting the divergence between Islamic teachings and patriarchal interpretations.

### **3. Research Methodology**

This qualitative study delves into the media's portrayal of Muslim women through a critical intersectional lens. By analyzing news coverage from five prominent Western outlets - CNN, BBC, Fox News, The Guardian, and The New York Times - between 2015 and 2020, we uncover the

dominant narratives and stereotypes surrounding Muslim women and the veil. Leveraging NVivo software, we identify key themes, including representation, stereotyping, religious framing, and the impact on Muslim women's identity, status, and rights. Our intersectional approach considers the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and class in coding the data. Additionally, we draw on qualitative research to explore the empowering representations of women in the Holy Qur'an and Hadith, highlighting instances of authentic feminism. By examining non-numerical data, we challenge the misrepresentation of Muslim women and amplify counter-narratives that promote a more accurate understanding.

#### **4. Findings**

The content analysis's conclusions indicate that preconceptions of Muslim women as submissive and oppressed are consistently propagated by the global media, which associates the headscarf and veil with things that seem incompatible with Western values. In addition, the representation of Muslim women is not broad enough to capture the range of their experiences and contributions to society. Negative narratives that are in the prevailing discourse often obfuscate their action and agency. Furthermore, Muslim women's experiences vary greatly between regions, nations, and groups in terms of culture, social structure, and politics. This is because the media usually presents Islamic countries as homogeneous entities.

Countering such distorted stereotypes about Muslim women is an urgent requirement. These feminist views must be examined through the prism of Islamic Shariah.

As a religion of peace, Islam guarantees gender equality and women's rights in all sectors of life. Women were liberated by Islam from pre-Islamic oppression, subjugation, violence, and injustice. Women's standing has been rightfully elevated by Islam, which has granted them reverence and rights that they could not even imagine in pre-Islamic times. Islam deems the husband finest who treats his wife well, according to Sunan-ul-Tirmizi, vol. 5, pp. 475, Hadith 3921, and Prophet Muhammad's teachings also strongly underline the rights of women in all roles. For the first time in human history, Islam provided compassion and comfort to despairing and oppressed women.

The content analysis reveals a troubling trend in the global media's portrayal of Muslim women. Stereotypes of submissiveness and oppression persist, perpetuating a false narrative that associates the headscarf and veil with values incompatible with Western culture. This limited representation fails to capture the diverse experiences and contributions of Muslim women, obscuring their agency and actions. The dominant discourse often overlooks the significant variations in Muslim women's lives across different regions, nations, and groups, shaped by unique cultural, social, and political contexts.

Instead, the media frequently presents Islamic countries as homogeneous entities, perpetuating distorted stereotypes. This oversight is particularly concerning given the significant contributions Muslim women have made to their societies, from politics and education to art and activism. By ignoring these achievements, the media reinforces a narrative that marginalizes and excludes Muslim women, perpetuating harmful stereotypes and limiting their potential.

To counter these misconceptions, it is essential to examine the experiences of Muslim women through the lens of Islamic Shariah. As a religion of peace, Islam ensures gender equality and women's rights in all aspects of life. The Prophet's teachings emphasize the importance of treating



women with kindness and respect, with the husband who treats his wife well, considered the best (Sunan-ul-Tirmizi, vol. 5, pp. 475, Hadith 3921). Islam's emphasis on compassion, justice, and equality provides a powerful framework for challenging dominant narratives and promoting gender equality. Moreover, Islamic history is replete with examples of women who played pivotal roles in shaping the faith and its community. From the Prophet's wife, Khadija, to iconic figures like Fatima and Aisha, Muslim women have been instrumental in preserving and transmitting knowledge, leading armies, and providing counsel. Their stories, often overlooked or marginalized, offer a powerful counter-narrative to the stereotypes that dominate the media landscape.

By highlighting these stories and examining the experiences of Muslim women through the lens of Islamic Shariah, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable representation of Muslim women in the media. This requires a commitment to challenging dominant narratives and promoting diverse perspectives, recognizing the agency and contributions of Muslim women in all their complexity and diversity. Only through such efforts can we hope to counter harmful stereotypes and promote a more just and equitable world for all.

#### 4.1 Discussion

The persistent misrepresentation of Muslim women in Western media continues to perpetuate detrimental stereotypes, thereby marginalizing them and impeding their full integration into societal discourse. This portrayal often associates Muslim women with themes of terrorism, extremism, and repression, while neglecting their diverse identities and multifaceted roles within their communities (Arti, 2007). Such biased depictions have extensive repercussions, contributing to the stigmatization of Muslim women in Western contexts and reinforcing prejudicial narratives and biases (Zempi, 2014).

Critiques by scholars underscore the pervasive nature of this issue. Nilufer Gole's exploration in "The Veil and the Political Unveiling of Muslim Women" (2001) critiques the portrayal by major news outlets like CNN, which oversimplify Muslim women's agency by reducing their identities solely to their attire choices. Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod's seminal work, *\*Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society\** (1986), critiques the tendency of media, such as the BBC, to depict Muslim women as voiceless victims of cultural norms, thus erasing their individuality and autonomy.

Sarah L. Marusek's scholarly examination in "Muslim Women and Power: Political and Civic Engagement in West European Societies" (2012) critiques media like The New York Times for perpetuating stereotypes that portray Muslim women as passive or lacking agency in their political participation. This narrow framing overlooks the dynamic roles and contributions of Muslim women in societal and political realms, thereby reinforcing misconceptions and prejudices.

Furthermore, Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis in "The Muslim Woman: The Power of Images and the Danger of Pity" (1995) scrutinizes Western media outlets, including The Guardian, for reducing Muslim women to simplistic stereotypes based on their appearance and familial dynamics rather than recognizing their diverse achievements and individuality. Joan Wallach Scott's critical work, *\*The Politics of the Veil\** (2007), similarly critiques Time Magazine's sensationalist coverage of Muslim women's attire and religious practices, arguing that such narratives perpetuate misunderstandings and harmful biases.

Sahar Khamis's scholarly contribution in "Framing Islam: An Analysis of Western Media Coverage of Women in Afghanistan" (2011) further examines how media outlets like Al Jazeera often portray Muslim women in conflict zones, reinforcing stereotypes of victimhood and passivity while overlooking their resilience and agency. This analysis aligns with broader critiques by scholars such as Sarah L. Marusek and Nilufer Gole, who have highlighted the tendency of Western media to oversimplify and distort the experiences of Muslim women, thereby perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biases.

Aya Gruber's critical analysis in "Covering the Global Politics of Gender: Framing the Burqa in the New York Times and the Washington Post" (2016) delves into how prominent newspapers like The Washington Post frame discussions around the burqa and Muslim women's rights. Gruber argues that such coverage often fails to capture the nuanced social and political dynamics at play, thus perpetuating a limited and skewed understanding of Muslim women's lived realities. This reductionist approach overlooks the complexities of Muslim women's experiences, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and biases in public discourse.

The persistent depiction of Muslim women in Western media primarily as victims of patriarchal oppression or religious extremism, as observed by Brown (2018), perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes that depict them as passive and devoid of agency. This narrative not only distorts the lived experiences of Muslim women but also reinforces prejudicial biases, hindering efforts towards their empowerment and inclusive representation.

These critiques underscore the Western media's tendency to homogenize and stereotype Muslim women, perpetuating harmful narratives that reinforce their marginalization. By ignoring their individuality, achievements, and agency, these representations perpetuate a distorted view of their lives, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and biases. It also highlights the need for more precise and accurate representations of Muslim women in Western media, representations that acknowledge their diversity, agency, and complexities. By challenging these stereotypes and biases, we can work towards a more inclusive and equitable understanding of Muslim women's experiences. By dismantling the prevalent stereotypes and representing the different skill sets and accomplishments of Muslim women in a wide array of fields, we can open up a large group of talented individuals who are not being utilized right now. This would be a big help in boosting the global economy. Hence, narratives regarding Muslim women must immediately be changed.

Transforming media representations to portray Muslim women as proactive and determined individuals can cultivate an environment that fosters increased economic opportunities and empowerment. This shift includes, but is not limited to, showcasing greater female participation in the workforce, leadership roles, and entrepreneurship – all of which align with the principles of Islamic Shariah. By recognizing and encouraging these qualities, we can unlock economic growth, prosperity, and innovation. Furthermore, by dispelling misconceptions and removing barriers, we can create a more inclusive social environment that values cultural diversity and promotes gender equality, ultimately leading to a more prosperous and harmonious society. Islam, a religion that espouses gender equality, grants men and women equal rights and opportunities. Women are entitled to inheritance, education, and financial independence, empowering them to reach their full potential. By dispelling misconceptions and gender biases, Muslim women can attain a position of equality and peace in society. When their efforts are acknowledged and valued, women's confidence and determination soar, leading to a more prosperous and creative society. The positive

representation of Muslim women fosters a culture of empowerment, unlocking their potential and contributing to a more inclusive and thriving community.

In conclusion, the pervasive misrepresentation of Muslim women in Western media underscores the urgent need for nuanced and accurate portrayals that acknowledge their agency, diversity, and multifaceted contributions to society. By challenging biased narratives and promoting inclusive perspectives, media can play a crucial role in fostering understanding and dismantling harmful stereotypes that perpetuate marginalization and exclusion.

### **Conclusion**

The persistent misrepresentation of Muslim women within media outlets fosters the continuation of prejudicial attitudes and reinforces inaccurate understandings of Muslim communities. This study posits the necessity for a more holistic and proactive approach to depicting Muslim women. Such an approach necessitates acknowledging and celebrating their rich tapestry of contributions to the political, social, and cultural spheres. Responsible journalism demands rigorous, impartial, and unbiased reporting that acknowledges the diverse experiences and fundamental human rights of Muslim women. Ultimately, eradicating the misrepresentation of Muslim women is an essential step toward fostering a society grounded in equality, inclusivity, and mutual respect.

Islam promotes equality and forbids any kind of financial burden on women, making it extremely illegal for men to subjugate women. Rather, their rights to dowry, inheritance, and protection are guaranteed and upheld by Islam. The way Muslim women are portrayed in Western media, however, is extremely unsettling as it leaves out the great majority of Muslim women. Essentially, prior research has demonstrated that American media rarely, if ever, highlights Muslim women who achieve success as scientists, political figures, postgraduates, instructors, physicians, nurses, photographers, or businesswomen. This absence helps to maintain stereotypes about women's rights in our patriarchal society. It is imperative to combat and dispel these false notions that obstruct positive portrayals of women and instead advance true Islamic teachings everywhere.

### **5.1 Recommendations:**

To combat misconceptions and promote an accurate representation of Muslim women in Western media, it's essential to showcase their achievements, skills, and goals, highlighting individuality beyond religious or cultural identity. Enabling media outlets to represent Muslim women accurately, eliminating prejudices, and promoting diverse perspectives and ideas can challenge distortions and advance understanding. Fostering dialogue and mutual understanding through community gatherings, interfaith dialogues, and cultural education initiatives can help overcome barriers by promoting respect, empathy, and inclusivity. Moreover, combating Islamophobia and discrimination through awareness, supporting anti-discrimination organizations, and opposing discriminatory laws is crucial. Encouraging media outlets to adopt inclusive reporting guidelines, countering stereotypes and upholding accurate depictions, and providing platforms for Muslim women to share their perspectives and experiences can promote a more comprehensive representation. By taking these steps, we can prevent inaccurate portrayals of Muslim women in Western media and advance towards a more comprehensive representation that honors their role, rights, and place in society.

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