

Analyzing American Newspapers' Portrayal of Veiled Muslim Women

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- a. **Purpose:** Analyze the media portrayal of veiled Muslim women in American newspapers.
- b. **Design and Methods:** Articles were selected through the U.S. Major Dailies ProQuest tool. Newspapers included in the database were: The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and the Wall Street Journal. Articles were selected using theoretical media sampling.
- c. **Results:** Veiled Muslim women were portrayed as agents in their own development. However, they were portrayed as agents through their integration into an American lifestyle. Outside of the United States, they were portrayed as lacking social mobility.
- d. **Conclusion:** Veiled Muslim women were portrayed as becoming agents in their lives once they adopted an American lifestyle and ideals. In addition, the veil was framed as a mechanism of integration and social mobility for veiled Muslim women.

INTRODUCTION

The article *The Education of Maira Salim* follows the life of a college girl that happens to be Muslim. She would otherwise be “the business major who binge-watches ‘Quantico’” or the student that works at her father’s used car business. Instead, due to her headscarf, people reduce her to her Muslim identity. This is not a negative for Maira as she is a proud Muslim. The problem arises when students limit themselves at her Muslim identity and do not take the time to know her personally. This is demonstrated through the comments/questions she receives such as “do they make you sleep in it?” and “can you hear me in that?” all the way to hurtful comments such as “go back to your own country” (Hull & McGarvey, 2016). On top of that, ignorant students often associate her with the Islamic State.

The article proceeds to detail her experience as the president of her university’s Muslim Student Association. On a 9/11 commemoration event, she presents plaques of appreciation to first responders and says, “you have to show people that there is good in the world.”

The terrorist attacks of September 11 have fundamentally changed the lives of Americans. More so Muslim women because they have dealt with its nasty aftermath: rampant Islamophobia. This research paper tasks itself with the media portrayal of veiled Muslim women. Moreover, this paper will focus on the intersections between agency, veiling, and media representation.

In the literature, there is extensive discussion surrounding the media portrayal of Muslim women. Studies suggest that mass media present Muslim women as devoid of agency (Bilge, 2010). Moreover, Islam is generally seen as something that is “backwards” and incompatible with mainstream feminism (Bilge, 2010). There is a gap in the literature surrounding the patterns of discussion that are utilized to portray veiled Muslim women as lacking agency. The aim of this paper is to explore the words and stereotypes newspapers use to portray veiled Muslim women as agentless.

The U.S. Major Dailies ProQuest tool was utilized to collect articles. The newspapers included in the database were: The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and the Wall Street Journal. Articles were selected using theoretical media sampling and keywords. Keywords: Muslim women, veil, hijab, headscarf, society, United States, 911 (9/11), terrorism, Islam, and agency.

Three frames emerged from the article sample: Humanizing Muslim women, Islamophobia and Sportswear Issues. The articles under the Humanizing Muslims frame focused on the experiences of Muslim women when integrating in the United States. The Islamophobia frame presented extensive coverage of the victimhood Muslim women feel in the U.S. The final frame, Sportswear Issues, highlighted the controversies that occurred in Europe over hijab sport accommodations.

Instead of finding articles that vilified Muslim women or presented them agentless, most of the articles in the sample portrayed veiled Muslim women as becoming agents once they assimilated to American culture, values, and ideals. This new understanding is important because it helps deepen the conversation surrounding the innate biases of Western media. This analysis found that these newspapers did not echo the disparaging stereotypes surrounding Muslim women (the disparaging stereotypes are later explained in the literature review). This may be a positive as it can be indicative of a shift in reasoning and perspective on behalf of American media.

This paper will be presented in five parts: literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and a conclusion. The literature review will have an overview of the current debates surrounding the veil and theoretical understandings of agency. The methodology section details the procedure used to collect articles. The discussion and the conclusion explain the relevance of this research paper and explores future possibilities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature surrounding the headscarf touches upon multiple topics such as the Western understandings of hijab and Islam as well as its intersection with agency. Generally, across Western media, Muslim people have been wrongly represented as “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics” (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Due to the headscarf, veiled Muslim women are more likely to face suspicion “due to a generalized fear of Muslims” (Droogsma, 2007). In the Western world, the veil is seen as utterly obstructive “especially within a Western cultural context that privileges ‘ocular-centric or vision based’ epistemology” (Macdonald, 2006).

Feminist literature indicates that after the 9/11 attacks, coverage of Muslim people had surged in “liberal areas of the media, but the opportunity this offered for diversity of perspective was repeatedly undermined by the continuing obsession with veiling/unveiling” (Bilge, 2010). Moreover, Alison Donnell (qtd in Bilge) added that 9/11 “replaced constructions of the veil as ‘an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism’ with a ‘xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic, gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference.’” Moreover, Muslim women have been painted as “victims of their own culture and a threat to the modernization of women’s identities in developed countries” (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017).

Despite the supposed liberal and secular nature of the West, veiled Muslim women can cause great expressions of surprise when they become influential members of society (Olympic athletes, politicians, etc.). Such sentiments “underline the tenacity of beliefs that Islamic veiling is intrinsically incompatible with women’s agency in the construction of their identities” (Macdonald, 2006).

Media depictions of veiled Muslim women undermine the headscarf and the meaning it carries. Muslim women wear the veil for different reasons. Using feminist standpoint theory, studies have shown that motivations for wearing the headscarf include expressing identity and spreading the word about Islam (Welborne et al., 2018). For other women, it acts as a behaviour check, a way to resist objectification as well as to preserve intimate relationships (Droogsma, 2007). Furthermore, “wearing the hijab helps Muslim-American women to define their own womanhood outside the bonds of the patriarchal society” (Droogsma, 2007).

Hijab is often seen as a dichotomous issue in feminist academic circles. It is often portrayed as being worn as a sign of submission to Islamic patriarchal standards or to resist Western hegemony (Bilge, 2010). In her article, Bilge pushes for a definition of agency that embraces religious autonomy and goes beyond the binary of resistance vs submission.

Davis (qtd in Bilge) states that agency in social theory is “central to the action-model, which attempts to grasp individuals’ capacities to act independently of structural constraints, or against them” (Bilge, 2010). In a similar fashion, Mack (qtd in Bilge) states that a liberal conception of agency is “defined as ‘the free exercise of self-willed behaviour... closely linked to the transcendental humanist subject” (Bilge, 2010).

Despite these seemingly fluid understandings of agency, hijab often causes an uproar within academically feminist circles. Saba Mahmood states “the vexed relationship between feminism and religious traditions is perhaps most manifest in discussions on Islam.” This is because modern strands of feminism are heavily rooted in “secular-liberal politics” (Mahmood, 2001).

In her work, Mahmood arrives to a new understanding of agency. She outlines an understanding of agency that considers religious desires and motivations. According to her, agency is “understood as the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)” (Mahmood, 2001). Moreover, she adds that when women decide to wear the veil, “the wearer voluntarily submits herself to religious norms and her subjectivity (her conscious experience of head covering) is premised on a chose docility, which reflects her religious agency” (Mahmood, 2001).

Even with these nuanced debates about hijab and agency, Western media represent Islam as backwards compared to Western ideals. Although the literature is comprehensive about agency, there is a gap in literature about the patterns of discussion that are utilized to portray veiled Muslim women as lacking agency. I want to explore how newspapers juxtapose words and stereotypes to portray veiled Muslim women as agentless.

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research question, newspaper articles were selected using theoretical sampling. Articles were selected through the U.S. Major Dailies ProQuest tool. The database included The New York Times, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and the Wall Street Journal. The keywords used were Muslim women, veil, hijab, headscarf, society, United States, 9/11 (9/11), terrorism, Islam, and

agency. Spelling and form variants of the keyword terms were included in the search to reach a diverse range of articles.

The media sample was restricted from 2001-2019. The timeframe starts on September 11, 2001 because after the 9/11 attacks, there was a surge in discussion surrounding Muslim cultures and traditions in “liberal areas of media” (Macdonald, 2006).

In total, 34 articles were analyzed. Initially, the result of the search was 4328 news articles. After restrictions such as only selecting news reports (as opposed to commentaries, features, or reviews) and setting the location focus to the United States, the articles were reduced to 550 results. Moving forward, topical subject focuses of “Muslims” and “women” were used. The subject focus of “Muslims” yielded 154 articles while the subject focus of “women” yielded 60 articles. Both samples were used. Some articles appeared in more than one focus.

Articles were selected to deepen the understanding of emerging themes according to theoretical media sampling. After the selection, a feminist analysis was conducted to form a conclusion about the media portrayal of veiled Muslim women.

It is also important to acknowledge that not all Muslim women wear the headscarf. For the purposes of this article, the terms “Muslim women” and “veiled Muslim women” will be used interchangeably as a significant number of Muslim women wear the headscarf. Moreover, when I refer to hijab in this paper, I mean the headscarf and not the multifaceted practice of religious modesty.

FINDINGS

1. HUMANIZING MUSLIM WOMEN

The articles in this frame detailed the realities and intricacies of being an American Muslim. Two themes emerged within this frame: (1) Americanizing the Muslim experience and (2) the empowerment of Muslim women.

Americanizing the Muslim Experience

These articles focused on American rites of passage such as owning a gun or going to college (activities that are heavily associated with the ideal American lifestyle). A 2018 article from the New York Times outlined the difficulty Muslim women face when owning a gun and practicing at ranges. Some Muslim women stated feeling a sense of discomfort in range shooting establishments because people stereotyped them as terrorists due to their headscarf (Alfiky & Hassan, 2018). This sentiment has given rise to certain gun ranges to label themselves as “Muslim-free.” Moreover, the article emphasized that American Muslims “own guns for the same reasons as anyone else: for protection, for hunting and sport shooting...” (Alfiky & Hassan, 2018).

Two articles focused on the university experience of veiled Muslim women. These articles presented Islam at odds with the modern-secular culture of American campuses. Practising faith was portrayed as a multi-faceted issue because Muslim women had to find a balance between their faith and elements of liberal American culture. In this context, Muslim women were portrayed as agents because

of their determination to affirm their Islamic identity within an American campus. A Muslim college student noted, "hijab creates a world of its own, with its own rules and regulations, as well as a certain mindset that comes with wearing it... Not only does having it on change how one looks... it changes the way one thinks of oneself" (Brotman, 2004).

Two articles focused on demystifying the hijab. One said "it is the way I see myself as an American Muslim woman. It means something to me: it means I am a woman who is empowered, I am a woman who has integrity..." (Schoenberg, 2019). In another article about the headscarf, a Muslim woman added "the hijab can be a very American assertion of the right to self-expression. It can be flat-out feminist" (*VOICE OF THE PEOPLE - U.S. Major Dailies - ProQuest*, 2019). Overall, these newspapers emphasized the empowering qualities of the veil while framing it as a potentially feminist affirmation.

The understanding of agency that is most relevant for these articles is a liberal conception of agency because these women are freely exercising "self-willed behaviour" in the United States.

Empowerment of Muslim Women

Articles under this theme focused on the opportunities an American lifestyle can bring to Muslim women. A 2018 article discussed the #MosqueMeToo movement (a subdivision of the #MeToo movement). Under #MosqueMeToo, Muslim women have opted to share their uncomfortable experiences surrounding abuse in their mosques.

The author of the article, Daisy Khan (a Muslim woman), recounts her experience. She says that this movement has drawn mixed emotion from Muslim Women in the United States since "many find themselves torn between centuries of tradition, modern social pressures, and their own beliefs. Like many Muslim women living in the West, I have struggled to find the balance among my religion, my culture and American social mores." This article raises the question: are Islamic traditions associated with a culture of diminishing women? According to this article, the answer seems to be "yes." For example, the article further states there is a reality of "segregated mosques and a tradition in which young girls often are forced to marry much older men" (Khan, 2018).

The use of the phrase "American social mores" implies that multiple Muslim women (like Daisy Khan) are in a new environment. By that reasoning, it follows that Muslim women must not tolerate such abuses as it is incongruent with their newly adopted American ideals. This article suggests that by integrating in American culture, these women gain agency by speaking out against the injustices they face. Furthermore, this article continues to propagate the stereotype that Islamic culture and traditions are oppressive.

A 2010 article from the New York Times outlined the success Muslim women can have in the United States. The article stated that veiled Muslim women engage in advocacy more than ever before. A Muslim woman added "what happened on Sept. 11 and after has led American Muslims to be more involved in civic society... Muslim women [are] finding that a very rich area for activity." Furthermore, the article adds, "Muslim women in the United States have advantages. They are better educated than their counterparts in Western Europe, [and] the average American... they are just as likely as Muslim men to attend religious services, which equates to greater influence." The article contrasts this flourishing in the United States to a hypothetical scenario of what it would be like living in their home countries. A Muslim woman added "in many of our home countries, socially or politically it would've

been harder for Muslim women to take a leadership role... It's actually quite empowering to be Muslim in America" (Knowlton, 2010). The contrast presented in the article portrays Muslim women's agency as being contingent upon living in the United States and engaging in American ideals such as civic action. Again, while Muslim women are not presented as agentless, Islam and Islamic countries are presented as backwards and lesser-than Western countries.

In general, articles under this section represented the U.S. as a bastion of freedom, equality, and opportunity. Veiled Muslim women were portrayed as becoming agents once they started adapting to American values. This conception is very much in touch with a liberal conception of agency as these women, now in the United States, are now able to freely exercise their choice at their own will. Mahmood's description of agency applies here because these women go against "the weight of tradition" (of their home countries) to realize their own interests in the United States.

2. ISLAMOPHOBIA

Many articles in this theme focused on the harmful consequences Donald Trump's rhetoric could have on the lives of veiled Muslim women. A 2017 article from the Wall Street Journal depicted Muslim women being victims to Islamophobic attacks. The article mentions a woman that "has been subjected to taunts because of her hijab. People on the street have started shouting at her to go back to her country" (Lovett, 2017).

Authors described Trump's rhetoric as motivation to vote for many Muslims. In the article, *How Trump is bringing out the Muslim Vote*, a veiled woman decides to throw "herself into political activism, campaigning and doing voter registration drives" (Dvorak, 2016). In the face of disparaging rhetoric, these women become political agents with the ability to shape the future of the United States.

Another article detailed Islamophobic incidents such as hijabs being pulled off the heads of women (Kaleem, 2017). Despite these difficulties, many Muslim women decided to embrace the veil stronger than before. Some said that "this is identity for a Muslim woman, this is what shows people that you're Muslim, so if you are taking it off, it is showing them that you're afraid," another stated "this is not a time to cower away and back away and fear. If you are attacked for wearing it, then God will reward you" (Sharif, 2017). This was one of the seven articles that depicted significant amounts of victimhood.

From a practical standpoint, it almost seems counterintuitive as to why these women continue to wear hijab considering the threat it can pose to their safety. Mahmood's concept of agency can help elucidate the dedication these women have towards hijab. Docility (in Mahmood's context) is associated with "struggle, effort, exertion, and achievement" (Mahmood, 2001). In an American context, that "discipline" can also be associated with the effort Muslim women undergo to faithfully balance Islam and their new life in the United States.

This set of articles diverted from the customary dichotomous representation of the veil. They were not exactly *resisting* Western hegemony, but they also were not *submitting* to patriarchal standards by wearing the veil. Instead, these newspapers portrayed them as complex human beings that choose to don the headscarf for diverse reasons. Once again, these women were portrayed as agents through adapting American values/ideals such as voting.

3. SPORTSWEAR ISSUES

Many articles focused on the difficulty Muslim women face when trying to play sports due to Islamic modesty requirements. Ibtihaj Muhammad, an award winning Muslim American fencer, was a recurring figure in these articles. She was framed as an inspiration for young Muslim women to take on sports, especially fencing.

Out of five articles, three articles portrayed sport hijabs as a useful accommodation for Muslim women. A 2019 article from the New York Times highlighted the outrage that ensued when a French company announced they were going to sell sport headscarves. The uproar resulted in salespeople being assaulted at company stores. A Muslim woman said, “for those who are not directly impacted by the hijab, it's just one more controversy, but for Muslim women, it has some nefarious, long-lasting consequences” (Peltier & Breeden, 2019).

While the headscarf is more acceptable in North American society, the debate surrounding hijab are much more prominent in Europe. In France, the state concept of *laïcité* (secularity) often clashes against discussions about veil accommodations.

In a 2012 article from the New York Times, Annie Sugier (then president of the League for International Women’s Rights in France) stated her opposition to hijab sport accommodations because of the “neutrality of sport.” Since the headscarf is a clear indication of religious affiliation, it follows to not allow it in sport arenas. Moreover, she adds the “neutrality of sport” is based on “universal principles” (Singh, 2012). This is contradictory as “universal principles” should not restrict certain groups of people from participating in competitive sports.

The articles in this sample do not create a dichotomy of hijab versus universal principles. In fact, most articles depicted the sport hijab as a much-needed accommodation for Muslim athletes. The sport hijab was portrayed as a useful tool that veiled Muslim women can utilize to increase their participation and, to some extent, agency in the world of sports.

DISCUSSION

The most prominent theme throughout this paper was “Humanizing Muslims.” Moreover, it is obvious these articles presented Muslim women as becoming agents once they entered the United States.

In the literature review, an article mentioned that women are often represented as “victims of their own culture and a threat to the modernization of women’s identities in developed countries” (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). In part, my findings affirm the first portion of the quote. My findings did confirm that veiled Muslim women are portrayed as victims of their own countries. On the other hand, the findings do not support that veiled Muslim women are “a threat to the modernization of women’s identities in developed countries.” Instead, an abundance of articles highlighted veiled Muslim women that took advantage of the opportunities available in the U.S. to launch their careers and get civically engaged.

Most of the newspaper articles in the sample functioned, in a way, to humanize the struggles of being an American Muslim. The process of humanization was intricate and had many factors. Through the sample, the main factor for the humanization of Muslim women was becoming American. For their struggles and agency to be valid, they needed to be American (or at least attempt to integrate into the American landscape).

CONCLUSION

Initially, I thought this study would reveal how veiled Muslim women continue to be portrayed as agentless. The goal of this research was to explore the juxtaposition of ideas and words that were used to propel the trope of the agentless veiled Muslim woman. During the process, different results emerged. They stand in contrast to the literature review because they did not overwhelmingly portray Muslim women as helpless and agentless.

In general, the articles portrayed veiled Muslim women as agents *through* their integration into an American lifestyle. Outside of the United States, veiled Muslim women were portrayed as victims of their home countries due to the lack of social and political opportunities.

Furthermore, these newspaper articles framed the headscarf as a mechanism of integration and mobility for veiled Muslim women in the United States. To some extent, these newspapers also frame the veil as a symbolic garment because it represents the impact their religious values have on their American lives.

Given these newspapers did not feature multiple agentless representation of veiled Muslim women, it is possible that such representation is readily evident in other media such as movies and/or TV shows. Considerations for future studies include doing a systemic show/movie review or perhaps doing a case study/ethnography about organizations fighting against the current veil restrictions in Quebec or a European country.

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