

# Diverse Representation of Muslim Women in the US Newspapers- A Corpus Based Critical Discourse Analysis

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## Abstract

The study presents an analysis of the diverse representation of Muslim women in various U.S. newspapers available at the Corpus of contemporary American English (COCA). The study attempted to know what kind of identities of Muslim women, and the Muslim world they are living in, are being portrayed in the American media. The study was conducted, on twenty-five texts from different U.S. newspapers available at the Corpus of contemporary American English (COCA), using a bi-directional approach i.e. the use of Critical Discourse Analysis on an already built Corpus. This study has used a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model proposed by Van Leeuwen (1996) for investigating the portrayal of social actors in a given discourse. This study shows that the Muslim Women are portrayed under the influence of the war between West and Islam/Muslims. The major findings of this study show that Muslim Women are either being portrayed as the suppressed individuals or the victims of inequality practiced within Muslim Communities through religious practices. Moreover, there is hardly any instance found which presents Muslim Women in a positive shade, because the image of a Muslim Woman shown in the texts is of a miserable creature which may be an overtime proliferation of selected realities. The construction of Binaries of 'US' and 'Other' can also be seen and analyzed in almost all the texts; whereby US refers to the people of U.S. or West and is presented as good, supportive and wishing well to Muslim Women, whereas the counterpart 'Other' which refers either to the Muslim men or Islam and is presented as evil, vicious and suppressing their women. Thus, the overall portrayal of Muslim Women, investigated in the study, can be said to be partial, biased and fabricated, and is visibly under the influence of negative perceptions about Muslims and Islam in the west. The analysis of portrayal of the social actors in this study suggests proper scrutiny of media news by public especially when the news is about the 'other' communities or their people.

## INTRODUCTION

Identities are seen as are portrayed by others, the link between identity construction and its influence on receivers is significant. Identity is not something that one has inherited; and something which is natural, innate and in-built. Rather, it is constructed, imposed from outside. There are actors who are constructing / defining others' images in the world and patients who are being constructed / defined vice-versa. This seems to have polarized the world into ME/WE/US versus YOU/THEM/OTHERS dichotomy. It is only the dominant counterpart which holds the position of representing the entire community, specifically of others. Thus, the sectarian voice of the few supposedly becomes the voice of the entire community, which in turn then seamlessly blends into the voice of the nation. It is from this biased perspective that the minorities/marginalized communities are being defined / imagined.

Although there are several agencies which determine how identities are shaped, imagined and perceived, yet by far the most important is the media. It does not simply reflect the social world, but actively constructs a coherent version of social reality within which ideological tensions can be contained and resolved. They produce a unified, intelligible, social reality, a 'world of the whole'. Dyer (1977) has argued, "media images are both produced by, and help to produce, the sum of social knowledge with which we map society and make sense of it." And since this construction is made of 'preferred readings' rather than excluded meanings, it is only a one-sided representation, which nevertheless is projected as the only authentic and natural reading of the phenomenon. Moreover, the messages emanating from the media do not appear to be messages at all. Cloaked either as harmless entertainment, or propagation of objective truths, they seep into consciousness, imperceptibly and almost invisibly leaving a desired image of others on one.

The representation of Muslims in the media relates to the objective of drawing a desired image of 'others', on the targeted audience, by maintaining a neutral as well as fair position. This study thence aims to explore the role that west media has played in desired identity construction of Muslim women and whether or not this effects the larger entity i.e. Islam and the Muslim world. The way Muslim women are presented in US newspapers help figuring out the way Muslims are generally perceived by the western world. Media as said earlier manipulates what is true, which is certainly to construct a desired image of the social actors.

## METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study a bi-directional approach is used i.e. the use of corpora in critical discourse analysis. This study hypothesized that the perception of western people about Muslims has changed significantly because of US newspapers portraying identities in a manipulative way. To find this out, a critical discourse analysis is done

on the selected texts and the framework, used and proposed by Van Leeuwen for social actors, is used. Twenty five texts selected from different US newspapers dated (2001-2012) are analyzed. The texts collected are from the corpus of contemporary American English (COCA).

The 'Corpus of Contemporary America English (COCA)' is used to explore the portrayal of 'Muslim Women' in the US newspapers from all possible dimensions. Following is the detail of the corpus used for this study.

Corpus of Contemporary America English (COCA) is composed of more than 450 million words from more than 160,000 texts, including 20 million words each year from 1990 to 2013. The corpus is used by approximately tens of thousands of people each month, which may make it the most widely used "structured" corpus currently available.

The corpus is evenly divided between the five genres: spoken, fiction, popular magazines, newspapers, and academic journals. The texts come from a variety of sources.

COCA is used to extract texts which appeared in the US newspapers and carried the word 'Muslim Women'.

## DATA COLLECTION

Twenty Five texts were selected from different US newspapers (2001-2012) and are critically analyzed using the framework for the Analysis of social actors presented by Van Leeuwen (1996).

## ANALYSIS

Leeuwen's (1996) framework consists of the following main sections:

### 1. Exclusion

### 2. Inclusion

### 3. Impersonalized social actors

Following is one of the texts used for this study followed by its analysis.

#### Text 21

Date	2008
Source	New York times

#### TEXT:

'later date.' // Last month, Ayman al-Zawahri, Al Qaeda's second in command, said in an online question-and-answer session that women could not join Al Qaeda. In response, a woman wrote on a password-protected radical Web site that 'the answer that we heard was not what we had hoped,' according to the SITE monitoring group, adding, 'I swear to God I will never leave the path and will not give up this course.' // The changing role of women in the movement is particularly apparent in Western countries, where **Muslim women** have been educated to demand their rights and Muslim men are more accustomed to treating them as equals. // Ms. El Aroud reflects that trend.' Normally in Islam the men are stronger than the women, but I prove that it is important to fear God -- and no one else,' she said.' It is important that I am a woman. There are men who don't want to speak out because they are afraid of getting into trouble. Even when I get into trouble'

#### Analysis:

As clear from the title the subject of the above text is Al-Qaeda and its activities. The text is an exposition of Muslim Women who are determined to be a part of Al-Qaeda and of those who live in the western countries and are given more rights over Muslim Women in Islamic countries.

In line (i) the name used 'Ayman al-Zawahri' refers to the direct nomination of social actors, who is associated to the act of declaring women not allowed in 'Al-Qaeda' in line (ii).

Whereas in line (ii) the phrase 'a women' and 'We heard was not what we had expected' in line (iii) the use of 'we' generalizes the answer given by 'a woman' to many 'Muslim women' hence creating their negative image to the world.

Also the use of terms like 'a password protected radical Website' and 'STTE Monitoring grop' in lines (ii) and (iii) positions to some secret activities taking place in the website of Al-Qaeda which are monitored by certain anonymous groups. The use of expression like site monitoring group hides all those set objectives which these groups are actually monitoring the sites for, also oly the suitable or criteria meeting context is revealed by these groups not what is positive in these sites. In line (iv) the respose of the Muslim Wokan 'I swear to God .....this course', shows the determination of Muslim women to their negative as this is associated to work for groups like Al-Qaeda which are labeled extremist by the west.

In contrast to the women willing to join Al-Qaeda, there is also another group of Muslim women which is shown as more sensible and effective, this group of is those women living in the western countries who enjoy equality and considered equal to men unlike to the practices in Islamic countries as mentioned in line (vi) and (viii).

Whereas, the lines (iv), (v) and (vi) are very crucial in the above text to discuss Muslim Women

representation the positioning in sentence number (v) is towards the education and training given to the Muslim Women to demand their rights. And 'men are accustomed to treating these as equal'. All these positive roles associated to 'Muslim women' and 'Muslim Men' are attributed to western countries or to put it the other way Western countries are giving Muslim Women and men sense of equality unlike the Islamic countries or Islamic laws as mentioned in line (vii) i.e. 'normally in Islam the men are..... Women'.

The rights given to the Muslim women in Islam are totally backgrounded in the above texts and clear binary of 'Self' and 'other' is created where 'self' is western countries doing good for Muslims Women and men and 'other' is Muslim Countries and groups, like Al-Qaeda performing all the illegal and unhealthy activities.

All this is done to draw the negative image of 'other' to the world and present 'self' as the most concerned and helpful hand which treats the human equally neglecting or excluding what problems even the native western women are suffering from and highlighting only what is required to put Muslims negatively.

## DISCUSSION:

The study has proven the media influence on identity construction. Muslims are seen as portrayed by the west media. There is a radical paradigm shift seen for Muslims identities changed diversely over the last few decades i.e. Muslims are being portrayed as terrorist, extremist, fundamentalist, chauvinist etc. by the west media. This negative portrayal of Muslims is however not always direct or explicit rather it sometimes is hidden and well entrenched in a given discourse. As in the above discourse Muslims are exposed negatively by their relation to their women. This study has though analyzed how the Muslim women are represented in the US newspapers it nevertheless presents them with their relation to the larger entities i.e. Muslim men and Islam.

The texts analyzed above are from different US newspapers i.e. Christian Science Monitor, San Francisco Chronicle, Atlanta Journal Constitution, Denver Post, New York Times, Houston Chronicle and Washington Post. In almost each of the texts Muslim Women are presented as the suppressed and depressed individuals of the Muslim society where Muslim men are dominating them by violating their rights. However, this portrayal seems to be completely biased and fabricated because in about all the Islamic states Muslim women are enjoying equal rights and are given due respect. This manipulated representation of the Muslim women seems to follow a clear objective of mortifying the entire Muslim community and Islam.

Moreover, the US attacks on many Islamic states are no more a secret, the entire world see it as 'War on Terror'. Maintaining a good image has always been one of the major targets of America and this target is well met by justifying all the vicious activities, America is involved in, through the help of media. For instance, if America is to attack on a state, its media will start putting up such stuff on air which ultimately will justify that attack. Media's role has always been influential in face saving and losing or in identity construction or destruction. And, the US print media has well played this role specifically with reference to Muslims and Islam. As all the attacks on Islamic states are justified by labeling it as "war on terror" also by portraying Muslims as jihadists, terrorists, extremists, tyrants, militants etc.

In the above study the representation of Muslim women is varied. In some of the texts they are presented with reference to their specific identities of 'Hijab', whereas in majority of the texts they are presented as suppressed individuals of the Muslim society. Text no. 1, 13, 14, 19, 20, 24 and 25 are from the newspaper Christian Science Monitor. Text no. 2 and 16 are from San Francisco Chronicle. Text no. 3, 4, 5 and 23 are from Atlanta Journal Constitution. Text no. 6 and 8 are from Denver post. The texts from New York Times are 7, 12, 15, 17 and 21. Text no. 9, 10 and 11 are from Houston Chronicle. And the texts from the newspaper Washington Post are 22 and 18.

i. The themes that have emerged from the above study are various, however the most significant one is the construction of binaries of 'self vs. others' and 'us vs. they'. In the year 2000 this binary construction can be seen in text no. 2. Wherein, 'Us' refers to western women who are less covered thus enjoy more healthy life according to the writer, and Muslim women who are referred to as 'they' are presented comparatively negative. These binaries of 'self vs. others' are further constructed in texts 3 and 7 in the year of 2001, wherein the role of west which refers to 'self' or 'us' is certainly presented very positive, whereas 'other' which refers to Muslim Men is presented as quite violent in terms of the exploitation of their women.

This binary construction continues to text no. 12, 14, 17, 20, 21 and 24 ranging from different years i.e. from 2002 to 2012. Whenever, social actors are presented in binaries of US and OTHER it follows a certain objective. In this study the objective of constructing these binaries remains the mortification of Islam and Muslims by putting up a comparison of Muslims to US. Islam has gain good popularity around the west and people are attracted to this religion, which consequently turns the west against Islam. Another reason is America's operations in different Muslim nations; to justify these operations and killings it uses media to hit the target of presenting the victims as guilty of offence. Hence, it retains the image of 'America's War against Terror.'

So, it can be said that representation of Muslim women in the US newspapers doesn't serve only a single purpose rather it compels to portray the negative image of Muslims and Islam. People tend to believe

whatever is presented to them, which is why the west is turning against Islam and Muslims. Moreover, there are fewer instances that one verifies the validity of the presented stuff and is compelled to believe the fabricated truth. Thus, the manipulation and construction of identities in a desired way ultimately affects people way of thinking.

- ii. The second important outcome or theme that has emerged is the presentation of Muslim Women in comparison or relation to Muslim men i.e. relational. The presentation of Muslim women in the analyzed texts is relational in many cases. For instance, Muslim women are not described in isolation rather are presented through a comparison and relation to the Muslim men. This relational representation of Muslim women can be seen in text no. 3, 4, 5 and 6 for the year of 2001. In the year of 2003 it is found in texts 13 and 14. Text 16 from 2004 and text 21 from 2008 also present the Muslim women relationally i.e. through their suppression by the Muslim men and Islam.

This relational presentation of Muslim women is to fulfill the set objective of portraying Muslims and Islam negatively to the world. And relational presentation of the social actors well serves the purpose of objective presentation of one's image. For instance, suppose one hates something and tells the world to start hating it equally. Now, this won't sound appropriate or applicable. But, if on the other hand the issue from within the hated entity is raised in front of the world manipulatively, the world will be compelled to believe the sketched image of 'other'. This remains the case with representation of Muslim Women in the above texts; they are presented to meet the objective of putting Muslims and Islam into the pessimistic zone.

- iii. The third important way Muslim Women are represented in the text is through 'Hijab'. It's worth mentioning here that 'Hijab' is negative in connotation in the above texts as it is referred to as the suppression of Muslim Women. However, this suppression associated to Hijab reflects only the west perceptions about it not it is a symbol of suppression in real. Rather, it protects the Muslim women from the evil considering them more precious and respectable. The texts which represent the Muslim Women through the specific identities of 'Hijab' are text no. 1 and 2 from the year 2000, 6 from 2001, 12 from 2002, 13 from 2003, 18 and 19 from the years 2005 and 2006 respectively, 22 from 2009 and text no. 23 and 24 from the years 2010 and 2011 respectively.

In all these instances Hijab is either referred to as a symbol of suppression or depicts the Muslim women as belonging to devout pessimistic groups in Islam. The question arises here is why is it so that the west criticizes 'Hijab' so much? The answer that emerges from the above analysis is that west or specifically the US tends to eradicate Muslim culture. This objective of the US seems to be the reason why west is against Hijab. Moreover, the texts which discuss Muslim women through their Hijab are actually embedded with the ideologies of the west. Since in US or any other western country there is no obligation for women to cover themselves for protection, it considers the Hijab privilege given to Muslim women as negative.

Not only Muslim women but the Islamic culture also is presented negatively. Every state has a freedom to follow its culture and traditions set on its religious grounds. But, US tends to target or criticize anybody because of the hegemonic relations it enjoys over the developing countries. This ideological attack on one's culture and religion badly affects people thinking. Every Muslim cannot be a terrorist and every Muslim woman cannot be a suppressed one, but the above manipulated representation of Muslim women presents them as a whole thus, affect their identity. Because of this reason Muslims and Muslim women are perceived in a desired way in the west.

- iv. The next important way Muslim women are presented in the US newspapers is through their religious practices. Now, very interestingly 'Hijab' which is criticized much in many of the texts, is on the other hand used to depict the ideal Muslim woman image. For instance if it is a Muslim woman speaking in favor of US objectives she is presented as with her Hijab identity to give due weightage to her objective inclusion. This contradiction is a very important clue about the manipulation of identities by the US media. The US print media thus constructs, deconstructs, reconstructs and manipulates the identities of Muslim women as per the requirements.

The texts which present Muslim women through their religious practices are 9, 10 and 11 from the year 2002, 13 and 18 from 2003 and 2005 respectively, text no. 20 from 2007, and text no. 23 and 24 from the year 2010 and 2011 respectively. In all the above instances, except for the year 2000 wherein the issue of conversion is discussed, Muslim women are presented with respect to a stereotypical image that west gives to them i.e. covered head to toe, veiled etc. In a nut shell a devout Muslim woman is referred to the one veiled head to toe. This description of Muslim women represents them as fundamentalists and Islam and Muslim men as extremists.

- v. The fifth theme which is established in the above analysis is the representation of Muslim women in relation to specific places and issues. For instance, text no. 5 presents Muslim women with relation to Algeria, 8 and 12 describes Muslim women and their condition in Afghanistan, Philippines and Tipton, text no. 15 describes Muslim women in India. Text 17 describes Muslim Women with reference to the prejudice between Iraq and America. Text 18 is about Moroccan society and issues of Muslims living there. Text no. 21 presents Muslim women under the issue of Al-Qaida. Lastly, the 25<sup>th</sup> text presents them with

reference to France.

In all these texts the presentation of Muslim women isn't the core agenda rather they are presented with reference to certain issues such as the war between America and Iraq, the cultural pull between the US and France, the fight between Al-Qaida and America, the problems between America and Afghanistan etc. Their representation is mainly as victims or instruments of the jihadist Muslims who are using Muslim women to meet their targets of standing against the west. Though the presentation of the Muslim women in these texts is less central, nevertheless it still fulfills the purpose of American print media which is to present Muslims as terrorists.

Moreover, these texts highlight the issues between America and different Islamic nations. The subsidiary inclusion of Muslim women helps to draw the desired sketch or meet the set objectives. However, the representation of Muslim women is well exploited in all these texts. In this study there are hardly a few texts which present a healthy image of the Muslim women. I will not say that they are directly presented negatively, but whatever presentation is given to them it represents them either as suppressed individuals of Muslim society or as victims of 'purdah obligation', 'Muslim men extremism' and 'Islamic fundamentalism'. It is the biased and fabricated representation of Muslim women to humiliate Islam and Muslims and attain fame for the western world.

Concluding all the discussion, it can be said that this cultural hit on Muslims and Islam through Muslim women and their Hijab practices is clearly west's propaganda against Islam. This study is conducted on the US newspapers however; it can be generalized to the entire US media and the perceptions of west about Muslim women, Muslim men and Islam. The picture of Muslim women given in these texts is quite a miserable one which is radically opposite to the reality. Moreover, Suppression of women isn't confined to Islam and Islamic nations only, instead there are greater instances of women suppression in the west than in the Islamic States.

The need of the hour is to analyze all the media elements that manipulate identities deliberately and effect people perception in a directed way. Also, the reasons behind this fabrication should be well explored so that truth can be disclosed and fabrication must be diminished. Moreover, in this era as media is prevailing everywhere, it affects a large number of people around the world. Same is the case with the above study, Muslims are presented in a desired way by depicting a miserable picture of Muslim women. West would believe what its media presents, thus the truth remains unexplored. And Muslims are seen through the eye of west media.

#### **SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Following are some suggestions and recommendations in light of the above analysis.

- i. Media should not be allowed to manipulate the identities of others in a desired way. Also there must be a complete check and balance on news that the media produces about other countries, religions or cultures.
- ii. No state should have the right to criticize the culture of any other state, also the religion must never be attacked to fulfill the hidden objectives and humiliate other nations.
- iii. Government of every country/state/nation must make sure that the rights of other nations are not exploited through fabrication and manipulation of identities by media, be it any kind of media.
- iv. The political grudges and hegemonic prejudices should not be practiced through cultural or religious attacks. Rather, a law of protection should be maintained for protecting the identities of others from the manipulation of media.
- v. There should be a clear boundary line for all the world media which must not be crossed. Religious and cultural practices should be considered sacred and media must not use or manipulate them to achieve the desired outcomes.
- vi. No state of the world, now be it the super power or be it the third world country, should be allowed to exploit one's identity in a desired way.
- vii. Media should be obliged to publish only what's real not what's limited to some rare cases and is presented after the fabrication of the real.
- viii. Lastly, if some intercultural news or news about other nations are to produce, then there must be strict filtration to publish the truth only and to not attack the nations culturally because of political wars.

Keeping in view the limitations of the above study there are some suggestions which must be catered if any further research is planned on the similar topic. Firstly, the use of corpus to perform critical discourse analysis is really an effective and novel approach, so if specialized corpora are built just for the research purposes then there would be no authenticity and accessibility issues. Secondly, comparisons between the native and foreign corpora can be made to see how the identities are sketched in line with the west culture. Thirdly, as this study is confined to the US print media only so the generalization is limited, however for future research both electronic and print media can be worked on. Lastly, I would urge to build our own corpora so that good quality work is produced and people are facilitated with plenty of opportunities of research.

## CONCLUSION

Muslims have been sketched differently as per the changing perception of western countries about them, and this sketching of Muslims in a desired way has influenced their image around the western world. Media portrays such images to the people that are created out of hegemonic and power relations, and are helping one in maintaining the wanted image of others across nations and countries. This study has explored the role of media in sketching the identities of Muslims women and how it affected and is still affecting the larger entities i.e. Muslims and Islam. People believe whatever media presents to them, and when this presentation is by one of the influential countries or by the countries which are enjoying power statures and hegemonic relations, the counterpart is strongly affected. This has been happening with Muslims and their portrayal. For the past few decades, they are presented negatively through different techniques and influential involvement of the media.

It is accepted that not only the west media but the media around the world are involved in identity construction and manipulation. However, the effects of this manipulation vary according to the prestige and hegemonic relationships that a state holds. For instance, if India produces something negative against Muslims or Islam it will not affect people as severely as it will if it is produced by the world power state like America, also it will affect greater number of people than the former case. Although, Muslim women are not presented directly negative but are used to criticize Muslim men and Islam. However, this objective presentation of Muslim Women also affects their identities in a negative way.

In conclusion it is advisable to have complete check and balance on whatever the media publishes and also the selective presentation of one's image should not be generalized to the complete entities. All the poor cannot be the thieves similarly all the Muslims cannot be terrorists. There must be a clear line between the fake and the real. No media in the world should be allowed to play with identities of others so that this identity mortification crime can be stopped.

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