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Ahmed's *Journey into Islam*: A Critical Response to the Stereotypical Representation of Muslim Women and Islamic Attires in Western Discourse

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Abstract

Muslim women in western literary and non-literary discourse have been portrayed stereotypically as uneducated, submissive, family-bound, segregated, confined to the harem, doubly marginalized and a threat for western ideology. Akbar Ahmed's Journey into Islam demonstrates Muslim women and their roles in Muslim societies based on different geographical contexts. This article attempts to highlight and challenge the stereotypical representation of Muslim women and the distortion of their social attire, such as the veil in media and academic representations. The veil is interpreted as a fundamentalist practice which is, from a Muslim perspective, a defensive mechanism and an empowering gesture. This article explores the true picture of Muslim women and their active roles in various walks of life.

Key Words: Islam, Misrepresentation, Muslim Women, Veil, Stereotypes

Introduction

Western intelligentsia and media represented Muslim women as mysterious creatures, passive and tradition-bound, restricted to their homes, and removed from social sectors. Mastro observes that "the American academics and media portrayed Muslim women in a set of heuristics" (2016, p. 2). [Koprowski \(2011\)](#) explicates western views about Muslim women as "Muslim men beat and harass their women to wear *hijab*, keep them in segregation and oppress them to adopt the traditional roles of Muslim woman so they may subjugate her" (pp. 4-5). *The New York Times* (April 2, 2002) reported that "Muslim women do not like veil. Men force them to wear *hijab* and hide which causes skin rashes and hair loss. They kept her in *purdah*". The westernized picture of Muslim women presented by western

discourse demonstrates the marginalization and imposed patriarchal rules by the Islamic societies. Such representations are the fabricated ones. This can be substantiated in the light of [Aftab's \(2011\)](#). "West demoted Muslim women as intrinsically repressed, slavish, and a dismal subject to male craving and fantasy. West covered such representations with a mask of reality so they may look natural. Such self-constructed representations have their roots in the myths about Muslim women in the West" (pp. 39-40). She further goes on: "literary representations are actually the reflection of socio-political and cultural fabrics of the societies" (p. 53). This view of representation refers to the reflection which is not entirely propagandist. But the representations of Islam and Muslims by the Western

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discourse and media are based upon certain propaganda. And in Said's views, such representations are manufactured within political context" (1997, p. 49).

Literature Review

Post-9/11 Endorsements of the Fabricated Violent Image of the Muslims

After 9/11, Muslims were not treated normally like other passengers at airports and in other public spheres. They had to pass through serious investigations just because of their Islamic identity and attires. Passengers with Muslim distinctiveness are regarded as suspicions that they are involved in terrorist and violent activities. They are perceived as a great threat for other passengers at airports and other places. A person with Muslim documentation is perceived as a terrorist who can blast at any moment and kill other travelers. Behind such qualms, there are the portrayals of both males and females Muslims by the west as terrorists, extremists, violent, and suicide-bombers. In Abolfazl's views: post-9/11 novels such as *terrorist* (2006), *Falling Man* (2007), and *Prayers for the Assassin* (2006), endorsed the view of the violent actions to Muslims; that Quran is the book that preaches violence (2015, p. 10); that Quran is a manual which teaches the bomb-making process, and Islam preaches terror ([Naqvi, 2010, p. 108](#)). Nurullah comments: the media in the post-9/11 world attached terrorism with Islam; violence, anarchy, fundamentalism, and extremism to Muslims. The movies, dramas, cartoons, games, and talk shows on western television screens and the internet presented Muslims as barbarians, fanatics, rebels, anti-west, terrorists and anti-modern (2010, p. 3). [Laboni \(2014\)](#) avows that terrorism has been a worldwide issue and non-Muslims have also been involved in it, but only Muslims are suspected whenever a case reports (p. 78). This can be substantiated under the light of Murtaza's proem Complementarity (2021):

A white man cannot be a terrorist, not even in New Zealand and Canada;

A Buddhist cannot be a terrorist, not even in Burma;

A Hindu cannot be a terrorist, not even in Indian Gujrat;

A Jew cannot be a terrorist, not even in Ghaza;

Only a Muslim can be a terrorist,
Anywhere!

Anytime!! ([Aatir, 2021](#))

MacLeod's *Beginning Postcolonialism* highlights the prejudice against Arab Muslims, which have been presented as 'violent Arabs' (2000, p. 44). Television has disseminated four stereotypes about Muslims: 'they are superbly rich; they are primitive, barbaric, uncivilized and uncultured; they are lunatic sexually; and they are involved in terrorist activities' ([Karim, 2003](#), p. 110). The representation of Muslims with such striking deleterious associations through books, movies, media, and television screens generated the problems for Muslims who travel throughout the world. [Tari \(2012\)](#) stated that Muslim women have often been depicted as nude or partially clothed in hundreds of Western works of art. They have been portrayed as immodest, untrustworthy, submissive, uneducated, family-oriented, arrogant, and active creatures of sexual pleasure who held the key to a myriad of mysterious delights. They have been reported as oppressed subhuman creatures that live in the state of abject slavery imposed allegedly by Islamic rules (p. 5).

The representations of women, constructed by writers like Burton, reflected a standard Victorian prejudice, namely that women were inferior to men; and that Muslim women were doubly inferior, being both women and Muslims. The Muslim woman is no more than a machine as she makes no distinction between one man and another man (Shabinard, 2015, p. 24). Abolfazl's *Representation of Islam in Post-9/11 English Novels* states that Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) has promoted the misconception of Islam to distort the message and purpose of Islam. He decontextualized verses from the Holy Quran to justify the misrepresentation of Muslim women as unclean and polluted (2015, p. 10).

The Washington Times (Nov. 9, 2002) highlighted that Muslim woman's dressing (*hijab*, *niqab*, and veil) had been discussed intensively in western media after 9/11. Julie (2013) commented that the western media sees the *hijab* as evil and primitive, which hides women's abilities to take part in society. It is linked with fundamentalism, and unveiling is regarded as a sign of modernity and gender equality in the West (pp. 42-43). Cope says in

Tearing Away the Veil: face visibility is the primary condition for security. A woman with a veil cannot be identified and looks like a shadow when she is among other people (*The New York Times*, May 5, 2010). If a Muslim woman wants to sit equally with a western woman, she must make her body visible (p. 43).

Theoretical Framework

Said's *Covering Islam* (1997) explicates the Westerners' lack of understanding and knowledge about Islam and Islamic culture. West perceived Islam as opposed to modernity and 'news' of hostile nature. Political parties, media, and academics regard Islam as a significant threat to western civilization (p. 144). The primary objective of western literary and non-literary discourse was to dehumanize Muslim men and women and associate devilish characteristics with them. Muslim women have been represented as immodest, arrogant, terrorists, and primitive. (1997, p. xii). Said further states: "The misrepresentation of Islam, Islamic culture, and Muslim women circulated among white people and generated fear among them. Islam which was the religion of peace, west started to associate it with violence" (1997, p. xii).

During the last three decades as Said avows, western writers, journalists, and intelligentsia have given a lot of coverage to Islam. They have not studied Islam rather categorized and portrayed it negatively (1997, p. li). Most of western reporters and journalists of CNN, Fox News, CBS, and many other channels reported Muslim women as a threat to security issues due to their social attire. The ethnocentric western media spread propaganda about them and continued to report them with stereotypes. A new wave of Anti-Islamism emerged in Hollywood cinema, and it represented them as marginalized, threat, terrorists, and obsessed with money (1997, p. xi). Western Media did not deliver unbiased news about Muslims. Communication media such as television, radio, magazines, newspapers, films and the internet follow certain ideologies. Said argues: "News about security issues due to Muslim women have been framed under some political principles" (p. 37). For the western news agencies, Muslim women have become news that is telecast on western media through news headlines and talk shows. Muslim women are the consumer of

news who have started to know about themselves through the images and information manufactured by the west.

Representations of Muslim women have been constructed under the influence of western corporations, governments, and media, which play a vital role in portraying Muslim women with stereotypes. The notions that Muslim women are family bounded, backward, submissive, and segregated have been converted into reality. This self-constructed reality based upon prejudice and stereotypes has been propagated by western literary, non-literary authors, and media journalists. In Said's view, such reality is fabricated and aims to dehumanize Muslims (p. 162).

Analysis

Propaganda against Veil

In the contemporary era, a new wave of prejudice against Muslim women has emerged, and the attire of Muslim women is being criticized in western art and media more extensively. *The Washington Times* reported that the attire of Muslim women (wearing *hijab*, *niqab*, and veil) is a prominent topic to discuss in western media, particularly after 9/11 (November 9, 2002). West has associated the wearing of *hijab* with security issues. Julie writes: 'veil is an evil and primitive tradition in the eyes of west and western media has associated it with religious fundamentalism and security threats' (2013, p. 42). In the United States and Europe, Muslim women who wear veils face discrimination and adverse remarks. *The New York Times* reported that "a woman who wears veil is unable to identify herself because she looks like a shadow when she is in the company of other people" (May 5, 2010). Ahmed counters such misrepresentation of Islamic attire and sees *the hijab* as a symbol of cultural identity. Syrian minister of expatriates, Bouthaina Shaaban, in an interview with Ahmed, commented upon the question of "women's place in Islam" as "western women are not more active and liberated than Muslim women". She propagated her views about the *hijab* by recalling her lecture at the United States, in which she stopped herself during lecture and concealed her hair with a *hijab* and then delivered the remaining lecture. She argued to Ahmed: "actually, my purpose was to show

that *hijab* does not mark any difference. My mind under the *hijab* is still the same" (2007, p. 120).

The western discourse has reduced Muslim women to the veil, which has become an icon of cultural primitiveness. A Muslim woman wearing a *hijab* seems to be unfit in modern society. The lifting of the veil is considered as modernization. To get a place in western modern society, she would have to remove the veil and made her body visible. Muslim women are labeled as 'docile' and 'tradition bound'. Some of the Western writers and media have scandalized the veil. According to Papanek: "Veil is like a clumsy piece of garment that Muslim women use to hide their face and *burqa* is something which resembles tent wore by Muslim women to hide from head to toe. Designs of veil and *burqa* get change with the change in fashion" (1988, pp. 64-65). [Kwok \(2002\)](#) avows that 'during the war in Afghanistan, western media reported 'veil' as the embodiment of the Islamic institution's intrinsic oppressiveness' (p. 30). Hasan, in his *The Orientalization of Gender (2005)* avows that the West has dehumanized Muslim societies and Muslim women by presenting them as passive, shackled, and secluded. Their identity has been calcified into veiled, subhuman, and subaltern (p. 27). [\(Jan Mohamed 1995\)](#) in *The Economy of Manichean Allegory* opines that behind the narrative of veiled women, there was a western stance to establish "moral superiority" and to marginalize Muslim women as "morally inferior" (p. 23). According to Aftab's *Gender Politics*, "The Muslim woman is oppressed by male and is confined to *the harem*. The veiled Muslim woman is absolutely segregated and secluded. Such assumptions sustain fascination and exist in the stories of Muslim women constructed by west" (2011, p. 38).

According to *The New York Times*: Muslim men have imposed *hijab* over their women while they do not like it. They use to wear *hijab* forcefully (April 2, 2002). In the west *hijab* is considered as a symbol of backwardness, marginalization, coercion, and subjugation, which provokes inflexibility. But in Ahmed's views, it has not been imposed by Muslim men rather, it is an Islamic tradition, and it empowers Muslim women and maintains their identity. Wearing a *hijab* is the teaching of Islam, and it is for the protection of Muslim women. It can be seen evidently in Holy Quran:

"O Prophet! Tell your wives, and your daughters, and the women of the believers, to lengthen their garments. That is more proper, so they will be recognized and not harassed. Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" (Surah Al-Ahzab 33: 59). "And tell the believing women to restrain their looks, and to guard their privates, and not display their beauty except what is apparent thereof" (Surah Al-Noor 24: 31).

Terman states that "western media reported veil of Muslim women as a symbol of oppression. She adds that Islamic culture believes in misogynist thoughts and has discriminations against women. The role of women in such societies is to just totalize the oppression" (2017, p. 6). This can be encountered through Ahmed's remarks as he appreciates the Muslim women who wear *hijab* as it is part of Islamic traditions. A woman with a *hijab* can easily be identified as a "Muslim woman". Ahmed opines: "I encountered Muslim women in the United States who were wearing *hijab*. I feel proud that they are keeping their identity and religious values" (2007, p. 121). Muslim women, Hasan proclaims, wear *hijab* to distinguish themselves from multicultural society as a religious, moral, and ideological principle. The slogan of "liberating" or "lifting the veil" seems to have a resemblance with the slogan of "civilizing the others," which caused economic-cultural exploitation and dispossession of the natives (2005, p. 48).

Misrepresentation of Muslim Woman: Subhuman, Immodest, and Tradition-Bound

In western ideology, religion is a personal affair of every individual. But Islam, Islamic values and affairs have been politicized frequently in western discourse. The western literary texts, media, movies and reality shows have represented Muslim women as immodest, hypocritical, partially clothed, uneducated, arrogant, immodest, submissive and tradition restricted. Ahmed highlights the western notion about Muslim women that they feel comfort in western attire, which they use to wear while living in western societies. They can move wherever they want as they are not bounded. In their homelands they live in segregation and their societies demand modesty from them (2007, p. 83). In Ahmed's views

these are fabricated representations constructed by the west, and behind them lies no truth.

The western media reported that Muslim women living in Muslim countries are deprived of basic human rights. Their rights are violated, and they are not considered equal to men. Media has presented Muslim societies as a misogynist. Muslim women living in Saudi Arabia, Iran, Jordan, Syria, Pakistan and Malaysia appeared as subjugated in western discourse. The hypocrisy and prejudice of American media towards Muslim women can be seen evidently through Terman's remarks, 'Muslim women in Lesotho and Solomon Islands are more oppressed and deprived of women rights, but they are not highlighted by the American media because in these countries Muslim women are in minorities' (2017, p. 2). It is the duplicity of American media which presents Muslim women living in the Muslim world as marginalized while, on the other hand, the non-Muslim states where Muslim women are underprivileged are never reported by the US media. It shows the prejudice of American media against Muslim women. Ahmed counters such stereotypical representations of Muslim women as he demonstrates: "western media portrayed Muslim women negatively. Instead of seeing them in miserable conditions as western media had always depicted, throughout the journey, we found Muslim women independent, self-confident, active, and impressionistic. They are fully aware of the world around them" (2007, p. 123). Ahmed further argues: the media has reported that Muslim women are facing gender inequality while they are enjoying relatively good rights in their countries. The stories broadcast by the western media played a pivotal role in shaping stereotypes about Muslim women. In Rochelle's views: "The portrayals of Muslims women are efforts to defame Muslim women as a cultural threat to western ideas of freedom, equality and tolerance" (2017, p. 6).

The western discourse and media have presented Muslim women as: ignorant, victimized, domestic, inferior, sexually corrupt, crude, and poor, while on the other hand, Western women have been portrayed and reported as modern, educated, superior, active, self-dependent and having control over sexualities. [Hasan \(2005\)](#) sees it as self-presentation of the west and a stereotypical

representation of the Islamic women by the west (p. 29). The western discourse depicts that western women are conscious of their rights while Muslim women are meek recipients of patriarchal ascendancy. Muslim women are restricted to their homes and are not allowed to get an education and work in social sectors. This can be substantiated in the light of Mastro's remarks, "the American academics and media portrayed Muslim women in a set of heuristics. The fact is that they know little about Muslim women" (2016, p. 2). Ahmed challenges the misrepresentations of Muslim women with a keen observation of Islamic societies. During the excursion, the interactions with Muslim women from diverse geographical societies had very positive impressions on the whole team of Ahmed. Jonathan, one of the team members, in his interaction with Muslim women at Kuala Lumpur (Malaysia), states; 'I found Muslim women very polite, smart, inquisitive and modern. They were neither oppressed nor submissive at all. They were getting an education and were determined about their bright future. They were religious but adjusted themselves to the globalized world. This was the real image of Muslim women that we witnessed through our journey' (2007, p. 123). Jonathan's interaction with Muslim women and his views present the true picture of Muslim women. They are: getting education, self-determining, enjoying their rights and are working on equal grounds with men.

The western fantasies about Muslim women's harem and seraglio portrayed them with putatively carnal nature, promiscuous, and enticement. In western discourse, Muslim women, Hasan writes, are preoccupied with sex who spend time for their sexual intrigue. The role of women is just a chattel which accomplishes the sexual gratification of the men' (2005, p. 31). Western intelligentsia portrayed Muslim women as a creature that longs for sexual desires. Literary texts such as [Kidwai \(2000\)](#) cites Hood's *A Tale of the Harem* and Julia's *The Romance of the Harem* have presented Muslim women fancifully. They have been described as "sexual licentiousness, debaucheries" and "lecherous" (p. 9). These are the stereotypical representations just and can be substantiated through [Said's \(1994\)](#) remarks as the political maneuvering behind the western fantasy about Muslim *harem* and patriarchy (p. 95).

The pictures of Muslim women as presented by Ahmed are entirely different from those which have been reported by western discourse. The remarks of Frankie (one of Ahmed's team members) appear to authenticate Ahmed's views as she said, 'Muslim women are enthusiastic, and their active role in all walks of life can be observed. They are determined about their future which will allow them to accomplish any dream they want. They explained Islam to me, which shows that they are in touch with their religion, but at the same time, they are playing their roles in the globalized societies' (2007, p. 123).

Role of Muslim Women in Islamic Societies

The European colonist writers misrepresented Muslim women. Said argues that Rudyard Kipling and other colonialist writers have viewed Indian Muslim women as lusty, elderly widows, importunate, and prostitutes (1994, p. 165). The American media portrayed Muslim women in the same way in which colonialist writers presented. But the pictures of Muslim women in Islamic states are entirely different from the images which western intelligentsia and media have represented. Ahmed sees Muslim women as educated, cooperative, celebrating rights, and showing their worth in all walks of life. Benazir Bhutto, the former Prime Minister of Pakistan, proclaimed in an interview with Ahmed; "Pakistani Muslim women are independent, competent, having educational, social, political and cultural rights and they are playing their vital roles in every arena of life. For them, Hazrat Khadija (wife of Muhammad [peace be upon him]), Hazrat Fatima (R.A.) (daughter of Muhammad [peace be upon him]) and Hazrat Zainab (R.A.) (sister of Hazrat

Hussein, the grandson of Muhammad [peace be upon him] martyred at Karbala) are the role models" (2007, p. 124). Ahmed and Frankie interacted with and addressed Muslim women in Jordan and found them polite and well-educated. Ahmed observes: "In Jordan I found Muslim women strong, cooperative and knowledgeable regarding worldly issues and policies. They were aware of the events happening across the globe. They appreciated inter-faith dialogue and efforts to restore the peace of the planet" (2007, p. 124).

Conclusion

To conclude, one cannot get the definitional trait 'good' unless he follows the western set of values and embrace western subjugation without reservations. The Muslim women have been presented as arrogant, segregated, marginalized selfish, flimsy and deceitful contrary to western women as honest, strong, and self-sacrificing. The Muslim women who wear *hijab* have been reported as oppressed by the patriarchy. This research paper counters such stereotypical representations and asserts that Muslim women in Islamic states are holding not only homes but public bureaus as well. They are not restricted to their homes. They carry *hijab* tradition as their religious and cultural identity marker and are working as harbingers of socio-economic, cultural and educational change in Muslim societies. They hold deep knowledge of Islam, the world and are working in all the public sectors such as judiciary, politics, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs etc. These educated, independent, strong and self-motivated women are true pictures of Islamic societies willfully ignored by Western representations.

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