A Reception of Muslim Images in Magazines: British Residents View the Identities of Muslim Women

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Abstract. In the context of multi-ethnic Britain, the major concern lies in the diversity and complexity of Muslims living in the West, which somehow is misrepresented in the western media as a frozen, static population, fixed in time and space. This misrepresentation dominates mainstream media through the hegemony of western superiority. The operation and role of Muslim media organisations are still under-researched yet potentially constitute an integral part of accommodating the minority population within the wider society. This paper discusses on the reception of images published in two British Muslim magazines by taking views from Muslims and non-Muslims into account. The results show that both groups recognize the identities of British Muslims via visual representations in the Muslim media and that the representations challenge the mainstream images of Muslims.

1 Introduction

Multiculturalism in Britain, according to Aziz [1] was the result of post-war immigration. Historically after the Second World War, people from the post-colony countries were encouraged to migrate to England to fulfil work demands in the pottery and textile industries. Immigrants from the formerly colonized countries such as India and Pakistan arrived in the UK rightly after the countries gained independence in 1947. The number of immigrants dramatically increased between 1965 and 1972 when the flux of East African immigrants, particularly from Uganda and Kenya entered the UK unskilled-labour market. Gradually, the community of immigrants grew larger when families from the original countries joined in British settlement.

It has been suggested that the politics of racism in Britain has now moved from biological descendants to cultural inheritance. Yasmin Ali [2] points out that at the beginning of the 1980s, 'black community' was a normalised concept of anti-racism that preclude other non-black communities. At that time, early Muslim communities who came from the Indian subcontinent were known as the 'Asian community' [2]. The campaign of War on Terror, nonetheless, has ignited new racism of Islamophobia, which Meer & Modood [3] argue as a form of 'cultural racism'. This new racism modifies the British

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discourse on racialized minorities. It has been transformed from the racism of "colour" in the 1950s and 1960s; to "race" in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s; to "ethnicity" in the 1990s; and to "religion" in the new millennium [4,5]. This claim will now be examined in relation to media representations of Islam and Muslims in the UK.

2 Literature review

In examining the media representation of Muslims in the British context, Edward Said's critique [6] on Orientalism provides an important background to understand this. Said argued that *Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"* (p.2). It often involves seeing the Oriental/Arab/Eastern/Muslim culture as exotic, backward, inferior, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. From this point of view, the West has defined themselves as having such the opposite qualities to the Orients as modern, intelligent, civilized, and superior. Most often than not, the West projects inaccurate and stereotyped cultural representation of the East.

Many researchers have argued that there is homogeneity in the media representation of Muslims. For example, in a research that highlights the degree of Muslim visibility in British print media before and after the 9/11 attack, Poole [7] observes that issues concerning British Muslims exhibited continuation of certain dominant discourses, which link Muslims with terrorism, extremism and cultural difference over 15 years (1994-2008). Likewise, Elgamri [8] indicates that the coverage of world important events in four decades – the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Salman Rushdie Affair (1989), the massacre of foreign tourists in Egypt (1997), and the 9/11 attack (2001) – cumulatively universalise Islam as a monolithic entity and synonymous with religious hysteria. Recent study by Baker et al. [9] also proves that the British press associate the word 'Muslim' in their reporting with conflict by putting Islam as problematic and central to aggression. The prolonged homogenization of bad Muslims by the press therefore has a tendency to shape a reality of this population.

In a more recent study, Allen [10] concludes that all visible manifestations of Islamic attire including hijab, niqab, abaya, or jilbab has been perceived as 'wrong, problematic and threatening.' Henceforth, every devoted Muslim woman has now become a construction of 'otherness.' "The veil has become an image of otherness, of a refusal to integrate and an example of the 'failings' of multiculturalism" [11]. Indeed, Muslim women have been politicised in a gendered representation to reinforce the centrality of white culture in the discourse of multiculturalism.

For the purpose of this research, the major concern lies in the diversity and complexity of Muslims living in the West, which somehow is misrepresented in the western media as a frozen, static population, fixed in time and space. In this regards, Said [12] urged for more subjective and critical fashion in evaluating the Muslim populations. So far, however, there is no reliable evidence of the diversity of Muslim population in the mainstream western media and no informed data on how people perceive their heterogeneity. To investigate the heterogeneity of Muslim population, the paper will focus on the reception of Muslim women images in British Muslim magazines among Muslim and non-Muslim informants.

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3 Focus groups

In this study, the focus groups were composed of full-time students at Staffordshire and Keele Universities[†] as well as part-time students at Suyuti Institute. To examine the reception of images, data were gathered from focus group discussions, which is distinguished between Muslim and non-Muslim participants, who are comprised of British and international citizens. They compose 36 respondents. Throughout the discussion, pseudo names are used to keep the confidentiality of the participants.

A total of 6 images were selected from *Emel* and *Sisters* magazines to stimulate discussions on Muslim women. The selection of pictures was made on the basis of multiple appearances of Muslims where participants could see the women in full. Four images are pictured singly (Picture 1A, Picture 1C, Picture 1D, and Picture 1E), one as part of a pair (Picture 1B), and one in a group (Picture 1F) respectively. The pictures encompass depictions of women generally in private and public domains from both magazines. From the selection, it was expected to gain an overview of Muslim women from the participants' perspective. The participants were asked how they interpreted these images. How they defined the women? Did they find them positive or negative, and why? Did the images have an impact on a multicultural society?

4 Findings and Discussions

In the context of Muslims living in British society, Meer [13] observes that Muslim consciousness is a dynamic phenomenon that can be interpreted from an intersectional approach of theology and sociology. In other words, Muslim identity comes into existence within an interplay of religious and ethno-cultural elements. This intersection may provide an explanation about the Muslim presence in Britain.

The manifestation of Muslimness emerged in all focus group discussions concerning the images in Muslim media. Four sub-themes were observed in the group interviews, namely ethnic diversity, religious identity, dimensional visibility, and incorporation into western society.

Diverse ethnicity: All participants from both Muslim and non-Muslim groups identify the Muslim community as colour-blind and inclusive of all races. The results were consistently obtained from the participants when they were asked what they thought of all Muslim women images in general. For Muslim groups, Muslim women are not identifiable by their race or skin colours.

> *Fizzy: You can show the woman can be anyone from any colour, any culture, any society, any background.*

Another non-Muslim participant perceived racial diversity as a feature of a multicultural society such as Britain.

> *Deevan: First, I think every picture has been pretty much seen in different race. Let say white male, white female each of them seen before, it's all part of normal life I've seen. That could be a model of someone else. So I think they are all pretty much in the standard of culture here and fit in to the culture of England.*

Religious identity: The next important theme that has been frequently discussed is religious identity. By realizing the dress code of Muslim women should be modest, all agree that regardless of their skin colours or ethnicities, the hijab is the first identification for a Muslim woman. To one Muslim participant, hijab acts as an identity marker that constitutes her personality as an obedient Muslim.

> *Shereen: To me the picture does not have facial feature (Picture 4A). It's kind of that woman is defined by the hijab. She doesn't seem double personality because she's not smiling, without expression and the fact that it's all faded away, have face a kind of conscious Muslim, she's wearing hijab.....kind of getting a personality from that.*

The view that hijab is a symbol of identity for Muslim women was affirmed by non-Muslim respondents.

> *Ember: (Picture) 1A, if I am saying correctly, it does seem a police officer. However, A representing the Muslim culture. They put a hijab on, they have a headscarf on to show their religion.*

To non-Muslim participants, hijab is only a manifest symbol of religion. They held a view that the variegated images of women shows that the religion and the hijab do not stop the women from participating in society.

> *Isaac: I think what they're trying to do by these photographs is it shows that it doesn't really make any difference whether not to wear scarves or what your religion is, you can just...I mean, you would just functional as society does.*

Dimensional visibility: Besides the hijab, the majority of participants also commented on the diverse appearances of Muslim women in the presented images. They observed that Muslim women are represented in a continuum of the veil-less, headscarf and full-faced

veil. Muslim participants consider this continuum as a positive representation of Muslim women to show the freedom they have when they appear in public.

> *Mareesa: Well, pic 1C I could see myself in there. It's a young Muslim girl and I can see likes fashion at the same time she likes to follow her religion so by putting an identity on her that she's Muslim practising. Pic 1D as the niqabi I mean masyaAllah, a lot of Muslim sisters are wearing the niqab and working all time and I really respect that they are struggling on that. So I'm thinking that's something else that represents our society today. Pic1F is the woman without hijab but that doesn't mean she is not Muslim and also you do not know how her relationship with her god but she still a Muslim and she is also one of the part of our society.*

The same view was shared by non-Muslim participants alike. For the image of unveiled woman, one participant perceived her as sociable and adopting a western appearance.

> *Valerie: In general, I think it shows Muslim women in a variety of settings, variety roles, it shows diversity within the religion that in D a woman could be completely veiled or B like very social, western.*

Incorporation into western society: Muslim incorporation has been rigorously discussed in two aspects – their contributions towards British society (labour market participation); and their physical attributes. The participants on the whole demonstrated that all images presented in the focus group sessions are representing Muslim women as part of British society. Through a portrayal of Muslim women in different roles and contexts, Muslim groups regarded this as a contribution towards society, thus being part of the society they work for. As one participant said:

> *Shah: Going back to our pictures what they represent, they do different sort of activities and different roles whether the police woman, driving instructor, or politician or even a mother at home.*

The same view was identified within non-Muslim groups. They recognize Muslim women's existence in multicultural Britain as having a normal life like others, pursuing careers and without over emphasizing their religious identity.

> *Jason: I think if they would share images more like A and F, that would be different. Because I think both, when you say about multicultural society, they show people getting on and living a lot, doing a job without regards necessary like overwhelmingly to their religion. I think one of the things what multicultural things should be, involved in and to respect with each other, that's not what to be a specification of the white, Christian majority.*

Besides having a job, participants also observe that the way the women dress demonstrates a union of Islamic and western styles, through a combination of headscarves with pants and shirts. The dress meets a normative standard:

> *Asma: Just to say that in a comparison, if you can hold the pictures except for 1D, it seems that all of them are sort of conforming to the western standard. Even 1B, I guess she's a mother but technically she's still working, sort of the western kind of civilization like all women are independent in everything coz they work. 1A she's working. She's a Muslim woman but obviously she's wearing a uniform. 1C she's wearing western clothing. 1E she's an academic and she's still wearing English clothing. 1F they're all wearing English clothes.*

For some non-Muslim participants, Islam is seen as non-western and strange to British culture, so the incorporation into western society which is indicated through a sartorial range is positive.

> *Sita: 1C is really, really cool representational cultural harmonisation. You can see someone who is embracing the religious identity and also the modern western fashion and I think that's really cool because it's kind of like saying you don't have to be of any extreme and take one of the middle spots of the bar.*

5 Conclusion

One major finding is manifest in the focus group discussions. It is apparent that the reception of Muslim women imagery receives a quite similar response from Muslim and non-Muslim participants in the discussion of the manifestations of Muslimness. They all recognize the British Muslim consciousness as having a blended identity of being Muslim and British. All images presented during the focus groups cognitively resonate with the participants' knowledge.

The fact that Muslim women have an heterogeneous identity is congruent with Meer's [13] thesis on the Muslim consciousness. The Muslimness is constituted within dynamic categories of religiosity, culture, ethnicity, sexuality, personality, economic status and so forth. Although religious identification was seen as a problem by egalitarians and a threat to multiculturalism [14], intersected categories of Muslim identification have been recognized by all participants and this undermined a claim that Muslims are not compatible with British society.

All participants generally agree that Muslims and non-Muslims are similar and lead normal lives, thus blurring the boundary between the Muslim community and the wider society. The boundary between 'us' and 'them', 'we' and 'others' seems to be lessened in the discussions. In other words, the boundary of Muslimness is becoming less obvious, hence showing a tendency to integrate with the majority.

The majority of respondents perceived that the representation of Muslim women in the two magazines extenuates the dichotomy of superiority and inferiority, the gap between the West and the East. To them, the Muslim consciousness of maintaining Islamic identity while at the same time conforming to western standards is negotiated in the magazines by the construction of hyphenated identity. Muslim media construct what Edward Said [12] suggested:

'Rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow.'

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