

“Saving” Muslim women and fighting Muslim men: Analysis of representations in *The New York Times*

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Abstract: This study analyzed representations of Muslim men and women in *The New York Times* between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2003. Stories about Muslim women living in non-Western countries were often stories about political violence where they were represented as victims of violence and Islamic practices. Representations of Muslim women were also marked by a continual obsession with the veil. Muslim women were often portrayed as victims in need of Western liberation, which was sometimes defined narrowly as the exercise of individual choice in the purchase and use of consumer goods such as nail polish, lipsticks and high-heeled shoes. Articles on Muslim men were often about Islamic resurgence, terrorism and illegal immigration with details about “resumes of holy warriors” and “manuals of killing.” However, *The New York Times* also performed a watchdog role by highlighting violation of civil rights of Muslims living in the United States and hate crimes committed against them after the September 11 attacks. Such stories, however, were rarely able to resist the dominant representations of Muslim men as violent and dangerous and Muslim women as victims of oppression. The dominant images of both Muslim men and women served the same purpose: They established the need to intervene to rescue the women and control the men.

Keywords: Representations; Muslim women; liberation; modernity; Muslim men; terrorists; illegal immigrants; Western intervention.

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Viewing mediated representations of both men and women may be considered by some to be a truly feminist exercise as it is both critical and inclusive. The purpose of this paper is to identify and compare representations of Muslim men and women in *The New York Times* between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2003, a period that witnessed both the war in Afghanistan in 2001 and the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003. In both the

wars, saving oppressed Muslim women and fighting militant Muslim men served as important justifications for waging war against the two countries. For instance, First Lady Laura Bush in a radio address on November 17, 2001 stated: “The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women” (Bush, 2001). The address enlisted support of women for the war in Afghanistan by pointing out that “because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes” (Bush, 2001). Such broad claims render it necessary to analyze how Muslim women are portrayed in the U.S. press.

A study of media representations of Muslim men also becomes important considering that in the two months following the September 11 attacks, more than 1,200 non-US nationals were taken into custody in the United States, in “nationwide sweeps for possible suspects” (Amnesty International, 2002). Partial data released by the government revealed that most were men of Arab or South Asian origin (Amnesty International, 2002). The Amnesty International report stated that the organization is concerned that the U.S. government may be violating fundamental rights of those arrested and detained. In another report titled “Human Rights Forgotten in USA’s ‘War on Terrorism,’” Amnesty International (2003) revealed that since the 9/11 attacks, more than 3,000 people who are alleged to be “al-Qa’ida operatives and associates” have been arrested in over 100 countries. Again, the report expressed deep concern about people held without trials and charges.

Elizabeth Poole and John Richardson (2006) assert that they feel a “pressing ethical and political obligation to criticize and counteract the distorted reporting” on Islam and Muslims as such coverage encourages detention of Muslims without trial and racial profiling (p. 2). Apart from racial profiling of Muslims, the raging “War on Terrorism,” continuing occupation of Iraq and escalating political violence in the region only heighten the urgency to examine how the U.S. press represents Muslim women and men post-9/11 and whether such images jointly justify the logic of empire? While this article will identify dominant and alternative representations of Muslim men and women in *The New York Times* and examine how such representations are used to justify Western intervention in Muslim societies, it must be clarified that this study does not assume that

there is a monolithic reality about Muslims that is either represented or misrepresented in the *Times*.

U.S. media coverage of Muslims

A study of previous literature shows that several scholars have confirmed the negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in American entertainment programs (Ghareeb, 1983; Kamalipour, 1995; Shaheen, 1984; 1997; 2000) and news media (Hashem, 1995; Kamalipour, 1995; Karim, 2000; 2002; 2006; Suleiman, 1988; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Edward Said (1994) pointed out that in newsreels or news photos, the Arab is shown in large numbers without scope to portray his personal characteristics or experiences. He argued that most pictures of Muslim men represent “mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric gestures). Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of *jihad*. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world” (Said, 1994, p. 287).

Analyzing the U.S. media coverage of the Persian Gulf War, Muscati (2002) highlighted the racial construction of the Arab/Muslim man as existing in a contextual and historical vacuum, “distanced spatially, temporally and morally from the West” (Muscati, 2002, p. 135). In fact, a common argument scholars make is that media portrayal of Muslims is not grounded in politics, international relations or historical background (Karim, 2000; Poole, 2002, Wilkins & Downing, 2002). For instance, Wilkins and Downing (2002) in their textual analysis of the film, *The Siege* (1998), pointed out that the absence of reference to oil politics, Western military intervention in the Middle East and Israeli policies prevented the film from presenting “a rounded perspective” of Arab/Muslim realities.

Research on post-9/11 media representations of Muslims indicates that previous trends have either continued or worsened. Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995) pointed out that stereotypes developed during war and conflict situations continue to “play a role in the ways we are invited to think about, and act toward, minorities in our midst” (p. 440). Poole (2006) in her analysis of the effects of 9/11 and the war in Iraq on British newspaper coverage found that these events “allowed for the construction of Muslims within a more limited and negative framework” (p. 92). She identified a continuation of

pre-9/11 themes associated with coverage of British Muslims including their portrayal as a threat to the security of the United Kingdom and to “British ‘mainstream’ values.”

Karim (2006) argued that the primary frames used by the media in the portrayal of Muslims draw from “cultural assumptions” about Islam that have survived a long time (p.118). Since the end of the Cold War, the West has been confronting the “Islamist challenge,” starting with the 1979 revolution in Iran and the hostage crisis (Salame, 1993). Karim (2006) thus located parallels in the coverage of Iran in 1979 with that of the 2002 war in Afghanistan: “Just as the journalists from the US and other countries covering Iran in 1979 were not able to sense the impending revolution, those reporting the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan in 2002 were too quick to predict that women in the country would all throw off the *burqa*” (p. 117).

Unveiling Muslim women - again

The need to unveil Muslim women has remained a Western obsession for centuries. In the book *Colonial Harem* (1987), Algerian writer Malek Alloula analyzed picture post cards of Algerian women produced and sent by the French in Algeria in the period between 1900 and 1930. Alloula exposed the colonial gaze on Algerian women by explaining the photographer’s fascination with veiled women and the accompanying need to unveil them. He documented the “double violation” committed by the photographer who “will unveil the veiled and give figural representation to the forbidden” (p.17). Thus, Steet (2000) commenting on a 1924 National Geographic magazine picture of Muslim pilgrims on their way to Mecca wanted to “slap the hand entering from the photograph’s left frame and holding open the woman’s robe, exposing her breast” (p. 7). Both Alloula and Steet offered a critical intervention in the act of forced unveiling of the Muslim woman by the West.

However, today like in the past, the very act of unveiling Muslim women is represented as a victory for the West, specifically a victory for an America victimized by terrorism (Lueck, 2003). Thus, President George W. Bush called for the “liberation” of women in Afghanistan while American forces occupied their territory. “Fully draped, these unseen women were ripe for interpretation. They became the victim in need of rescue by U.S. democratic values. To save these women would be to rescue ourselves” (Lueck, 2003).

Similarly, Cloud (2004), in her analysis of images of Afghan women and men published on Time.com between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2002, argued that the images of veiled Afghan women helped the viewer assume a “paternalistic stance.” The women were depicted as being liberated only after U.S. troops invaded the country; they then began removing their veils and shopping for consumer goods. Cloud (2004) pointed out that liberation was defined in the images as the “exposure of women to the consumer market and to the mass media....shopping becomes a key indicator of modernity” (p. 295).

Although America media often refer to the veil while describing Muslim women, studies show that they do not highlight the complex meanings associated with the veil (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Cloud, 2004; Esposito, 1998; Shirazi, 2001; Wilkins, 1995). El Guindi (1999) accused the Western media of harboring hostility against the veil “often under the guise of humanism, feminism or human rights” (p. xi). She argued that veiling in contemporary Arab culture is largely about identity and privacy. It may also imply rank and status, power, autonomy and/or resistance. Thus, modesty and seclusion are not the only characteristics of a veil although these two elements are most emphasized in Western writings on Middle Eastern women (El Guindi, 1999).

Furthermore, Abu-Lughod (2002) compared veils to “mobile homes” (p.785) and the expectation that Afghan women will throw off their burqas as a mark of liberation to expecting Westerners to wear shorts to the opera. She emphasized the need to work against the “reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom” and opposed the reduction of “diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing” (p. 786). However, as the review of previous literature shows, the U.S. media often represent Muslim women and men as “inferior” to their Western counterparts and evaluate their lives according to Western norms. The article will now give an account of the theoretical framework used for this study.

Theoretical framework: Questioning universal application of Western norms of progress and consumerist modernity

This study will draw upon Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism and upon feminist criticism to analyze the portrayal of Muslim women and men in *The New York Times*. Referring to Orientalism as a “discourse of power,” Said (1994) identified Orientalist discourse as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (1994, p. 3). For Said, the Orient refers primarily to Muslim societies in Africa and Asia. Orientalist discourses “depict Muslim Arabs as culturally and psychologically primitive, prisoners of their emotions, trapped in a patriarchal vise, and locked into ‘jihad’” (Wilkins & Downing, 2002, p. 420).

Said (1994) explained that the Orientalist confirms existing beliefs of his audience without questioning them. In the case of media coverage, news practices such as selection of specific sources, using certain story-telling techniques, deadline pressure and even cultural assumptions of journalists often contribute to representing Muslim men and women in Orientalist frames. Said (1997) argued in his book *Covering Islam* that “what the media produce is neither spontaneous nor completely ‘free’: ‘news’ does not just happen” (p.48). Instead, there is a “qualitative and quantitative tendency to favor certain views and certain representations of reality over others” (Said, 1997, p. 49). One of Said’s most powerful achievements, Ganguly (1992) thus pointed out, is his demonstration that Orientalism goes beyond “theoretical violence” and continues to be demonstrated in “contemporary intellectual and political practice” (p. 73).

While Said’s work has been criticized by several scholars (Halliday, 1993; Kerr, 1990; Lewis, 1982; Musallam, 1979; Turner, 1989), other scholars have founded the academic discipline of postcolonial studies by building on his thesis through revisions and counter-arguments (Bhabha, 1994; Yeğenoğlu, 1998; Young 1990; Young 2001). These scholars have reworked Said’s concept of colonial discourse and highlighted the tension and instability within it; they have qualified Said’s emphasis on hegemony with an account of counter-hegemonic resistance (Bhabha, 1994; Young 2001).

Furthermore, scholars such as Yeğenoğlu (1998) have developed Said’s arguments to include a “sexualized reading” of Orientalism, thus demonstrating how images of women and sexuality are critical to the very formulation of Orientalist discourses. According to Yeğenoğlu (1998), Orientalist discourses depict the West as the “universal subject of history” that has developed a “universally applicable norm of development and progress”

(p. 95-96). In a globalized world, the Western media propagate a “consumerist vision of modernity” which guarantees “self-realization and pleasure through consumption” (Murdock, 2006, p. 24). Armed with the belief that values of Enlightenment, liberalism and Western modernity are universal, transnational media engage in a “battle for the hearts and minds of people the world over” (Chitty, 2005, p. 555). However, generalizations based on Eurocentric assumptions about the living conditions of non-Western women and men only aid imperialistic projects. Wilkins (2004) thus argued that “the U.S. government attempts to impose a process of transition within the Middle East based on an idealization of tradition and modernity within a global sphere” through its development and military projects in the region (p. 483).

Further, Mohanty (1984) accused Western feminisms of appropriating and colonizing “the fundamental complexities and conflicts which characterize the lives of women of different classes, religions, cultures, races and castes” in developing countries (p.335). She argued that power is exercised when Western values and culture are used as a universal measure of progress and modernity. While Western women are assumed to be secular, liberated and modern,

third world women as a group or category are automatically and necessarily defined as: religious (read ‘non-progressive’), family-oriented (read ‘traditional’), legal minors (read ‘they-are-still-not-conscious-of-their-rights’), illiterate (read ‘ignorant’), domestic (read ‘backward’) and sometimes revolutionary (read ‘their-country-is-in-a-state-of-war-they-must-fight!’) (Mohanty, 1984, p. 352).

Women in non-Western societies are thus studied primarily in terms of their “object status (the way in which they are affected or not affected by certain institutions and systems)” and evaluated on the basis of how far they have reached the goal of achieving Western ideals (Mohanty, 1984, p. 338).

In the preface to the book *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society*, Fatima Mernissi (1987) asserted that the tradition of discussing Muslim women “by comparing them, explicitly or implicitly, to Western women,” leads to “senseless comparisons and unfounded conclusions” often limiting the issue to “who is more civilized than whom” (p. 7). Responsible for such misleading moves is the “application

of the notion of woman as a homogenous category” without taking specific contexts into account and the lack of connections being made between “first and third world power shifts” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 351-352).

Apart from accepting the premise that specific socio-political and cultural contexts must be taken into account to enable a better understanding of women’s lives worldwide, this study also assumes that “the ‘feminine condition’ cannot be separated from that of men, the family, and the wider society” (Fernea, 1985, p. 2). Based on these theoretical foundations, the following research questions will be addressed in this study.

RQ1: How does *The New York Times* represent Muslim women?

RQ2: How does *The New York Times* represent Muslim men?

RQ3: How do the representations of Muslim women and men in *The New York Times* establish the need for Western intervention in Muslim societies?

Methodology

A textual analysis of news articles (n=258) was conducted to analyze the representations of Muslim men and women. A LexisNexis search for the words “Muslim woman” and “Muslim female” and their plural forms in *The New York Times* between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2003, yielded 136 articles. A similar search for the words “Muslim man,” “Muslim male” and their plural forms yielded 122 articles. *The New York Times* was selected for study because it is an eminent national daily, respected both nationally and internationally. *The Times* also sets an agenda for other news media, both print and broadcast (Lule, 2002).

The author followed a grounded textual analysis approach to examine the articles (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The author identified a variety of representations of Muslim men and women in the articles in *The New York Times* through multiple readings and categorized them thematically. The method of qualitative textual analysis enabled the author to examine both manifest and latent meanings associated with the portrayal of Muslim men and women.

This analysis includes both news articles as well as commentary, such as editorials and opinion essays. Editorials and commentary not only summarize and evaluate news events, but they also influence how a particular news event is portrayed. Each of these formats contribute to the overall portrayal of Muslim women and men in *The New York*

Times. Including a variety of texts allows a more comprehensive description of this characterization in *The New York Times*.

Results

This section will answer the three research questions. The first question asked about the representations of Muslim women in *The New York Times*. While there was an overwhelming portrayal of Muslim women living in different parts of the world as victims of political violence and Islamic practices, few articles portrayed them as agents of resistance and change within the Islamic framework. However, *The New York Times* did highlight acts of hatred committed against Muslim women living in the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Some articles portrayed liberation as the freedom to unveil and buy consumer goods. Representations of Muslim women in *The New York Times* were categorized into the following themes: Muslim women as victims of violence and Islamic practices; Liberation of Muslim women linked with consumer freedom and Western liberal ideologies; Marginal coverage of resistance by Muslim women within the Islamic framework; Obsession with the veil and concern with re-veiling; and highlighting acts of hatred against Muslim women in post-9/11 America. While analyzing the themes, it must be noted that articles on Muslim women and men did not always focus on a single theme. Some articles drew from more than one theme making it difficult to divide them into mutually exclusive categories.

The second research question asked about the representations of Muslim men in *The New York Times*, which were thematically categorized as the following: Stories of violence, terrorism and Islamic resurgence; Deporting illegal immigrants from the United States; and Muslim men and the debate between civil rights and national security. In the case of Muslim men, the dominant focus on violence is reflected in the fact that at least 55 percent of the 122 articles on Muslim men focused on acts of violence and their repercussions in different regions of the world.

The following sub-sections will elaborate on the themes toward answering the third research question, which asked how representations of Muslim men and women in *The New York Times* establish the need for Western intervention in Muslim societies.

Muslim women

Muslim women as victims of violence and Islamic practices

Stories about Muslim women living in the non-Western world were often stories about political violence in Kashmir, Rwanda, Nigeria, Bosnia, West Bank, Afghanistan, Somalia, etc., where Muslim women frequently figured as victims of rape, torture, stoning and patriarchal oppression. For example, a news article with a Kaduna, Nigeria dateline, which was titled “Fiery Zealotry Leaves Nigeria in Ashes Again,” stated: “Nigeria’s president, Olusegun Obasanjo, arrived in Kaduna today to begin reconciling his country’s population, which has shown itself to be devoutly religious but also quick to kill” (Lacey, 2002, p. A3). The article covered the religious riots that broke out after a newspaper published a report that was considered offensive by some Muslims. The article pointed out that the “Shariah remains a contentious issue in Nigeria, especially since two Muslim women were recently sentenced to death by stoning for having extramarital sex” (Lacey, 2002, p. A3).

A news article with a Netanya, Israel dateline narrated the story of Ashley Nasser, a Muslim woman from Morocco, who was injured when a Palestinian suicide bomber detonated his explosives in a hotel packed for Passover:

A year and five operations later, Ms. Nasser, one of the more than 100 who were wounded in the bombing, lives alone on the fifth floor of the nearly deserted hotel, her paralyzed right arm leaving her unable to work, and bits of jagged metal still working their way to the surface of her skin. Two weeks ago, a sliver was extracted from her right eyelid. That leaves two pieces near her spine, one behind her ear and one wedged inside a molar. (Myre, 2003, p. A3)

Another news article on political violence in Kashmir pointed out how an “exaggerated” picture of “Indian atrocities” was used to gain support for the insurgency: Officials here hand out purported tallies of the victims. According to one official list, 71, 204 Kashmiris have been killed by Indian troops, 553 children have been burned alive in their schools, and 7, 613 Muslim women have been raped by soldiers, among other monstrous acts....International rights groups have documented widespread vigilante killings, rapes and other violations by Indian forces, but involving far fewer victims than

Pakistan describes. Rights monitors say that Muslim rebels have also targeted civilians and engaged in brutality. (Eckholm, 2002, p. A6)

While there was an overwhelming coverage of violence, there were few stories on Muslim women’s everyday lived experiences, their struggles, successes and failures. It may be argued that basic news values lead to a focus on violent situations than on everyday lives of ordinary Muslim women. However, such portrayals contribute to the narrow framing of Muslim women as oppressed victims in need of rescue. Further, while the articles on political violence often offered graphic coverage of acts of violence, few articles offered political context and historical background of those conflict situations.

Liberation of Muslim women linked with consumer freedom and Western liberal ideologies

While many articles in *The New York Times* presented Muslim women as victims of oppression, some articles constructed a rather narrow interpretation of liberation and modernity. A reporter sensed “freedom” reigning in the streets of Kabul after the United States invaded Afghanistan by noting the number of thriving beauty salons, and the popularity of “fashionable hairstyles and nail varnishes and cosmetics” (Burns, 2002, p. 10). However, he lamented that the “concept of beauty remains intensely private, for a woman’s own pleasure, and for the men in her family” even as the reporter and his photographer “were turned away at several salons before being admitted at Humaira’s, and there, many of the women undergoing treatments fled to the back of the salon, peering nervously through the curtains at the intruders” (Burns, 2002, p. 10). The news article titled “Relishing Beautiful New Freedoms in Kabul” further elaborated that the “most visible change in the way women in Kabul appear in public is the increasing number who venture out without wearing the shroudlike burqa” (Burns, 2002, p. 10).

In several articles, Muslim women adopting Western attire and practicing secular values were framed as symbolic of their liberation and modernization, whereas public expression of Muslim religious identity was often portrayed as restrictive. A news article described Muslim women getting a taste of freedom in Kish, an island 10 miles off the Iranian coast, where they can show “a little leg” and drink “a little booze,” a place where

there was “no morality police to clamp down on prostitutes or the sale of alcohol, though both are illegal” (Fathi, 2002, p. A4).

Further, an opinion column with a headline “Liberties: Cleopatra and Osama” described the post-invasion, liberation of Afghan women in the following words:

When the barbarian puritans running Afghanistan began to scurry away last week, men raced to buy pin-ups of beautiful girls. And, in a moving and amazing tableau, some women unwrapped themselves letting the sun shine on their faces as they smiled shyly and delightedly. A few dared to show a little ankle or put on high heels. (Dowd, 2001, p. 13)

The article stated that the White House had begun a campaign against the Taliban’s treatment of women and quoted Laura Bush saying that “Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women’s fingernails for wearing nail polish.” The columnist concluded with the suggestion that the First Lady should extend her campaign beyond Afghanistan to countries such as Saudi Arabia where women are treated like “chattel.”

Marginal coverage of resistance by Muslim women within the Islamic framework

Few articles portrayed Muslim women as active agents demanding reform in Muslim personal laws, resisting patriarchy and challenging age-old practices. Exceptions included a news article that narrated how Iranian female parliamentarians were demanding “equal blood money” for women (Reuters, 2002). Another news article with a headline “A Nation Challenged: Islam; Where Muslim Tradition Meets Modernity” elaborated how Muslim women were beginning to demand a reinterpretation of the Koran (Sachs, 2001). The article quoted Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi who elaborated that Muslim women were now using the Internet to fight extremists within the religion, thus highlighting the use of new media by Muslim women to assert their rights. She also pointed out that no extremist could refer to Muslim women as inferior to men without being a laughing stock on Al Jazeera (Sachs, 2001).

Despite the presence of a few articles that highlighted Muslim women’s resistance against patriarchal traditions, the portrayal of Muslim woman as oppressed victims

dominated coverage. However, the very presence of articles that covered Muslim’s women’s indigenous struggle for their social and political rights is a source of hope for more complete coverage in the future.

Obsession with the veil and concern with re-veiling

Whenever the words “Muslim woman” or “Muslim women” were mentioned in the articles, phrases such as “head covered by a scarf” “wearing traditional Muslim head scarves” “in *hijab*” almost inevitably followed. While several articles were dedicated to coverage of the Florida court case where a Muslim woman wanted to wear her veil in her driver’s license photograph and the headscarf controversies in France, other articles focused on the veil even while reporting on topics that had little do with Muslim women’s clothing. For instance, a news article on the changing car market in Iran began with the description of a veiled Muslim woman in its lead: “Saleheh Najafi, a 40-year-old homemaker swathed from head scarf to socks in layered black, stands in the car showroom looking the very model of Muslim female virtue” (MacFarquhar, 2002, p. 4). The article mentioned Najafi wanting to buy a two-seater convertible because she wanted to feel the wind blow through her hair. The reporter promptly reminded Najafi about her “mandatory head scarf.” She replied: “Oh, You’re right. Well still, it would be nice to feel it blow around the scarf” (MacFarquhar, 2002, p. 4).

The American press imposed its own interpretation of the veil as a symbol of oppression ignoring the fact that the veil has different meanings in different cultural and social contexts. Further, American journalists’ obsession with the veil was not limited to articles on women living in predominantly-Muslim countries. Their concern with veiling and the growing influence of Islam also extended to American Muslims.

Highlighting concern with re-veiling among young Muslim women in America, a news article narrated how a Muslim girl in the United States decided to wear an “Islamic head scarf” to school without the knowledge of her parents (Goodstein, 2001a). The 19-year-old college junior said she decided to don the scarf by choice. The reporter argued that Muslim students were different from others:

For many students, regardless of their faith, the college years are a period of intense spiritual exploration. Young people are exposed to classes in comparative religions and

recruited by religious groups. They are also free to rebel against secular parents. *But a particular force exerts itself on Muslim students, pulling them toward religious conservatism -- alienation from their non-Muslim peers* [italics added]. (Goodstein, 2001a, p. B1)

Thus, not only were Muslim students depicted as odd and mysterious due to the exertion of “a particular force” on them, re-veiling was framed as religious conservatism and equated with alienation from non-Muslims although the women who were re-veiling themselves often claimed it was liberating for them.

Another news article with a Fremont, California dateline described an all-girl Muslim prom as an attempt by young Muslim women to adapt to the “American prom culture of high heels, mascara and adrenaline while bring true to a Muslim identity” (Brown, 2003, p. A1). The article elaborated on the prom venue:

The rented room at a community center here was filled with sounds of the rapper 50 Cent, Arabic pop music, Britney Spears....But when the sun went down, the music stopped temporarily, the silken gowns disappeared beneath full-length robes, and the Muslims in the room faced toward Mecca to pray. (Brown, 2003, p. A1)

The reporter described the organizer of the prom, 18-year-old Fatima Haque, as “one of a growing number of young Muslim women who have adopted the covering their mothers rejected. Islamic dress, worn after puberty, often accompanies a commitment not to date or to engage in activities where genders intermingle” (Brown, 2003, p. A1).

Highlighting acts of hatred against Muslim women in post-9/11 America

The New York Times performed the role of a watchdog by highlighting acts of hatred committed against American Muslim women after the September 11 attacks. A news article described the impact of the September 11 attacks on the lives of Muslims living in America in the following words: “Their [Muslim] religion, their beliefs and their behavior are attracting unprecedented scrutiny – from people they know, from total strangers, from the news media and from the government” (Goodstein, 2001b, p. B10). Another news article narrated how a Muslim woman in Brooklyn was afraid to ride a

subway or a bus because she had heard stories of veiled women being attacked and called names (Lee, 2001, p. 1).

Yet another news article pointed out that Muslims were facing a “quiet but persistent discrimination against them in their everyday social transactions” that was not always tangible. “A once-friendly acquaintance no longer says hello. A child is repeatedly teased over his Arabic name. A customer calls the police to suggest that a foreign-looking merchant might be a terrorist” (Sachs, 2002d, p. A16). The article informed readers that the New York City Police Department got 117 reports of hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims between the September 11 attacks and the end of March 2002.

In opinion columns, some Muslim women aired their frustration over being perceived as outsiders. In a column titled “Fear in the Open City,” a lawyer narrated her experience after the September 11 attacks: “Before last week, I had thought of myself as a lawyer, a feminist, a wife, a sister, a friend, a woman on the street. Now I begin to see myself as a brown woman who bears a vague resemblance to the images of terrorists we see on television and in the newspapers” (Rahman, 2001, p. A27).

By highlighting hate speech and crime against Muslim women and emphasizing the need to put an end to them, *The New York Times* attempted to educate and calm a shocked and confused community. *The New York Times* also reported actions taken by citizens to improve the situation, such as volunteering to escort veiled Muslim women in public spaces, etc. A news article reported that Christian, Muslim and Jewish women had come together in Syracuse to alleviate social problems in the town and in Muslim countries (“In Syracuse,” 2003).

Several articles emphasized that many Muslims call themselves moderates and did not strictly adhere to religious rituals. For instance, a news article titled “Stereotyping Rankles Silent, Secular Majority of American Muslims” pointed out that “cultural Muslims say they have been overlooked in the portrayal of Muslims after Sept. 11 attacks, with devout Muslims regarded as the norm, even in the United States. Cameras have homed in on women in head scarfs [sic] and bearded men on their knees facing Mecca” (Goodstein, 2001c, p. 20).

Muslim men

Stories of violence, terrorism and Islamic resurgence: Focusing on “resumes of holy warriors”

The words “Muslim men” and/or “Muslim man” were often followed by words such as “suspects,” “detained,” “deported,” “terrorism,” “illegal immigrants,” “suicide bombers” and “violence.” News articles about Muslim men in the non-Western world were often stories about violence, terrorism and Islamic resurgence. These news articles offered coverage of acts of political violence in Iraq, Bosnia, Nigeria, Israel, India, the Netherlands, etc. Some articles focused on Islamic punishments. For example, a news article titled “Rising Muslim Power in Africa Causes Unrest in Nigeria and Elsewhere” which was part of a series titled “The Force of Islam: A Growing Influence in Africa” pointed out that “Muslims have become an angry, organized force in several important African countries, and it often comes with a wariness of the West – especially the United States” (Onishi, 2001). The article further narrated the results of implementing Islamic law: “Cow thieves have had their hands cut off. A teenage girl was given 100 cane strokes for premarital sex; another has just been sentenced to death by stoning for adultery” (Onishi, 2001, p. A14). Another news article on Saudi Arabia’s war against drug abuse in the country informed readers that “beheadings are routinely conducted in public squares” (Sciolino, 2002, p. A3). Some articles made unwarranted generalizations. For example, an article on challenges facing a Pakistani dancer stated, “In Pakistan, it seems, murder is often considered a solution to disagreements, and Ms. Kemani said she regularly receives death threats, by telephone or written note” (Mydans, 2002, p. A4).

Several articles offered accounts of the spread of anti-Americanism in predominantly Muslim countries, which were seen as potential sites for recruitment of “angry young Muslim men” by terrorist organizations. A 4555-word front-page news article with a headline “A Nation Challenged: Qaeda’s Grocery Lists and Manuals of Killing,” which was part of a series titled “The Jihad Files,” reported on “resumes of holy warriors,” their training and exercise regimens including the number of push-ups and sit-ups, their espionage and explosives classes and the bureaucracy and paperwork in the training camps (Rohde & Chivers, 2002, p. 1). The article also referred to Osama Bin Laden’s use of the media to “fashion an image and spread his message” and pointed out that the

March 2001 issue of the Qaeda Media Committee’s monthly press packet included news articles downloaded from the Internet.

Another page-one news article narrated the story of a terrorist, who once studied at the London School of Economics, threatening to behead three kidnapped British journalists in India (Jehl, Dugger & Barringer, 2002). The article offered detailed descriptions of his terrorist activities in Pakistan. Some articles about Muslim men even included extremely provocative statements by Muslim religious leaders. For example, a news article described the sermons of an Imam who preached “murderous hatred” of the United States to 9/11 pilots and others associated with the planning of the attacks in a small German mosque. “Christians and Jews should have their throats slit,” he apparently said in a videotaped sermon (Frantz & Butler, 2002, p. A3).

Another article by a New York-based freelance writer quoted a 16-year-old Filipino boy calling him “a white monkey” and declaring: “I want to go to America, find some shiny white boy and make him lick my boots” (Thomas, 2002, p. 78). The writer, who was apparently traveling in the islands as they held “promise of adventure” was shocked by the hate speech and left the island. The boy was a fresh recruit of a militant group and the island was the group’s home base.

Further, a news article on Mohamed Atta, described as the “ringleader of the Sept.11 hijackers,” pointed out that Atta “had been planning for years to die for Islam” (Shenon & Johnston, 2001, p. B5). The article also quoted Atta’s death wish which included misogynist instructions such as not allowing pregnant women or “a person who is not clean” at his funeral. Atta’s version of Islam was not contested or debated in the article.

While reports of terrorism and political violence are sadly true, there are also millions of Muslim men who are leading ordinary lives. There were few stories about such Muslim men. The focus was instead on militant Islam.

The problem was further compounded by the fact that in several articles covering political violence, Muslim men were identified by religion alone. For example, a news article with a Nairobi dateline described the “chilling encounter” between a nun and a “Muslim man” on a bus in Kenya (Lacey, 2003, p. A14). The Muslim man apparently told the nun he wished he were on the plane that rammed into the World Trade Center. There was no information on the background of the man. His only identity was his

religion. However, the nun, described as a good Samaritan, was identified as a 60-year-old who has “lived in Kenya for most of the last 24 years, long enough to pick up some Swahili, develop a taste for the Kenyan cornmeal staple known as ugali and feel a bond with the poorest of the country's poor.” (Lacey, 2003, p. A14). By identifying the “angry man” by his religion alone and ignoring his country of residence, citizenship, educational background and ethnic community, the press contributed to demonizing Muslims as a group. It is possible that the nun reported the encounter to the reporter, who may have had no opportunity to follow up with the man. However, at a time when Muslims all over the world are being stereotyped as dangerous and violent people, it becomes the responsibility of the press to provide more balanced and detailed coverage.

Another article on a Kenyan bombing investigation reported that investigators “were questioning a car dealer who sold the four-wheel-drive vehicle used in the suicide bombing last week to two men who he described as Arabs” (Foreign Desk, 2002, p. A24). The reporter did not qualify what was meant by the identifier “Arabs.” Instead, he only added that two Muslim men had also been detained. Wilkins and Downing (2002) argued that “while Muslims are a religious and not an ethnic community, their public homogenization and frequent fusion with Arab identity easily led toward discursive processes and stereotypes analogous to ‘race’” (p. 420).

However, not all stories on violence mentioned Muslims as perpetrators. *The New York Times* provided significant coverage of the trial of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and those of army commanders charged in the Srebrenica massacre, where more than 7,000 Muslim men and boys were killed in a UN-protected enclave by Bosnian Serbs in 1995. A news article on Hindu-Muslim riots in India stated, “Here in the adopted hometown of Mohandas K. Gandhi, the great apostle of nonviolence, Hindu mobs committed acts of unspeakable savagery against Muslims this spring” (Dugger, 2002, p. A1). Another news article offered accounts of the conditions of Muslim men who had been deported from the United States to Pakistan for entering the U.S. illegally or overstaying visas: “They say they now find themselves stranded between countries and cultures, their lives upended, since being detained and deported under a post-Sept. 11 crackdown” (Rohde, 2003, p. A1).

Muslims in the United States: Deporting illegal immigrants

Stories about Muslim men in the United States were often addressing illegal immigration; they narrated how Muslim men were on the run due to “crackdowns” by the American state machinery. Headlines announced: “A Nation Challenged: Immigration Control; INS to Focus on Muslims Who Evade Deportation” (Lewis, 2002); “A Nation Challenged; Deportations; U.S. Begins Crackdown on Muslims Who Defy Orders to Leave Country” (Sachs, 2002b); “Thousands of Arabs and Muslims Could be Deported, Officials Say” (Swarns, 2003); “Threats and Responses: The Investigation; Seeking Terrorist Plots, the F.B.I. is Tracking Hundreds of Muslims” (Shenon & Johnston, 2002).

As mentioned in the previous section, several stories that reported arrests or interrogation of Muslim men in the United States mentioned their religion as the only or primary form of identification. Articles also informed readers about new methods and programs such as special registration drives and surveillance campaigns that were being implemented to track down Muslim illegal immigrants. An article reported the new role of local police officers in catching illegal immigrants:

For years, most local police departments have resisted the idea of using their officers to track down illegal immigrants, reasoning that crime-fighting is better served by building relationships of trust in immigrant communities. Now, in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, a growing number of law enforcement agencies around the country say that they have begun to equate immigrant enforcement with protecting national security and that they want to be involved. (Sachs, 2002a, p. A11)

A news article pointed out, “Before Sept. 11, the merest hint of using profiles to screen for potential wrongdoers was widely regarded as a violation of some elementary American value. But the debate has become more complex” (Lewis, 2002, p. A12). Another news article reported that “Prompted by rumors of dragnets and by new federal deadlines that require male foreign visitors, principally those from Muslim and Arab countries, to register with the government, families that lived illegally but undisturbed in the United States for years are now rushing to Canada” (Sachs, 2003, p. A1).

Articles in *The New York Times* also reported hate crimes committed against Muslim men and the challenges faced by them in a post-9/11 America. They reported criticism by civil

rights groups, lawyers and constitutional scholars against what were perceived as draconian methods used by the government to track illegal immigrants and interrogate Muslim men. The articles also reported the justifications provided by the Bush government for secret trials and widespread interrogation.

Muslim men and the debate between civil rights and national security

Coverage of Muslim men in *The New York Times* included post-9/11 debates positioning individual civil rights against national security interests. A news article titled “After Sept. 11, a Legal Battle on the Limits of Civil Liberty” drew attention to the secrecy of the trails of “special interest” immigration cases:

The government has never formally explained how it decided which visa violators would be singled out for this extraordinary process, and it has insisted that the designations could not be reviewed by the courts. But as it turns out, most of these cases involved Arab and Muslim men who were detained in fairly haphazard ways, for example at traffic stops or through tips from suspicious neighbors. Law enforcement officials have acknowledged that only a few of these detainees had any significant information about possible terrorists. (Liptak, Lewis & Weiser, 2002, p.1)

Another news article titled “A Nation Challenged: Detainees; Civil Rights Group to Sue Over U.S. Handling of Muslim Men” reported that a “class-action lawsuit” prepared by the group “accused the government of arbitrarily holding Muslim detainees in prison for months on minor immigration violations, with no hearings to determine whether the government had probable cause to hold them” (Sachs, 2002c, p. A13). Many of these articles quoted academics, primarily law professors, and civil rights activists and legal experts. An editorial argued: “To slash away at liberty in order to defend it is not only illogical, it has proved to be a failure. Yet that is what has been happening. Since last September, the Bush administration has held people in prison indefinitely and refused to tell the public who is being held or even how many detainees there are” (Editorial Desk, 2002, p. A24). The editorial carried the headline “The War on Civil Liberties.”

Despite such coverage, articles highlighting the debate between civil rights and national security barely managed to counter the overwhelmingly violent and aggressive image of

Muslim men portrayed in many articles. A reading of the Muslim man as someone struggling to safeguard his civil rights was rendered extremely difficult under the weight of the dominant negative image of the Muslim man as that of aggressor, suspect, terrorist and illegal immigrant.

Discussion

While *The New York Times* coverage of Muslim men primarily included stories about violence, terrorism, Islamic resurgence and illegal immigration, its coverage of Muslim women frequently portrayed them as victims of violence and as oppressed by Islamic practice. The pages of *The New York Times*, which form an important part of the global media network, also provided a discursive space where dominant U.S. perspectives that link liberation with globalization, consumerist modernity and Western liberal ideologies could be emphasized.

Many articles on Muslim women focused on the veil, presenting it primarily as a symbol of oppression. Cooke (2002) thus remarked that “politics in the era of the U.S. empire disappears behind the veil of women’s victimization” (p. 469). The articles in *The New York Times* rarely gave agency to Muslim women; they did not adequately highlight Muslim women’s efforts at empowerment within their specific religious, political and economic environments. Instead, the oppressed Muslim women were portrayed as awaiting Western intervention.

Such portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed victims requiring Western rescue symbolized a “benevolent recuperation of the colonialist agenda” (Ganguly, 1992, p. 74), which Gayatri Spivak (1988) has summarized in her statement about “white men saving brown women from brown men” (p. 297). Abu-Lughod (2002) argued that this rhetoric of salvation, which is based on an assumption of Western superiority, needs to be challenged. She pointed out that when one saves someone, one saves that person not only “from something” but also “to something” (p.788). And, it is arrogant to assume that Muslim women want to be saved to follow Western values. Abu-Lughod (2002) emphasized that in her 20 years of fieldwork in Egypt, she has never met a single woman, “who has ever expressed envy of U.S. women, women they tend to perceive as bereft of community, vulnerable to sexual violence and social anomie, driven by individual success rather than morality, or strangely disrespectful of God” (p. 788).

Of course, such arguments do not imply that the West should not intervene at all in case of violation of human rights, which include women’s human rights. However, as critical feminist scholars have pointed out, using Western feminist values to evaluate specific experiences of women living in other parts of the world may not help improve their situation (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Fernea, 1985; Hussain, 1984; Mohanty, 1984). Instead, they have stressed the need to take account of their particular, socially-constructed and culture-specific, individual experiences. Further, feminists such as Freda Hussain (1984), Elizabeth Warnock Fernea (1985) and Abdelwahab Boudhiba (1985) do not believe that Islam can be blamed for the oppression of Muslim women. Instead, Hussain (1984) has argued that change in the “role of Muslim women must be brought about, by the elimination of feudal Islam through Islam...The Quranic text must be related to the present context and used to liberate women from male domination” (p. 6).

Furthermore, it may be considered deeply problematic to interpret unveiling by some Afghan women or their buying of cosmetics as liberation. While some may consider these acts of liberation, exercising individual choice in the purchase of consumer goods presents only a narrow view of what emancipation may possibly mean to women all over the world. In fact, Abu-Lughod (2002) argued that Afghan women may not be as interested in throwing off their veils as they are in struggling to free themselves from “structural violence of global inequality and from the ravages of war” (p. 787). They are more concerned with finding enough to eat, ensuring their loved ones are not killed in bombings and shootings than just experiencing the joys of wearing nail polish (Abu-Lughod, 2002). However, the articles on Muslim women in *The New York Times* rarely offered in-depth analysis of the impact of U.S. policy decisions on the brutal regimes and practices in predominantly Muslim countries.

As for the Muslim men, their stories in *The New York Times* were primarily about terrorism, militancy, detention and interrogation. Foreign Muslims seem to be covered in relation to a more limited range of themes/issues when compared to coverage of Muslims living in the United States. Disproportionate and decontextualized attention on acts of violence committed by Muslim men established them as fanatics who needed to be controlled. Several articles on Muslim men in *The New York Times* quoted hate speech by Muslim religious leaders and extremists without contestation. Such coverage only serves

to inflame passions on both sides. While many articles focused on the making of terrorists, their sleeper and active cells, prayers and meetings, recruitment and training and other everyday details, they did not examine the larger socio-political forces at work. Karim (1997) pointed out that acts of terrorism and violence carried out by Muslims are often perceived as a result of a “historical tradition of fanatical violence” (p. 166). He argued that such a view “disregards the structural violence resulting from North’s economic and cultural hegemony over the globe as well as direct violence supported by Northern powers against Southern interests” (1997, p. 166). According to Karim (2002), the consequences of structural violence can be witnessed in the poverty, repression and deprivation among people living in unprivileged parts of the globe. However, the news media rarely relate structural violence to acts of political violence: “Public attention is thus kept focused on the *violence* rather than the *politics* of political violence” (Karim, 2002, p. 104). Further, Karim (1997) elaborated that journalists can assert such poorly supported statements about Muslims because audiences often share their assumptions. He pointed out that dominant discourses on Islam allow “flights of logic” wherein one violent incident by a Muslim can be used to extrapolate conclusions about Muslim cultures across the globe (p. 175).

Instead of providing scope for critical intervention, dominant discourses in *The New York Times* thus confirmed Orientalist framing of Muslim men and women. The media portrayals of Muslim men and women in *The New York Times* jointly reinforced the need for Western intervention in Muslim societies and communities, whether the declared purpose was to liberate Muslim women or to keep Muslim men under surveillance. Cooke (2002) explained that “imperial logic genders and separates people so that the men are the Other and the women are civilizable. To defend our universal civilization we must rescue the women. To rescue these women we must attack these men” (p. 469). This strategy legitimizes intervention by presenting Muslim men as dangerous for Muslim women and the latter as too weak to defend themselves without external help. When newspapers such as *The New York Times*, read within the United States and outside the country, engage in such Orientalist framing of Muslim men and women, it becomes increasingly difficult for media emanating from other parts of the world to introduce

counter-frames. U.S. perspectives often dominate the news media which are a global industry.

Despite the overwhelming portrayal of Muslim men and women in Orientalist frameworks, *The New York Times* played a watchdog role by providing significant coverage of hate crimes against Muslims living in America and violation of their civil rights after the September 11 attacks. Also, the very presence of articles that reported on Muslim women’s resistance (within the Islamic framework) against patriarchy and religious extremism holds promise for more nuanced coverage in the future.

Several questions remain. Restricting the sample of this study to articles that used words such as “Muslim men” and “Muslim women” may be perceived as a major limitation by some. However, the fact remains that the religion of Muslim men and women is often explicitly mentioned in articles. Thus, a search in Lexisnexis for the words Christian man, Christian male, Christian woman, Christian female and their plural forms between September 11, 2001 and September 11, 2003 brought up only 24 articles. Future studies could use a sampling strategy that searches for stories about a place or event involving the phenomenon of interest (e.g. Iraq or Iraq war) and examine all related stories. Such a strategy may yield more balanced representations in the sample and many stories about Muslims that may not mention religion at all.

To conclude, it may be emphasized that the portrayal of Muslim women primarily as victims of oppression and that of Muslim men as violent fanatics in *The New York Times* serve the overarching objective of justifying Western intervention in Muslim societies to “save” the women by fighting with the men. *The New York Times* showed an obsession with the veil and often portrayed it reductively as a symbol of religious conservatism. Muslim women’s resistance and demands for rights and justice within the Islamic framework and without Western intervention were marginally covered. Some articles presented the liberation of Muslim women as an exercise of individual choice in the purchase and use of consumer goods. Although a few articles introduced alternative discourses on Muslim men and women, they were rarely effective in countering the dominant Orientalist framing.

In the context of the present political scenario, this study is not just about research of media representations of Muslim women and men. It highlights the urgency to improve

U.S. media representations of Muslim men and women. Will Western journalists be able to question their cultural assumptions and be open to alternative definitions of liberation and modernity? Will they be able to embrace the fact that not everybody considers individualism morally superior to community- and family-oriented living? Finally, as Abu-Lughod (2002) asked, “Can we use a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation?” (p. 789). However, it is not just journalists who need to stop talking about salvation. We are faced with that challenge too: How can we, as people who occupy privileged spaces globally, shift a dominant focus on Orientalism in our cultural ideology to a position that accepts differences and refuses to engage in a “civilizing mission” of our cultural others?

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