UWTSD

Islam Today (HPRS7006)

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3. Using examples, evaluate contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims in western contexts.

Introduction

Media is persistently used as a tool to denigrate Islam and Muslims in Western contexts and to serve the political agenda of the West in the "War on Terror" after the 9-11 Twin Towers attack in the United States (U.S.). Reese and Lewis argued that the label, "War on Terror" was a powerful "organising principle" used during US president Bush's administration to justify its offensive military campaign against Iraq and Saddam Hussein as a rightful response to 9-11.[1] Post 9-11, the American media participated freely in this framing and provided a "favourable news discourse climate" for the United States' "War on Terror" and gained support from the non-Muslim masses in its war against Iraq.[2] In the United Kingdom, the media's coverage on Islam and the British Muslim communities has also been heightened since 9-11. In general, the media representation of Islam and Muslims in western contexts has mostly been negative and associated with themes of terrorism, violence, Samuel Huntington's theory of the "clash of civilizations" between Islam and the West" and the oppression of Muslim women. This paper will cover these major themes in the media representation of Islam and Muslims in the West with a focus on the U.S. and UK contexts.

Muslims Portrayed As "Terrorists and Dangerous"

Following the 9-11 terrorist attack, the media in the West continuously replayed the clips of the attack on the Twin Towers for days, months and years.[3] Pictures of the Arab Muslim men responsible for the terrorist act were published and the news rhetoric on Islam being a threat to national security were repeatedly sounded. In the UK, Kabir

[1] Stephen D. Reese and Seth C. Lewis, 'Framing The War On Terror: The Internalization Of Policy In The US Press', *Journalism*, 10.6 (2009), 777–797 (p. 792) <DOI: 10.1177/1464884909344480>.
[2] Ibid, p. 792.
[3] Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims In The Media: Race And Representation After 9/11*. (New York: New York University Press, 2012), p. 2; Todd H. Green, *The Fear Of Islam: An Introduction To Islamophobia In The West*. (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2015), p. 235-236.

noted that major news broadcasting stations such as BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Sky and Channel Five reported on the 9-11 attack "every day, exactly in the same order and at the same time."[4] Graphics of the 9-11 attack and the Arabs involved in the terrorist act reportedly influenced the minds and opinions of the masses greatly with regards to their mindset about Islam and Muslims. The constant use of the term "Muslim and Islamic terrorists" by the media reports caused Muslim men who had a beard and wore a *topi* to be stereotyped as potential terrorists posing a dangerous threat to national security.[5] Subsequently, eye-catching and sensationalised headlines in the British print media labelling Muslims criminals together with their religious affiliation such as "Muslim British men" instead of just "British men" were also rampant in the media.[6] All these cast the UK Muslims in negative light and they are deemed guilty by association. The state of Islamophobia is further heightened and adds to the increase in hate-crimes against the Muslims in the UK society.

In the U.S., TV dramas such as *24*, *Sleeper Cell* and *The Agency* had common storylines and representations of Arabs or Muslims as terrorists and how the U.S. government and law agencies were hard at work combating terrorism and keeping the nation safe.[7] These stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists and dangerous figures in TV drama helps to reinforce and legitimise the U.S. government narrative of the necessity of the War on Terror to protect her citizens. Furthermore, these TV dramas "replayed the tragedy of 9/11 weekly to U.S. audiences, keeping the trauma fresh in the collective memory."[8] This inevitably caused the U.S. citizens to live in constant fear of the Arabs or Muslims in their midst and be on heightened alert against them lest they commit another "terrorist act."[9]

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[4] Nahid Afrose Kabir, *Young British Muslims: Identity, Culture, Politics and the Media*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 117.
[5] All Party Parliamentary Group on British Muslims, Report on the Inquiry into a Working Definition of Islamophobia / Anti-Muslim Hatred. (2017), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/599c3d2febbd1a90cffdd8a9/t/5bfd1ea3352f531a6170ceee/1543315109493/Islamophobia+Defined.pdf [accessed 20 December 2021], p. 32; Kabir, *Young British Muslims,* p. 117-119, 128; Green, *The Fear of Islam,* p. 122.
[6] Kabir, *Young British Muslims,* p. 131.
[7] Green, *The Fear Of Islam,* p. 247.
[8] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 45.
[9] Ibid, p. 45.

Muslims Portrayed As The "Other"

Another contemporary media representation of Muslims in Western contexts is that of portraying them as the "other" in the majority white society. A binary narrative of "us" vs "them" is constantly constructed by the media. In the UK, Professor Justin Lewis in his analysis of newspaper reporting of Muslims from 2000-2008 that about 49% of the articles being published portrayed Islam as a dangerous, backward and irrational religion, as a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West and as a threat to the British way of life.[10] Specifically, when the media reports that Muslim perpetrators of crime were raised in Western society, it reified the belief that the Muslims were not integrating into their "host countries."[11] As Najimdeen noted, the "media hype exacerbates the climate of mistrust and widens the gulf of understanding between host majority group and minority Muslim community" in the Western contexts.[12] The media's repetitive coverage on the differentiation between Islam and the West intensifies and normalises the social stigmatisation and discrimination of the Muslims as the "other" in their host countries.[13]

Another binary opposite narrative that the media often portrays of the Muslims in Western contexts is that of projecting a "good Muslim" versus a "bad Muslim" paradigm. In post 9-11 U.S., the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Ad Council took on an extensive advertisement campaign which seeks to present the American Muslim first as an American and second a Muslim.[14] In several posters, the campaign aims to showcase that an American Muslim can be a patriot who serves and protect the nation and is also a "productive and desirable citizen-patriot" with a family settled in America.[15] The "good Muslim" who is acceptable in the America society is one who has a good relationship with his/her host country. A "bad Muslim" on the other hand is positioned as the "other" who is associated with violence, terrorism,

[10] All Party Parliamentary Group On British Muslims, p. 32.
[11] Green, *The Fear Of Islam*, p. 296; Bakare Najimdeen, 'Muslims And The Charlie Hebdo Saga', *Policy Perspectives*, 12.2 (2015), 81-104 (p. 88); Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping And Representation After 9/11* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 64.
[12] Najimdeen, 'Muslims and the Charlie Hebdo Saga', p. 88.
[13] All Party Parliamentary Group On British Muslims, p. 34; Mahmood Monshipouri. The War On Terror And Muslims In The West in *Muslim In The West After 9/11: Religion, Politics, And Law*, ed. by Jocelyne Cesari (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 45-65 (p. 46).
[14] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 143-144.
[15] Ibid, p. 143-144.

and oppression.[16] In the UK, mainstream print media such as *The Times* and *The Guardian* also took on a differentiation approach of depicting "good Muslims" as loyal British subjects who condemns violence and terrorism versus "bad Muslims" (the "other") as those who supports terrorism in the name of jihad.[17]

Muslim Women Portrayed As An "Oppressed Gender"

In the post 9-11 context, another contemporary media representation of Islam and Muslims focused on Muslim women as an oppressed gender and the "veil" (hijab/niqab/burqa/head scarf) as an oppressive symbol.[18] This is another case of a Muslim stereotype by Western media in depicting Muslim women as having no rights and being victims of violence and sexism by misogynistic Muslim men.[19] Green opined that to the West, the "veil" represents Islam's backwardness and uncivilized nature and is therefore an object of particular concern for the media."[20] Alsultany reported that thousands of articles on Muslim women were published within a year after 9-11 in "major U.S. and world publications and thousands more during the subsequent seven years of the Bush administration's War on Terror."[21] The media's enthusiastic publication of images of "oppressed" and "veiled" Muslim women positioned the status of these women as victims of Islam, an oppressive and violent religion and in need of rescue.[22] This issue of Muslim women and the "veil" is also often politicised to serve the political agendas of the West and to justify the ongoing wars against the Islamic terrorists.[23]

Furthermore, media images and stories of Muslim women dying in honor killings and facing female genital mutilation often arouse public sympathy and moral outrage from the West and presents a monolithic view of Islam as violent and oppressive.[24] In the UK, Morey and Yaqin opined that the reporting of honour killings of Muslim women in

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[16] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 171.
[17] Kabir, *Young British Muslims,* p. 133-136.
[18] Green, *The Fear Of Islam*, p. 243.
[19] Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 4; Green, *The Fear Of Islam*, p. 240.
[20] Green, *The Fear Of Islam*, p. 243.
[21] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 72.
[22] Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* p. 7; Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 71.
[23] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 82, 84; Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, p. 10.
[24] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 75-76; Green, *The Fear Of Islam*, p. 244; Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, p. 44, 71.

the UK press is problematic as it conjures up the image of the "civilized Self" (the West) and an "unenlightened Other" (Islam) and further draw the cultural divide between these two civilizations.[25] All these reinforced the ongoing Western media's portrayal of Muslim women as an oppressed gender in Islam and honor killings as inherently present in the Islamic faith. Thus, it again reinforces the idea that the Islamic faith is incompatible with Western values of freedom and rights. The discourse on Muslim women as an oppressed gender in Islam has also been politicized in the U.S. through public broadcast and print media made by influential women such as Laura Bush and Hillary Clinton.[26] The war against terrorism has thus also been framed by the media as a fight by the West to protect and liberate Muslim women from their unacceptable deplorable oppressed state and to punish the perpetrators – Muslim men and Islam.[27]

Conclusion

Since 9-11, Islam and Muslims have been getting bad press in the Western media. The persistent framing of Islam and Muslims as violent, dangerous, and backward as compared to Western civilization has been ingrained in the minds of ordinary non-Muslims in the West. Furthermore, the pity and sympathy aroused through the intentional framing of Muslim women as victims of oppression further ignited public anger and outrage against Islam as a religion and culture. "Saving" Muslim women from the clutches of "evil and bad Muslim men" and Islam becomes the Western nations' mission and duty. This negative framing of Islam and Muslims helped the Western governments to gain traction and support in their nation-wide securitization initiatives to combat terrorism and military interventions in the "War on Terror." As a result, a wider wedge is drawn between the U.S. and UK Muslim communities and the non-Muslim communities in these Western contexts. The contemporary representation of Islam and Muslims in these western contexts is certainly unflattering and damaging to the overall image of Islam and her adherents.

(Word Count: 1513)

[25] Morey and Yaqin, *Framing Muslims*, p. 71-72.
[26] Alsultany, *Arabs And Muslims*, p. 73.
[27] Ibid, p. 73.

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