



Visual Representation within the Media: A Descriptive Analysis of Images in British Muslim Magazines

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To fashion an analytic view of representations of Muslim women in British Muslim magazines.

Design/methodology/approach: Drawing on theories from within the history of Islamic art and data from the current population of Muslims in the United Kingdom, this paper examines the representation of Muslim women. Four images were selected from recent media products and discussed to expose how the magazines have employed their cultural identity to represent Muslim women.

Findings: The paper explores the representation of Muslim women within Muslim media in the UK. It explores the extent to which the history of Islamic art has relevance for making sense of recent media representations and outputs.

Research limitations/implications: Future research into Muslim images may improve the way Muslims are visually represented in the mass media and help position them as 'us' and 'insider' rather than 'them' and 'alien' in a context of multiculturalism.

Originality/value: The paper contributes to scholarship by improving understanding of the visual representations of Islam and Muslims in the media.

Keywords: Visual analysis; media representation; representation of Islam; Muslim populations

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of Muslims living in the West, global media has generally characterized Islam as a monolithic entity, synonymous with terrorism and religious hysteria (Said,



1997). Such characterization has led to the formation of a stereotyped image of Islam that resulted in the development of negative attitude and behaviour against Muslims worldwide. Despite the criticism levied against the misrepresentation of Muslims, the trend still continues until today. Several attestations to this claim can be found in the recent literature of media representation of Muslims and Islam. Terrorism, Muslim extremism and cultural issues made up the top three dominant topics in the British media (Poole, 2011; Lewis et al, 2011; Baker, 2010). Similarly, the media in France (Rigoni, 2007) and Belgium (Zemni, 2011) depicts Islam as a threat to the law of the republic, secularism, freedom of expression, women's rights and security of the West.

From the point of view of visual communication, Muller, Ozcan & Seizov (2009) assert that images carry the potential for dual meaning - in the form of its content; and its form or style of representation. They brought example of 12 Danish cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammad that sparked global controversy in the early year 2006. While it was considered as the artists' expression of how they perceived Prophet Muhammad and a politically reflection of alienated Muslims in Denmark by the editor, it triggered widespread anger among Muslims all over the world concerning the meaning of the content as well as the form it was represented. To Muslims, depicting negative image of the prophet was an insulting act and it was created purposefully to demonize their religious leader and the whole Muslims. The depiction was simultaneously offensive to Muslims as depicting God and all prophets in any form is blasphemous.

As far as the integration process is concerned, the British system of multiculturalism places a normative emphasis on preserving heterogeneity (Greenberg & Miazhevich, 2012). By ignoring cultural, political and historical aspects of visual media or perhaps not realizing the diversity in the customary practice within the Muslim community itself, it could widen the gap between diversity and equality, the two important components in multiculturalism (Modood, 2005, 2007; Meer & Modood, 2009; Parekh, 2006; Phillips, 2004). This paper will therefore discuss the visual analysis of two different-oriented Muslim magazines in the UK from social, cultural and historical context. To sketch a sort of profile of the editor's attitudes towards Muslim women, two documents can be utilized: History of Islamic arts; and Muslim populations in Britain.

1.1 History of Islamic arts

Du Ry (1970) asserts that to understand the image in Islam is to look the history of arts through different eyes. Islamic art is distinctive in the light of its three-fold entity namely religion, politics and culture (Stewart, 1972). Each of the three is dynamically co-extensive, inseparable and sometimes overlaps in the creation of Islamic arts. Likewise,



James (1974) states that art and Islam is indivisible, notably in the representational art of calligraphy and architecture. Thus, image in Islam could be seen and should be conceived in the different orientations it embraces.

Historically, Muslims created a distinctive and valuable culture of their own by taking elements of various cultures. Persian miniature painting of the Mongol Ilkhanid Dynasty is the clear example. Since the Ilkhanids had close links with China, Persian painters were exposed to the stimulating influence of Chinese arts. Some of the effects of Chinese influence can be seen in the picture of *Bahram Gur's Battle with the Dragon* in the famous *Shah-Nama* (Book of Kings) in the 14th century (James, 1974). The mountain and landscape details are of Far Eastern origin and of course the dragon and the attire of the warrior in combat.

Later in the 16th century, many painters moved to India, an area with a long-established three-dimensional tradition. They were influenced by the attitudes of influential rulers of Mughal emperors such as Akbar (1556-1605), Jahangir (1605-1627) and Shah Jahan (1627-1659). Akbar, as part of his general policy of accommodating the Hindu majority of the state, encouraged the fusion of Persian and Indian artistic traditions in painting, thereby encouraging the best humanistic and realistic aspects of the classical Persian style and playing down the impersonal images and purely decorative colour schemes. The best example could be the scene from *Akbar-Nama* (James, 1974), which illustrates Akbar and his people on the Fort of Ranthambor. There is an individualisation of people, animals and landscape details. Hindu-Muslim collaboration in the visual arts continued until the next successor, Jahangir. Obviously, the influence of Chinese and Indian arts demonstrates the fusion of intercultural ingredients that involved acceptance, accommodation and tolerance to other cultures.

In spite of the fusion of various cultures, images in Islam preserve the same proscription and present a strong uniformity in its belief in One God. Even when the rulers changed, Islamic arts present uniformity in its images (Ettinghausen, 1974) and intimately interweave with religious, theological and legal commitments (Madden, 1975). Stemming from this belief, Islam puts its concern on the "religious interdiction of images" (Burckhardt, 1972). Aniconism becomes the principal guideline in presenting images in whatever means and forms. Islamic religious law does not prescribe any particular forms of art, but merely restricts the field of expression. The restrictions are based on two major jurisdictions:



1. The Quran prohibits idolatry that involves all visual representations of God in any form because the nature of God is beyond all descriptions; and
2. The Prophet says imitating the Creator's work such as the form of man is blasphemous.
- 3.

Following this, Islamic religious law does not prescribe any particular forms of visual, but merely restricts the field of expression. Most contemporary scholars agree that photography and computer-mediated images, whether 2D or 3D, are permissible for good reasons and are so long not tainted with the motive of idol or heroic worship (Onislam, 22nd Mar. 2013; Islamic Scholar Imran Nazar Hosein, 23rd Mar. 2013).

1.2 Muslim populations in Britain

Muslims constitute the largest minority religion in the European Union and also the biggest Islamic diaspora in the world (Amghar, et.al, 2007). Ramdani (2012) in the British Council's Our Shared Future Project reports that Europe is currently home to an estimated 44 million Muslims, with the number expected to increase to more than 58 million by 2030. About 11 million live in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and other Eastern European countries with long-established Muslim communities; 16 million live in Russia and over 18 million live in Western and Northern Europe. Of the latter group, a large majority are immigrants from Muslim nations who were either invited to come and work in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s or have made their way to the continent in recent years to look for jobs, seek asylum or join their families.

Data gathered by the Pew Research Center (2011), a nonpartisan fact tank that informs the public about the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world, also highlights the number of Muslims in Europe has grown from 29.6 million in 1990 to 44.1 million in 2010. Europe's Muslim population is projected to exceed 58 million by 2030. Muslims today account for about 6% of Europe's total population, up from 4.1% in 1990. Meanwhile in the UK, Muslims population increase 4.6% in 2010 or equivalent to 2,869,000. In more recent statistics (<http://www.gatestoneinstitute.org/>, 2012), the Muslim population of the UK rose from 1.5 million to 2.7 million between 2001 and 2011. Significantly, there is an increase from 3 percent to 4.8 percent of the overall population.

At present, Muslims in Britain are more ethnically diverse. In the 2011 National Population Census, (<http://www.ons.gov.uk/> Office for National Statistics, 2013), two-thirds of Muslims (68 %) were from an Asia background, including Pakistani (38 %) and Bangladeshi (15 %). The proportion of Muslims reporting as Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (10 %) was similar to those reporting as Other



ethnic group (11 %). Back to 2001, there were 1.6 million Muslims in England and Wales, or 3 % of the population, according to the census. By 2011 the Muslim population had grown to 2.7 million people or 4.8 % of the population. The most intriguing part in the census is 47.2% of Muslim populations were born in the UK and 53% were non-UK born, which implies the former is the second and third generation of immigrant-Muslims who might form an adoptive living of being culturally-Muslim and British at the same time.

All the above data will drive us to the discussion on the identity of British Muslim people, particularly women and how they adopt themselves living in the UK. By taking the history of Islamic arts into consideration, it is my aim to address the visual representation of Muslim women in the magazines to inform us about them as an individual and as a wife. My study is significant to tell something about how Muslim editors/publishers are visibly constructing the identities of British Muslims in a largely hostile public space and misrepresentation of Muslims in the media.

2. METHODS AND PROCEDURE

For this paper, my concern is to outline a descriptive approach in examining visual representations with reference to gender display depicted in two Muslim magazines published in the UK, namely *Emel* and *Sisters*. These two monthly magazines offer rich imagery in different orientations that will trigger fascinating discussions and findings from the perspective of a culturally diverse religion. Firstly founded in 2007, *Sisters* is proud to announce that 'the magazine's ethos is rooted in the Quran and Sunnah, according to the understanding of the Pious Predecessors.' While *Sisters* has a team of writers, journalists, artists and readers who are based all over the world (<http://www.sisters-magazine.com>, 5th Jul. 2013), *Emel* has had outstanding reception from Muslim and non-Muslim alike and has subscribers in over 60 countries (<http://www.emel.com>, 5th Jul. 2013). In 2004, *Emel* editor was awarded an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) from the UK Government for having a major local role in "interfaith dialogue".

Drawing on theories from within the history of Islamic art and data from the current population of Muslims in the United Kingdom, this paper examines the representation of Muslim women within the media that will tell us the plurality of Muslim society. Two images in *Emel Magazine* and two images in *Sisters Magazine* respectively were assessed to examine the meaning of images and discussed to expose how the magazines have employed their cultural identity to represent Muslim women. I will further discuss how these visual representations promote integration in the UK.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

It is believed that images provide ideals for how people perceive themselves and manage their actions, such as how they feel, look and behave. (Morris, 2006; Cottle, 2000). Khiabany & Williamson (2011) propose that it has become impossible to talk about Islam without reference to women, and the image of a Muslim woman appears to be among the most popular targets when representing Islam. Therefore in this paper, all the four images were selected on the basis of woman as an individual and woman as a wife to demonstrate their cultural background and the way they are represented as depicted in both magazines.

3.1 Woman as an individual

3.1.1 *Woman and Faith*



The first picture is taken from *Emel* magazine issue 77 February 2011 (<http://www.emel.com/>, 26th Feb 2014). This picture shows an image of Myriam Francois Cerrah, who was a Catholic and embraced Islam in 2003 at the age of 21. As an Oxford University DPhil student in Middle East Politics (at the time the picture was published) and formerly graduated from Cambridge, she is represented as a native white lady who transform herself as a committed Muslim and having high education. Her body language and facial expression show her emotional state as being a Muslim. Furthermore, her choice of attire indicates she is practising Islamic teachings as Islam clearly outlines a clear guideline of attire for Muslim women that reflect chastity and modesty. With a grinning smile, the gesture is pointing out the symbolic attribute to the viewer. The picture carries emotive purpose and symbolizes a happy converted Muslim with firm hope and determination of her choice being a Muslim.

In Britain, percentage of the native White British embracing Islam is rising (2013). Data from mosques indicates there may be more than 100,000 converts in Britain of various ethnicities. There were 5,000 conversions in 2012 of which three quarters were young females (<http://www.arabnews.com/>, 2013). This trend is also discussed in a report by

the University of Cambridge, "Narratives of Conversions to Islam in Britain: Female Perspectives (2013), which among its objectives is to provide a platform for the converts to express their views of being British Muslims. Since their conversion becomes political, the report emphasizes that White converts could be an important instrument and fill the gap between heritage Muslim and wider British society.

3.1.2 Woman and Beauty



The second picture (*Sisters*, issue December 2011), uses a graphic illustration of a woman to highlight woman and beauty, particularly in hair style and treatment. The body posture connotes the woman is pleased with herself, feels free expressing her beauty and charm. There is a connection between the form of her hair with the background of floral/vegetal design, one of the prominent visual elements of Islamic arts. Floral design or better known as arabesque is a decorative art found in mostly Islamic arts. Islamic arts encompass a wide historical range and broad geographical area including North Africa, the Middle East, eastern and sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, as well as part of South and Southeast Asia (<http://www.shangrilahawaii.org>, 2014). Islamic art visually covers many centuries, cultures, dynasties and geographical areas, and arabesque is seen as unifying visual components of Islamic arts besides calligraphy and geometry. Historically, ornamentation in Islamic art came to include figural representations in its decorative vocabulary. In spite of opposition to the depiction of human and animal forms holds true for religious art and architecture, in the secular sphere, such representations have flourished in nearly all Islamic cultures (<http://www.metmuseum.org/>, 2014).

In this regard, a graphic illustration of a woman becomes the foreground of this image. The magazine presents a living being in a basic figure and associates the art of beauty with woman. Woman without veil is depicted here as in practice, woman is freely open her hair at home only in front of her husband and closely blood-tied family. Without giving scrutiny on the face, the beauty is signified through the wavy hair look that resembles with the rhythmic graphic of arabesque in the background. Giving no identity

to the woman allows creativity and emotive detachment in the mind of viewers. It is a brilliant combination of traditional element of visual art with the representation of a modern woman, which devoid of particular ethnic or racial identity.

3.2 Woman as a wife

3.2.1 Relationship

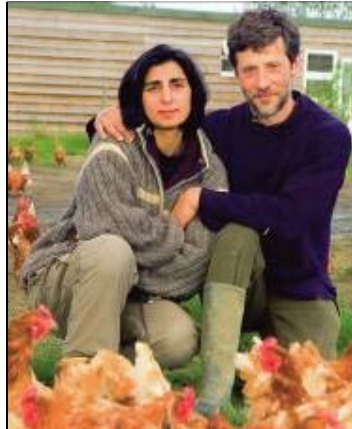


In spite of defining a relationship of a married couple in a more personal way, *Sisters* (Issue January 2013) symbolizes marriage in the depiction of hand holding between husband and wife. Although the picture is not including faces, the audience would know they are a married couple through such symbols as henna, ring and decorative dress. Henna is synonymous with a bride from Indian continents, some African region like Morocco and other parts of South Asia. It shows that the magazine represents the woman with her traditional practice inherited from the country of origin. In term of relationship, there must be a man and a woman play the role of a husband and a wife that constitute a marriage. Through the lenses of Islam, marriage is viewed as a sacred relationship and put in a high place in a functioning society.

In this picture, the hands are part of unstructured analytical process in a conceptual representation. The hands are made salient and conventionally associated with symbolic values of wife's role in a marriage, no image details as to depict a generalized essence of marriage. Ring, henna and decorative cloth were used to confer a wedding that celebrate a lawful marriage. Man and woman each is essentially a different human being with different characteristics and physical identities, but they can live hand-in-hand in a meaningful life. In marriage, a woman is responsible to control and guides her husband emotionally. By looking at the attire and accessories of the bride and groom, this picture shows that this Muslim couple blend a traditional wedding ceremony with western attire and the practice is compatible within British society. Based on the hand's gesture, the image clearly denies a practice of forced marriages among Muslim community, which

always lead to oppression and injustice to women as is abusively reported within the media.

3.2.2 Role and responsibility



The last picture from *Emel* (<http://www.emel.com/>, 26th Feb 2014) describes a married couple who decide to be farmers and own a farm house in Oxford. Former academics, Ruby and Lutfi Radwan moved from London, where they both grew up, to establish Willowbrook Farm in Oxfordshire. This picture represents the second generation of Muslim immigrants who grew up and had education in Britain. They are just some other British people who discover the attractions of rural living and move away from an urban environment to start a new life in the countryside. Approaching their 40s with four kids, they represent Muslims as hard working and optimistic about their future in the country. They consider they are loyal British citizen and going through hardship and challenges to survive just like other British citizens. This picture promotes the role and responsibility of a wife to be always side by side with her husband in deciding their future life and growing the family together. The wife is not a passive spouse, but actively works hand-in-hand with the husband to build a strong foundation of the family physically, mentally, faithfully and financially.

From the perspective of visual studies, *Sisters'* representation of women is unique and distinctive. The way they represent people demonstrates a strong philosophy where they cut off heads and never present women in a complete figure and facial expression. Some of the women images are represented by graphic illustrations and some are depicted from back view with no specific identification of personality.



The following hadith address the use of imagery in Islam and serve as inspiration for the Sisters' methodology:

Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim relate that a man came to Ibn Abbas (Allah be well pleased with him and his father) and said, "My livelihood comes solely from my hands, and I make these pictures. Can you give me a legal opinion about them" Ibn Abbas told him, "Come closer," and the man did. "Closer," he said, and the man did, until he put his hand on the man's head and said: "Shall I tell you what I heard from the Messenger of Allah, Prophet Muhammed (Allah bless him and give him peace) I heard the Messenger of Allah say, "Every maker of pictures will go to the fire, where a being will be set upon him to torment him in hell for each picture he made. So if you must, draw trees and things without animate life in them."

And in another hadith, Bukhari, Tirmidhi, and Imam Nasa'i relate the prophetic hadith from Ibn Abbas, "Whoever makes a picture, Allah shall torture him with it on the Day of Judgment until he can breathe life into it, and he will never be able to."

It is noted that Sisters does not limit to women who are shown from behind or at angles with the facial features cut-off. All living beings, men or women, adults or children are represented this way. Sisters' World and Voices Editor, Brooke Benoit in her email to the author said,

"A few of the internal dialogues at Sisters about how we represent women in particular have had to do with hijab and hegemony. As far as hijab goes we have begun to present some illustrations of women in private environments where they would likely be hijab free, such as a spreads of women in their homes or at a women-only party. These images are still presented without any facial features on them, which is among the minimum some scholars advise when making illustrations of people.

The second issue that we occasionally discuss –hegemony- is to be sure to include a variety of people with varying skin tones and body types. Although uncommonly thin white women are one of the smallest demographics in the ummah, they are the most commonly depicted



women in most media and media sources, such as those we buy our images from for the magazine. Sisters designers are diligent to not bring the hegemony into the magazine, but rather to source diverse images and alter some when possible."

Emel however, explicitly exhibits all Muslim images from different walks of life and women are not exceptional, even receiving more attention. The editor once mentioned that the magazine offers narrative space about people in the same way the Quran tells the story about people. *"Islam does not exist in abstract....it is lived and expressed through people."* They place no constraints of women appearance on condition the images are able to reflect the characters they bring to the readers. They include both heritage and convert Muslims, who are represented as educated, ambitious and firm with their decision in living their life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

By applying different form in representing Muslim women, both magazines show plurality in Muslim society, create positive representations of Islam and Muslims, and boost a self-generated view of identity among Muslim women, which is compatible within a British society. The integration of traditional and contemporary lifestyle these women are highlighted and differing approach the media use to represent them need to be more considerably conveyed to the public. These two magazines represent who the Muslim women are and demonstrate how they live their life as others do. Looking through the history of Islamic arts, the representations of women reflect the various Muslim populations in Britain that enrich the existing multicultural Britain. This is well-connected with what Modood (2005) suggests that the concept of multiculturalism is a gracious vision for Britain in the 21st century. Multiculturalism ideal could be a platform for two-way interaction between the members of majority and ethnic minorities, where both parties should initiate ways to integrate. Every members of society must recognize the distinctiveness of each group and that the process of integration works differently for different groups. Following this, media and public spokespeople can play a key role in fostering such narratives by promoting positive stories of Muslim–non-Muslim relations and demonstrating the diversity and depth within Islam and Muslim communities. This paper would add scholarship endeavour towards global understanding about Islam, especially in the midst of white-dominant country like the UK. Further studies would investigate the extent to which Islamic values accord with British values, which in return could create harmonious integration within a wider society.



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