

Framing of Pakistani Muslim Women in International media: Muslim feminist's Perspective

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Abstract

Drawing from Orientalism, Muslim feminist theories and standpoint feminism this study analyses the articles on Pakistani Muslim women in Time and Newsweek from the year 1979-2002. The study explores whether the two magazines portrayed the struggle of Pakistani Muslim women for change as a political force in these years as a group who are trying to improve the lot of their sex within the confines of their faith i.e. in demanding change within an Islamic framework or as a group who rejects the possibility of co-existence between Islam and feminism? The findings indicate that they were often depicted as oppressed victims of the 'repressive' laws of Islam. The identification of Pakistani women's problem as a religious problem was very prominent. Least coverage was given to her as the one who is trying to work for her emancipation within the context of Islam. Whereas, most of the coverage was given to women in the secular image and in this context hardly any reference of Islam was given.

Key words: Pakistani women; Islamic feminism; standpoint feminism; emancipation

Introduction

It is argued that the image of Muslim women, in the West, is very biased and designed. The image is tainted with racism and ethnocentrism. While tracing the traditional Orientalism Mehdid (1994) contends that the females have been, perhaps more systematically than males, dehumanized and disincarnated. She remains the object of a permanent gaze and a constant prying, placed under male Western eyes. Similarly Said argues in 2001 that Orientalism is an exclusively male province; "it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders (p.207)". He illustrates, in the writing of travelers and novelist Eastern women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy expressing unlimited sensuality, where women are depicted as more or less stupid and above all willing. This trend of covering Eastern women negatively has increased in the recent years. Muslim woman has been portrayed as submissive, oppressed and backward and in the construction of this negative image mass media has played a major role (Macdonald, 2003). In most of the Western world, the phrase "Arab Islamic women" conjures up a vision of heavily veiled, secluded women, whose lives consist of little more than their homes, their children and the other females in the harem or immediate kinship circle (Gerner , 1984).

The trend among American reporters is to stereotype the act of an individual or a group as being representative of the entire Muslim community or Islam. Studies in the past indicate that the portrayal of Muslims and Islam and particularly Muslim women in the American media is negative and violent. It portrays Muslims and Islam as anti-modern, anti progress and uncivil and anti-west (Shaheen, 1988; Abdullah,1994 ; Siddiqui , 1994). Number of researches has indicated that the images of Muslim women conveyed by the dominant culture have been based on distortions and stereotypes that legitimate the status quo at the same time; they falsely represent the actual experience of Muslim women in the society. The odious images and information in the Western media expose the gross mistreatment of women in the Islamic countries. An appalling aberration by the media is that they fail to distinctly state that the images of oppressions are the product of corrupt, patriarchal regimes and governments. This renders the uncritical consumers of American corporate media unaided in discerning fact from fiction.

It is very further argued that these images are largely marked by stereotypes rather than knowledge. Western commentators have generally projected a negative view of the relationship among Islamism as a political ideology, Islam as a religion, and women where she is depicted as living in oppressive patriarchal societies and shackled by a long list of cultural and religious codes of conduct oppressing them (Abdellatif & Ottoway, 2007).

European literary and scholarly works have been lowering the local traditions, by stating that they are hostile to women (Moghissi, 2000) and very little attention has been paid in the literature to show how women's position has been shaped in crucial ways by broader forces in motion via economic and political development, almost totally unconcerned with women and their equality (Areibi, 1991).

Feminists analyzing colonial discourse have revealed that to legitimize the colonial rule a number of European authors have created images of Muslim women as visibly lustful, impious, an enslaved source of sexual pleasure as in the images projected in Arabian nights. Along with the images of a domesticated, subjugated, unenlightened woman as compared with the liberated, independent and enlightened Western woman (Moghissi, 2000). This is just not true in the past even today the news narrative of the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban regime is linked to the legitimization of military involvement in general and of foreign policy in particular (Klaus and Kassel , 2005). After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 the main narratives about the success of the war has been that the 'burka (veil) has disappeared ' and freedom has been achieved. They argue that though it is important to address the issue of women's rights in the media, whenever women's rights suddenly appear on the agenda of foreign or domestic news, one should ask where this interest is rooted and whether it serves women or some other purpose. (Eide, 2004; Klaus and Kassel, 2005).

The present study explores how the images of Muslim women of Pakistan are framed in the international magazines Time and Newsweek. The Standpoint feminists' perspective is applied to challenge the notion of Western feminism as the criteria through which other women is looked at. The researcher examines whether Pakistani Muslim women's emancipation images are framed as succumbing to foreign influence. Is the struggle of Muslim women for change as a political force depicted as a group who are trying to improve the lot of their sex within the confines of their faith i.e. in demanding change within an Islamic framework or as a group who rejects the possibility of co-existence between Islam and feminism? As it is argued by Muslim feminists to understand the position of the Muslim women one must understand the teachings, then the context or society in which they live before making any judgments. But west identifies the problems of Muslim women as a religious problem which is strongly resented and resisted by Muslim feminists for it reflects sheer ignorance of Islam.

Theoretical Framework

Feminism in the 1990s has shown a new and refreshing willingness to engage in self-criticism. Placing emphasis on including all women by accepting the multiplicity of each woman's identity and self-identification, feminists are now urged to respect difference, affirming the singularity of each woman's experience and struggle, and validating self-understanding and self-analysis. In the postmodern period feminists approach is the 'decentering of women' they propose replacing unitary image of women with a concept of fractured, multiple identities. Postmodern feminists reject the idea that there is one truth, and argue that there are many truths, none of which is privileged along gender lines. Postcolonial feminism inspired views hold that feminist social science should be practiced from the standpoint of particular groups of women. They point out that because of the many differences that divide women it is impossible to claim one single or universal 'women's experience'. They argue that individuals are both oppressed in some situations and in relation to some people while at the same time are privileged in others.

Standpoint feminism focuses on power and challenges the idea of 'essential truth' especially the hegemonic reality created, passed down and imposed by those in power. It emphasizes that feminist social science should be practiced from the standpoint of women, or particular groups of women. They have pointed out that because of the many differences that divide women it is impossible to claim one single or universal 'women's experience'. They argue that individuals are both oppressed in some situations and in relation to some people while at the same time are privileged in others. Their goal is to situate women and men within multiple systems of domination in a way that is more accurate and more able to confront oppressive power structures (Anderson, 1988).

Muslim feminists' raise questions both about the systems of thinking that have been derived from western-centered ways of knowing and about new ways of constructing knowledge, to be more inclusive of and centered in Muslim women's experiences. The contention of a Muslim woman in today's time is to understand the status of a Muslim woman in her own context. Her right to assert herself, her right or conscious choice to opt for a certain religious course needs to be acknowledged and appreciated. Unfortunately, West cannot see a woman being liberated without leaving the crutches of religion. However, majority of Muslim women see their liberation in following their religion.

Recent researches reveal that Muslim female activists have shown rejection and even contempt for the concept of Western feminism, which they interpret not as a struggle for the recognition of the rights of women, but as a movement to free women from all social constraints and obligations to family and community, leading to excessive individualism and even licentiousness. (Abdellatif & Ottoway, 2007). Areibi in 1991 argues that Muslim women have been unable to adopt the Western model of feminism for three reasons. First reason has to do with the insistence of Western liberation movement on wages as a liberating force. Secondly the insistence of western movements that family and kinship ties are a hindrance to women's liberation. And the third reason is connected with the West's identification of the problem of Muslim women as a religious problem. This view is strongly resisted by Muslim women, because it reflects a sheer ignorance of Islam. Leila Ahmed also argues that the nature of the attitudes of society shaped by Islam regarding women are incompatible with feminism for the social attitudes towards the Western World, which is the birth of feminism, are mixed, for the relation between the Islamic world and West have traditionally been confrontational (cited in Arebi, 1991).

Muslim feminists' raise questions both about the systems of thinking that have been derived from western-centered ways of knowing and about new ways of constructing knowledge which is exclusive of Muslim women's experiences. The contention of a Muslim woman is to understand her status in her own context. They assert that her conscious choice to opt for a certain religious course should be acknowledged and appreciated. They argue that the only way to achieve equality of rights for women in Muslim societies is within an Islamic frame work. The reason for this is because, majority of Muslim women who are attached to their religion cannot perceive that they can be liberated through the use of secular approach imposed from the outside by international bodies or from above by undemocratic governments. The only way to resolve the conflicts of these women and remove their fear of pursuing rich and fruitful lives is to build a Muslim feminist jurisprudential basis which clearly shows that Islam not only does not deprive them of their rights, but in fact demands these rights for them.

As Mernissi contends that, "women, illiterate and educated alike, are coming to diagnose and verbalize their problems – previously identified and labeled as being emotional- as being essentially political"(p. 10), and that this is the sort of revolutionary process that is taking place in the Muslim world and since it does not have the spectacular aspects of media coverage , it is the process that is not much talked about. (Mernissi, 1987).

Pakistani context

The status and position of women in Pakistan and their subsequent access to power have undergone substantive change since 1979. In this period of 23 years from 1979 till 2002 Pakistan saw two military dictatorships with brief intervals of four democratic regimes. General Zia ul-Haq's assumption of power and his implementation of Islamization programme had profound consequences for women of Pakistan. Controversial ordinances dealing with adultery and law of evidence were promulgated. General Zia's period witnessed on the one side for the first time an establishment of Women's Division in the cabinet secretariat and the appointment of another commission on the status of women. Along with 20 women as members of Federal Advisory Council (Shoora) and 20 percent increase in the National Assembly in 1985. And on the other side in the process of Islamisation a series of controversial and discriminatory legislation against women such as Hudood Ordinance 1973 and Law of evidence 1984. He also promulgated laws regarding Islamic penal laws governing retribution and compensation (Qisas and Diyat) in crimes involving bodily injury when the victim if woman the amount of compensation was halved.

Later, hopes were pinned down on the two democratic regimes of Benazir Bhutto. Subsequently, the assumption of power by General Musharaf in the year 1998 opened a new debate of "Enlightened moderation" in Islam.

After Zia ul Haq in 1988 during Benazir Bhutto rule as the first woman prime minister, women issues were addressed by setting up women's police stations, courts and women's development banks. However, during her two incomplete terms (1988-1990 and 1993- 96) she was unable to repeal the controversial Haddood Ordinance and propose any legislation to improve welfare services for women. However, Pakistan acceded to the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW). But later Pakistan neither signed nor ratified the optional protocol women's convention.

Nawaz Sharif in 1997 formally enacted the Qisas and Diyat ordinance which was earlier kept in force through the presidential order after every four months. However, in 1997 a ruling by the Lahore High Court though upheld a woman's right to marry freely, called for amendments to the 1965 Family Laws, on the basis of Islamic teachings to enforce parental permission to discourage "love marriages".

Later, even the report of the Inquiry of the Commission for women stated that the Hudood legislation must be repealed as it discriminates against women and is in conflict with their fundamental rights. During his regime, country's first all-women university, Fatima Jinnah University for women was inaugurated in 1998. During General Mushraaf's regime (1998- 2008) the famous rape case of Muktaran Mai brought the plight of rape victims in Pakistan under international scrutiny. And in 2006, General Mushraaf signed an ordinance for the immediate release on bail of around 1300 women were imprisoned on charges other than terrorism and murder. And in late 2006, the Pakistani parliament repealed some parts of Haddood ordinance and passed the Women's Protection Bill. The bill allowed for scientific evidence and DNA tests to be used in processing rape cases. In 2006 for the empowerment of women the cabinet approved of increase of 10% from 5% reserved quota seats for women in Central Superior Services. And in the same year for the first time women cadets assumed guard duties at the mausoleum of Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

In the last 30 years Pakistani women are making an impact in all walks of life, whether politics or sports. They are breaking down a western stereotypical image of oppressed, uneducated Pakistani housewives. They are having an impact in almost every professional field. They have proved that they do not lag behind in any professional field e.g. as doctors, engineers, IT specialists, economists, media personnel, lawyers, parliamentarians and even in sports. Recently, four women joined Pakistan Air Force as fighter pilots, making a precedent in the history of Pakistan. Hundreds of women have been employed in police and traffic police particularly after the establishment of women's police stations in the country. Though they are excelling in all walks of life, especially in decision-making fields, activists say there is yet to be done to further empower women in Pakistan. It is also argued that a strong feudal and patriarchal social structure, cultural bias against women and the acceptance of traditional customary laws creates an environment that is not conducive to the aspirations of the contemporary women.

However, despite their successes they are portrayed, especially in the west as oppressed victims of the social and economic taboos. These stereotypes have been strengthened by issues like burning of girls' schools in some remote area of northwestern Pakistan by militants. It is argued that while the western media rushes to highlight the negative attitudes, it never highlights positive aspects and women active participation in the fields which are usually dominated by men. Pakistani women in some aspects even beats world's biggest democracy, United States. Though in Pakistan women's population is 51% but if you compare the ratio of women's participation in politics in America, Pakistan stands way ahead of America. For example, in the lower and upper houses of the parliament, women's presence is 33%, while in America it's only 17%.

Research questions and Hypotheses

RQ1. Is there a relationship between the political context of the country and the coverage on Pakistani women?

H1. Oppressed images of Pakistani Muslim women are prominent in the two newsmagazines.

H2. There is a strong relationship between oppressed images of Pakistani Muslim women and negative image of Islam

Methodology

This study considers all the news articles of Time and *Newsweek* in which Pakistan or Pakistani Muslim women are referred to from January 1979 to December 2002. The study analysis the coverage on Pakistani Muslim women in the Muslim feminist's perspective. The images are studied in the context of prominence and Islam.

The image of Pakistani women is studied in five categories; *Liberated westernized Muslim* women, who are framed to be liberated while following the model of the West; *secular* image of Muslim women who are neither rejecting religious dictums nor fighting for her rights within an Islamic framework and is also not necessarily following the model of a Western woman; *liberated positive image* of Muslim women who understands their position in Islam and are trying to fight for their rights within an Islamic framework; *rebellion Muslim women* who openly challenge the religious dictums and asserts herself without following the model of western women; and lastly image of *oppressed Muslim women* who are oppressed due to religious and social norms of the society and passively accept her position. Oppressed image is considered when there is reference to issues of veil, polygamy and patriarchy or when she is referred to depict the backwardness of the country in the news article or in the picture. And the last category though she was depicted but could not be placed in any of the above mentioned categories.

Comment in the context of Islam¹ is studied both in the text and image in the picture along with the caption. It is studied in four categories. Favourable- when any reference to Islam, which favours the rights of Muslim women and highlights that Islam, is a religion, which is not oppressive and is likely to create a favourable impression of Islam. Against - any reference to Islam as an oppressive religion and is likely to create an adverse image of Islam. Neutral-a reference to Islam that does not fall into the above mentioned categories. None- no reference of Islam in the text or in the picture. Prominence given to Muslim woman is the total score of ,placement of the story; number of pages; page number; nature of story; number of pictures; size of the pictures; camera shots. Index score of the following is done on ratio scale.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Year- wise coverage of Pakistani Muslim women

Year	No reference	Westernized	secular	liberated	rebellion	oppressed	total
1979	0	0	2	0	0	1	3
1981	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
1982	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
1983	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
1985	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
1986	0	2	10	0	0	0	12
1987	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1988	0	0	12	0	0	0	12
1989	0	1	6	0	0	0	7
1990	1	0	10	0	0	0	11
1991	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
1992	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1993	0	0	5	0	0	0	5
1994	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
1995	0	0	2	0	0	1	3
1996	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
1997	1	1	5	0	0	0	7
1998	2	0	1	1	1	0	5
1999	1	0	1	0	0	2	4
2000	1	0	0	0	1	0	2
2001	0	0	1	0	1	1	3
2002	2	1	1	0	2	3	9
N=	11(11.3%)	5(5.1%)	65(67%)	2(2%)	6(6.1%)	8(8.2%)	97

The findings in the Table 1 show that out of 97 articles on Pakistan, only 2 (2%) articles were on liberated Pakistani Muslim women, who were depicted in the positive context of Islam; whereas, 65 (67%) articles were on the image of Pakistani women as secular which in this case was mostly of Benazir Bhutto, the first woman prime minister of Pakistan. Likewise, her image as a woman who rejects Islam and does not also follow the western idea of emancipation is more or less the same as the one who rejects Islam and follows the western idea of emancipation.

The categories are significantly different from the hypothesized values, $\chi^2 (5N=97) = 179.8, p=.000$. (The minimum expected cell frequency is 16.2) This shows that the difference between the categories was significantly different. The year-wise topical coverage of Pakistani women in Table 1 show that most coverage on Pakistani women in the two magazine was in the year 2002. The rise in the oppressed images of Pakistani women was in the year 2001. Although from the year 1977 till 1988 during a very controversial rule of Gen. Zia as far as laws on women was concerned, there was hardly any reference to Pakistani women in this period. In the year 1998 Pakistan did its first nuclear tests; hence increase in the images in this year.

¹ Image of Islam in the text and picture.

Scoring: 0=if in the text or in picture no reference of Islam; 1= if text or picture is positive; 2= if text or picture is neutral; 3= if both text and picture are negative.

High score indicates negative image of Islam.

Another interesting finding is the sudden increase in the coverage in the year 2002 just after the toppling of the Taliban government in Afghanistan. The increase in the images was mostly related to crime on women.

The images of Pakistani Muslim woman as secular were mostly of Ms Benazir Bhutto, in the year 1986; this was the year when she returned to Pakistan after a prolong self exile. In 1988 she won the elections and she remained in power till 1990. She was removed from the office in August by the President on the corruption charges. Later, she was re-elected in the year 1993 and removed in the year 1996 again on corruption charges this time by the president who was chosen by her own party. This explains the reason in the rise in the coverage her in these years. Findings also show that out of 65 news items, 27 news items were exclusively on Ms Benazir Bhutto whereas others had a reference in the text. In most of the news items her educational background in the West was always highlighted. Even when there were serious charges of corruption, her responsibility was mitigated by focusing more on the general conditions of the country or by minimizing the effect by hinting that it is the usual power game where the ruling often accuses the opposition of corruption. She was referred as a 'hard target' who despite the corruption charges 'vows to fight back the ruling'. In the news items she was most of the time referred to, either implicitly or explicitly, as a 'strong willed aristocrat who was educated at Harvard and Oxford'. She would be often referred to as someone who has 'Come Back' and who 'Battles to revive her family's dynasty' (*Newsweek*, Jan,1997).The reference to her family as a dynasty also portrays her as royalty, who has come back to fight for her right.

The findings indicate that Hypothesis 1 which stated that negative images of Pakistani Muslim women are prominent in the two newsmagazines is accepted as the correlation between the negative images of Muslim women and prominence given to them in the newsmagazines was highly significant, in the Pearson's correlation test, $r(96) = .364, p < .01$.

Table 2: Image of Pakistani Muslim women and Comment on Islam

Image	No reference	favour	neutral	against	Total
no reference	9 (81.2%)	0	1(9.1%)	1(9.1%)	11
Westernized	4(80%)	0	0	1(20%)	5
liberated	61(93.8%)	1(1.5)	2(3.1%)	1(1.5%)	65
liberated Muslim woman	2 (100%)	0	0	0	2
rebellion	0	0	0	6(100%)	6
oppressed	2 (25%)	0	1(12.5%)	5(62.5%)	8
Total	78(80%)	1(1%)	4(4.1%)	14(14.4%)	97

The findings in the table 2 show that out of 8 news items on oppressed image Muslim Pakistani women 5 (62.5%) news items had reference to Islam which was negative. Whereas, with reference to Pakistani women as secular out 65 news items, only 1 news items had a negative comment on Islam and 61(93.8%) news items did not refer to Islam. In the image where she was projected as the one who rejects Islam all the articles had negative comments about Islam.

Findings indicate that there is a big difference between the coverage of Pakistani Muslim woman in the secular image in the context of Islam and between Pakistani Muslim women as liberated and context of Islam. Hypothesis 2 which stated that there is a strong relationship between images of Pakistani Muslim women and negative image of Islam is accepted. The correlation between the negative images of Muslim women and negative image of Islam in the newsmagazines was highly significant, in the Pearson's correlation test, $r(96) = .503, p < .01$.

Conclusion

Findings indicate that in the two US based international magazines the coverage on Pakistani Muslim woman as secular and other images of women of Pakistan was poles apart in terms of quantity and quality. The coverage on women as secular, which was mainly focused on the first Pakistani woman Prime Minister Ms Benazir Bhutto, was positive. She was referred to as a secular leader capable of handling the complex problems of her country. She was frequently portrayed as a 'strong-willed aristocrat who was educated at Harvard and Oxford'. Her educational background in the West was often highlighted which might explain why her image was glorified in comparison to other women.

Even when there were serious charges of corruption, her responsibility was mitigated by focusing more on the general conditions of the country.

However, coverage on other Pakistani women was mostly negative. They were often depicted as oppressed victims of the 'repressive' laws of Islam. An interesting finding was that Ms Benazir Bhutto was hardly referred to in the context of Islam whereas other Pakistani women were usually framed in the context of negative image of Islam. The identification of Pakistani women's problem as a religious problem was very prominent.

Findings supported the hypothesis that the women who were trying to improve their position were the ones who adopted a secular outlook or who rejected Islam. Whereas the oppressed section of Pakistani women were most of the time associated with religious backwardness.

The findings also indicate that her image as oppressed and with reference to Islam as oppressive religion was also linked with the political context. Her image as oppressed along with the negative image of Islam increased after 9/11. Whereas, her image as oppressed was least during General Zia's time, whose rule is considered to most controversial one as far as rights of women are considered. This could be because Pakistan at that time was fighting the proxy war of US in Afghanistan.

The coverage excluded the experience of the Muslim women of Pakistan with Islam. Muslim women who attach themselves to their religion, do not alienate themselves from Islam and do not use a secular approach to improve their conditions were almost excluded in the coverage.

As standpoint feminism argues, it is impossible to claim one 'single' or universal 'female experience', similarly the researcher also argues that Muslim women of Pakistan are both oppressed in some situations and in relationship to some women, while at the same time are privileged in other. Goal should be to situate Pakistani women within their multiple contexts that more accurately reflects and confronts the oppressive power structures. The researcher within the framework of Standpoint feminism challenges the idea of one 'essential truth' as created, passed down and imposed by those in power. What is required is to accept and respect Muslim female identity and her struggle within the framework of her belief system.

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