The Misrepresentation of Arab and Muslim Women in Western Media

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Introduction

Women's representation in media is often stereotypical. Women are objectified, sexualized, and seen as secondary characters (Kasirye, 2021). Women are also significantly underrepresented in the media. The representation of Arab and Muslim women is no different, especially in Western media, where these women are often portrayed in a negative and stereotypical way. According to Ridouani (2011), "the long history of encounters between Western civilization and Islam has produced a tradition of portraying, in largely negative and self-serving ways, the Islamic religion and Muslim cultures" (p. 10). Muslim and Arab women are usually pictured in Western media as oppressed victims, the obedient servants of their controlling husbands or fathers, or as terrorists alongside their male relatives. Further, most Western media is fixed on the idea that all women originating from the Middle East or an Arab country, are hijab-wearing Muslims (Qutub, 2013). "The traditional image of the Middle Eastern woman that has long dominated Western media is one of an oppressed and exoticized creature, controlled by men and religion" (Eltantawy, 2013, p. 767). Though this may be true for some women, it is not an accurate representation of all Middle Eastern and Muslim women. This misrepresentation not only affects the public's perception of these women but also directly affects Middle Eastern and Muslim women. Such portrayals negatively affect the entire religion of Islam. When the media perpetuates stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim women, this affects society's perceptions of these women. Thus, shifting the portrayal of these women into a more positive and realistic image could lead to a complete social change in the Western mindset.

This paper analyzes how Western media portrays a negative and stereotypical image of Arab and Muslim women. It aims to address these misrepresentations and inaccuracies. The purpose of this paper is to examine how stereotypical representations Arab and Muslim women affect society, and the importance of addressing these misrepresentations. Finally, the paper provides strategies that can help to shift the media's portrayal of Arab and Muslim women. The paper is divided into four parts: literature review, discussion, policies and recommendations, and conclusion.

The Representation of Arab and Muslim women

According to Ridouani (2011), the stereotypical representation of Arabs and Muslims in Western media is not a recent phenomenon, but is, in fact, something deeply rooted in conceptualizations and perceptions that are based on Western society's first interactions with Arabs and Muslims. These women are mostly represented in fabricated stereotypes in different media outlets. Ridouani (2011) explains that when Western artists portray Arab and Muslim women, they tend to use their imaginations and their conceptualizations of Arabs and Muslims rather than factual evidence. Ridouani explains how the images drawn by Western artists are usually represented in a pornographic way and even present Arabs and Muslim women naked. He points out that when Western painters portray Arab and Muslim women, they tend to depict her as a belly dancer. This is because belly dancers are a cultural stereotype of Arab and Muslim women that most Westerners recognize. Nuraddin (2017) agrees that the representation of Arab and Muslim women is negative, and states that Muslims and especially Muslim women are one of the suppressed minority groups misrepresented by the media. They are often represented as submissive victims that usually fall under the threat of a patriarchal society, and consequently in need of the West's help.

Khan and Zahra (2016) also discuss the misrepresentations in Western media regarding Muslim women's roles. They explain how Muslim women are hardly ever recognized for their professions or their hard work. Rather, the only image that Western societies use to conceptualize a Muslim

woman is that of a heavily veiled or covered woman. Muslim and Arab women are presented as women with no freedom or liberty, as they face deep oppression within their own cultures, whereas Western society is able to "free" them from this oppression. Arab customs and culture are mainly targeted in the Western media, and instead of focusing on the facts related to the appearance, behaviors, or roles of Arab and Muslim women, Western media usually tends to distort these facts by creating stereotypical images of these women. This distortion takes root in the viewers' minds. For instance, the scarf, also known as the hijab or the veil, is usually understood as a mask worn by terrorists hiding their faces. Hence, the portrayal of these women is negative. Several authors claim that the "Hollywood-fabricated stereotypical images" of Arabs and Muslims are the consequence of "the 9/11 attacks and 9/11's association with Muslim individuals" (Qutub, 2013, p. 143). However, these misrepresentations were generated for decades before the 9/11 attacks. Qutub adds that Hollywood's portrayals of Middle Eastern cultures serve two main purposes, financial and political.

The negative portrayals of Arab and Muslim women in Western media vary. Kasriye (2021), for example, analyzed 32 stories using context analysis from the *New York Times* and 17 stories from *The Guardian* regarding how they describe Muslim women. Kasriye found that certain codes and descriptions were repeatedly used to describe Muslim women. For example, they were described as financially oppressed, terrorists, housewives, sexual objects for men, uneducated, and extremists.

Satiti (2017) notes that a veil is never considered a part of Western culture. She notes that it is often deemed as contradictory to freedom, since veiled women are portrayed as submissive. Veiled women are also assumed to have been "forced" to wear the veil, in accordance with their traditional and conservative societies. Khan and Zahra (2016) also explain that such representations position the West as "more progressive" than Muslim cultures, and in support of women's rights.

Western media also highlights violence against Muslim women, which supports the West's ideological claims that these women need to be rescued and liberated. For example, Western media labels like "victimized," "marginalized," "restricted," and "threatened," to portray Arab and Muslim women who are not actively fighting against their patriarchal societies. In contrast, labels like "warrior," "strong," "brave," "rebellion," and "fighter" were used to describe Arab and Muslim women rebelling against their society. Khan and Zahra (2016) also mention that Western media usually refers to Arab and Muslim women as "they, their, them," while positioning Western audiences as "us, we, [and] ours."

Qutub (2013) discusses the portrayal of Middle Eastern women in Hollywood productions. He states that Middle Eastern women are negatively represented in Western media as needing Western modernization, and this is the reason why educated Middle Eastern women are never portrayed or presented in any Western movie. Qutub also explains how Western media assumes that Arab and Muslim women have no actual agency in their communities because their societies are assumed to be gender segregated.

To make sense of these stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim women, Terman (2017) uses what she calls the theory of gendered orientalism. Using a gendered theory of orientalism, Terman identifies two primary findings. First, Muslim and Arab women are more likely to appear in the U.S. press only if they are living in societies that do not respect women's rights. Second, Terman notes that the U.S. media only covers or reports stories on Muslim and Arab women if they are mainly focused on gender discrimination and women's rights in their societies, even if the society they live in has a good record towards women's rights. In addition, Terman also explains how often the American media compares the lives of non-Western women to those of Western women, along with increased coverage that these women need saving and rescuing. She deduces that "gendered orientalism concludes that American media coverage cast Muslims as distinctly misogynistic, which reinforce stereotypes of Muslims generally as uncivilized, barbaric, and a cultural threat to Western values" (Terman, 2017, p. 495). This in turn affects the perception of Arabs and Muslims in the eyes of Westerners .

In her article "Challenging Media Representations of the Veil: Contemporary Muslim Women's Re-veiling Movement," Bullock (2000) challenges the prevailing notion of the veil as a symbol of oppression in Western media. She notes that "for the popular media, hijab is foreign, alien, a sign of the "other," and of violent, backward, and inferior foreigners trying to drag the civilized world down" (Bullock, 2000, p. 48). According to Bullock's survey results, veiled women listed a number of reasons why they chose to veil. These include political protest, religious obligation, access to the public sphere and employment, to combat male harassment, to express personal identity, and to gain respect. Bullock argues that the survey results demonstrate that veiling is not always something that is forced on these girls and women. Rather, in many cases, veiling represents a personal choice and belief, and that is something Western media rarely portrays or covers. Nawar (2007) agrees with Bullock, and argues that the stereotypical portrayal of veiling in Western media is largely due to ignorance. "A woman wearing a veil has now become the symbol of women in the Arab world, what an insult! Yes, it is true that an increasing number of Muslim women now wear a hijab (veil), but it is wrong to generalize and stereotype" (Nawar, 2007, p. 95).

Discussion

The literature presented in this paper demonstrates that Arab and Muslim women are in fact represented negatively in Western media. Further, this misrepresentation is not something new. Rather, it is historical. These women are still portrayed in stereotypical roles and even cliché ones. This in turn prevents Western audiences from knowing that not all Arab and Muslim women are oppressed, nor do all wear a hijab or any other sort of head cover, nor are they all terrorists. Rather, these women can be professionals, specialists, even leaders and businesswomen with great achievements. Moreover, the negative media coverage and the usage of the negative codes like "we" and "them" treats these women as foreigners and inferiors. This was referred to as treating these women as "the others" (Khan & Zahra, 2016). These studies explain how Western media lacks objectivity when it represents Arab and Muslim women. Instead, the stereotypical portrayal of Arab and Muslim women is based on racist and sexist beliefs rather than facts. Arab

and Muslim women are portrayed as weak, vulnerable, submissive, and oppressed by a patriarchal society or by their religion. Further, they are portrayed as victims in need of Western aid. Unsurprisingly, Western media does not associate these women with professional or independent figures in society, but only as helpless and abused women.

Studies also show that the only way that Western audiences can identify an Arab or a Muslim woman in media is if she is veiled. For example, television series like "Grey's Anatomy" (2011) and "9-1-1 Lone Star" (2020) both include Arab and Muslim women wearing a hijab. Arab and Muslim women are also recognizable through their proximity to terrorists. In these cases, the veil is often used to indicate that a woman is "hiding" a weapon underneath her veil. This assumption is portrayed in Hollywood movies like *American Sniper* (2014) and *Argo* (2012), which both present fully covered women who were either terrorists or hiding some sort of weapon or bomb under their clothes and working against the West. Such movies affect the public's viewpoint, whose cultural and political knowledge about the region might be very limited.

Studies show that Western media tends to use such portrayals to highlight the misery of veiled Arab and Muslim women. These portrayals emphasize that women must remove their veils as the "first step" toward freedom and independence. The veil or hijab is never considered as a symbol for religious identity or as an expression of one's beliefs and customs.

Policies and Recommendations

It is important to challenge these portrayals of Arab and Muslim women by Western media outlets. Several steps can be taken in this regard. First, raising awareness about the stereotypical portrayals of Arab and Muslim women in Western media is critical. Another important step is to counter these stereotypical representations with empowered representations of Arab and Muslim women in Western media. Relatedly, this means empowering the representation of women in Arab and Muslim media outlets as well.

Conclusion

The stereotypical representation of women and girls in media is a global issue. However, media is still an important tool for raising awareness about issues such as gender equality. Therefore, it is important for media outlets to remove these stereotypical representations in favor of images that empower women and girls. This should also apply to Arab and Muslim women. As this paper discussed, it is clear that Arab and Muslim women are negatively portrayed in Western media. The perpetuation of this misrepresentation is not something that will just stop or vanish on its own. Western media outlets need to correct these misrepresentations in order to showcase the actual realities of Arab and Muslim women rather than the imagined realities that Western audiences want to see.

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