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Representation of Muslim Women in Social Media: Some Reflections from Western and Indian Media Representations

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to understand the representation of Muslim women in social media. The essentialist and stereotypical projection of Muslim women by Western media often influences Western feminist understanding of Muslim women. Similarly, in the Indian context, the representation of Muslim women in visual media is much sensualized and is restricted to certain specific issues like personal laws, triple talaq, and low education level with an overtone of religion. However, this portrayal of Muslim women in media is not static; it is changing with time. Due to globalization and technological advancement, Muslim women are also becoming tech-savvy. This notion of representation changed when Muslim women's activists started representing themselves on social media platforms as agentive selves. This paper investigates the self-representation of Muslim women's online activism on social media. Based on the study of online presence on various social media platforms, this paper uses thematic analysis, content analysis and critical discourse analysis to investigate the formation of discourse about Muslim women in social media. To collect data, leading Newspaper Websites, magazines, news channels, YouTube, and X were chosen purposefully to demonstrate the various ways by which self-expressions of Muslim women, solidarity, activism, and womanhood are re-constituted across time and different locations.

INTRODUCTION

The paper attempts to critically engage with the images and representations of Muslim women in various media platforms. There are three objectives of this paper. First, to understand how media has played an important role in the construction of an image of Muslim women, which is essentially stereotyped as outwardly religious, backward, and suppressed. Second, to understand the various ways by which media frames Muslim women into stereotypical images. In this background, it is also important to discuss how Muslim women contest such stereotypes through various forums, including online social media platforms. Castells (2015) discusses the power of network society and communication provided by the internet and social media platforms. He argued that digital communication provides social actors more autonomy and is free from government control. Therefore, the paper also delves into various ways by which Muslim women are raising their voices against inequality and injustice within their communities while contesting the media-constructed stereotypes on online platforms about them.

A quick and random analysis of news items related to Muslim women suggests that their image and identity are circumscribed in religion throughout different media platforms in Western countries as well as in the context of India. In recent times, some of the major issues that played a crucial role in the stereotypical construction of Muslim women in India are triple talaq, personal laws, polygamy, high fertility rates within Indian Muslims, lower socioeconomic status, low educational attainment, and poor decision-making power in the family. By and large, we will discuss how such portrayal is in continuation of the orientalist image of Muslim women, which portrays them as women without agency who are religious,

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backward, and oppressed by religion. Such imagery runs beneath the media portrayal of Muslim women. Our study suggests that there has been a constant underlying theme that dominates the representation of Muslim women historically in various expressions, including mass media. According to Foucault (1969), such representations form' discursive formations' as they are constructed loosely through combining a variety of genres, concepts, themes, thoughts, and structures of knowledge. Said (1978), in describing Orientalism, discusses some modalities of such representations where he demonstrates that the representations of the Orient since modern times have been essentially religious, unchanging, timeless, sensual, and exotic. Orientalism, therefore, is a discourse of power by which the West defines itself as superior to the Orient. By scanning several reports, articles, and op-eds in various magazines, newspapers, periodicals, etc., we can see such themes underlying the representations of Muslim women in mass media.

Orientalism, Media and Representation of Muslim Women

9/11 was a watershed moment in our contemporary history, which brought back the old civilizational discourse of differences between Western and Muslim societies to the forefront. Post 9/11, there was a general perception of Islam as a religion associated with violence and Muslims as backward, fundamentally religious, with the propensity to engage in terrorizing activities. These civilizational differences were accentuated by scholars like Samuel Huntington (1996) and Bernard Lewis (1990) in 1990s, when Western democratic societies were projected in stark difference with Muslim societies. This unilateral asymmetric projection of Muslim society as backward, non-modern, and religiously violent can be understood by Said's notion of Orientalism (1978), where he considers Orientalism as a discourse of power that projects non-Western societies in a particular peculiar way in opposition to the Western societies. Said's understanding of 'Orientalism' becomes essential to understanding how the West perceives Muslim women. In this regard, Khalid (2011) discusses how the USA constructed gendered and orientalist images of Afghanistan and Iraq to deploy the US military in those countries to justify the 'war on terror'. Orientalism thus helps us to understand how Muslim women are seen as veiled, oppressed, and subjugated by their barbaric Muslim men. Similarly, Crosby (2014) employs Said's "Orientalism" to examine the ban on *burqa* in France, citing this as a step to defend France against extremists. The Western media perpetuate the image of Islam as backward, barbaric, monolithic, and unchanging, which prevents Islamic society from progressing and keeps women as enslaved people. Weber (2001), in her article, explains how the West represents Islam and Muslims by engaging with the concept of Orientalism. The Western feminists analyzed Muslim women through ethnocentric and static viewpoints. The generalized assumption about women and patriarchy shaped the notion of Western feminists about Muslim women.

Muslim women have been highlighted in media across the countries with reference to certain religious and cultural markers and practices like issues surrounding headscarves, high fertility rates, extremist views on religion, etc. It is also important to underline that the stereotypical representations of Muslim women on various media platforms have also led to voicing resistance and contestations from several scholars and Muslim women themselves on different media platforms. In this regard, social media plays a vital role by providing spaces for contestation to individual users who can voice their opinions on social media, which may resonate globally. In this regard, Baulch and Pramiyanti (2018) discuss how 'hijabers' in Indonesia are projecting themselves on Instagram. The result of the study showed that Muslim women in Indonesia are wearing hijabs not just because of certain religious and cultural sensibilities but also because of their choice. For Indonesian Muslim women, hijab is not the marker of subjugation as portrayed by media platforms, but it is also a part of their expression of fashion. The author mentioned that several fashion designers are active on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, influencing Muslim women's everyday clothing style and fashion. Similarly, Kim (2012) discusses two case studies of Muslim women from Indonesia and Malaysia. She explains how increasing use of social media through mobile phones provides autonomy, privacy, and freedom to Muslim women. Her study suggests that earlier, Muslim women used to go to cybercafé to use the internet, where they did not have privacy and freedom, which changed remarkably after the arrival of smartphones, which provided them with more freedom and privacy in online interactions. The study suggests that most women use social media sites for entertainment and social interaction and not to engage in any religious debates. Terman (2017) suggests that journalists often portray Muslim women in a negative framework in the media. By examining the media portrayal of Muslim women in the United States, she pointed out that the majority of the news is related to violations of Muslim women's rights, but, on the contrary, news pertaining to their everyday acts of resistance and assertion received less attention from the US media. An article by Posetti (2006) discusses how hijab has become the focus of media debates as a symbol of Islamic extremism and Muslim women's backwardness. Therefore, Muslim women are projected as victims of their religion, and there is a pressing need to liberate them from it. Similarly, Mishra (2014) analyzed Muslim women's representation in 'The New York Times' between September 11, 2001, and September 11, 2003. The study suggests that most of the news covered in the 'The New York Times' is related to political violence faced by Muslim women.

The above studies suggest that the media plays an important role in projecting Muslim women as a homogenized category and stereotypes them in certain ways, whereby their images from Afghanistan and Iran become part of the cover page for Western media, giving an impression that all Muslim women are the same. Therefore, there is a pressing need to study the media portrayal of Muslim women across the countries to understand the various underlying modalities by which certain consensus is built to project Muslim women in a particular way.

Aim and objective of the study

The first objective of the study is to understand how leading media houses shape the image of Muslim women. The second objective of this study is to examine different modalities through which media frames Muslim women as backward, subjugated, and victims of their religion. The third objective of this study is to understand how Muslim women make counter-arguments by using X (previously Twitter) and other platforms.

Methodology

This paper is based on secondary data containing published online articles in leading newspapers and magazines both from English-speaking Western countries like USA and UK and from major English newspapers from India. The data from Western newspapers were collected from two newspapers, The New York Times and The Guardian, from USA and UK, respectively. The criteria for their selection were based on their subscribers, global reach, and the profile of their readers. The New York Times is a leading English daily newspaper in the USA with 9.1 million subscribers, the second largest subscriber base just after The Wall Street Journal, which mainly covers finance and economics-related news. According to the 2023 data at statista.org, The Guardian is one of the leading newspapers of the UK, which is the third most popular newspaper after Metro and The Daily Mirror. The data suggest that almost 34% of newspaper readers prefer The Guardian. It is also important to note that both newspapers have a high female readership. The female readership of The Guardian is 44% (The Guardian, 2010), whereas, for The New York Times, it is 47% (Gitnux Market Data Report, 2023) respectively. The New York Times has a massive worldwide reach of 8.3 million subscribers, and over 1 million digital news subscribers are outside the United States. (The New York Times, 2021). The Guardian has 81 million visitors to their websites, of which 2.7 million are from India, and it is the 5th biggest market of The Guardian. (World Association of News Publishers, 2023). Therefore, we see that both newspapers have a sizeable digital subscriber base and have impressive global reach, enhancing their visibility and accessibility.

With respect to India, all the newspapers selected for data collection are national newspapers of India with a major subscriber base. The following newspapers were selected to collect data: The Hindu, Hindustan Times, The Indian Express, and Times of India. The subscriber base of the selected newspapers is as follows: The Times of India has 1.5 crores, Hindustan Times has 76.7 lakh, Hindu English has 62 lakhs, and The Indian Express has 30 lakh readerships in India (ET Brand Equity, 2019). Apart from these newspapers, two leading weekly bi-lingual magazines - India Today and The Outlook Magazine- were also selected. Being bi-lingual, it has a huge readership across the country. Lastly, BBC India services have approximately 82 million weekly audiences in India across its English and language output (Nanji, 2024).

Social media platform 'X' (earlier Twitter) accounts have been chosen to map Muslim women's responses across online platforms. Social media platforms like 'X' provide facilities for tweeting and retweeting any message, which easily provides us with an idea about the trends associated with any message. Further, one can also ascertain the popularity of any message on 'X' by following the hashtag # sign with the keyword. Lastly, all important Muslim women's organizations dealt with in this study have an active 'X' account, for which their activities on 'X' were mapped for collecting data for this study.

Certain keywords like 'news on Muslim women' and 'hijab and Muslim women' were used to search the relevant articles in the sources mentioned above. The articles were subjected to content analysis methods to understand the various ways by which news on Muslim women is portrayed in newspapers and magazines. Content analysis of the articles also helped to figure out the major emergent themes from those articles. Lastly, to understand how the news articles on Muslim women are a wider part of discursive formations, we used qualitative discourse analysis, where we looked upon the selected articles in their socio-political context, which is described in the later part of this article.

Representation of Muslim women in Western media

In this section, we will discuss how leading newspapers in the USA and the UK construct the image of Muslim women by different trajectories, such as headscarves, unemployment, victims of their religion, etc.

The image of Muslim women is often stereotypical and biased. In recent times, the 9/11 bombing of the Twin Towers in the USA and the banning of headscarves in 2004 in French public schools have intensified this essentialist image of Muslim women. To attain a better understanding of Muslim women's representation in mainstream media in a global context, a thematic and critical analysis of popular media representation in newspapers, magazines and online sites is given below:

Headscarves are often seen as a sign of backwardness and oppression of Muslim women. Mainstream media have repeatedly projected headscarves as the biggest enemy of Muslim women. France banned headscarves in 2004 in

secular places, such as schools and colleges, because they can divide people based on religion and race. In another article, Sciolino (2004) in 'The New York Times points towards the statement of the French Prime Minister defended his decision by saying that Muslim women's headscarves undermined French equality and freedom. The French government portrayed headscarves as a symbol of radical Islamism, which need to be controlled to save national integrity. Similarly, Henley (2004), in an article in 'The Guardian,' opined that veiled culture might encourage militant religious activities and support proselytism in public schools. Another article by Perlez (2007) on the veil issue in 'The New York Times' explained how Muslim women had to restrict their outdoor activities because of the practice of mandatory veiling. They cannot play outdoor games like badminton or go skating. When it comes to employment, a Muslim woman who is a lawyer dressed in an *abhaya* or headscarf cannot represent a client in court. That article also mentions the statement of then British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who regarded the veil as a 'mark of separation'. In the same article, David Sexton, a British columnist, considered the veil as an abusive marker that violates Muslim women's freedom. To counter such narratives, Muslim women in Western countries have also used hijab as a mark of protest, pointing out that their dress does not determine their agentive potential as individuals. In this context, the opinion page of 'The New York Times' by Nomani (2016) suggested that wearing the *hijab* in solidarity perpetuates oppression and mentioned that as a symbol of oppression, the hijab cannot display solidarity. In her opinion, the veil is not a mark of solidarity but appears as a sexual objectification of women, a barrier that subjugates Muslim women. Similarly, in another opinion page of The New York Times, Arbabzadah (2016) mentioned that headscarves are a sign of oppression and not of solidarity and identity.

In almost all such portrayals, we see that the individuality of Muslim women is reduced to a material symbol of *hijab*, which ceases to be a dress rooted in a particular culture and history, but *hijab* becomes a political tool fostering polar sensibilities like religion/secular, freedom/subjugation, and fundamentalism/tolerance. The *hijab* thus becomes an overarching symbol dissolving a variety of experiences and ontological status of Muslim women into a monochromatic frame and presenting a homogenised picture of Muslim women as subjugated, backward, and docile individuals.

Importantly, the bodies and choices made by Muslim women are considered to be alien to themselves, which goes very close to the Orientalist portrayal of the Orient, as discussed by Said. The veil is a marker of separation between two different and polar worlds and worldviews of modern, secular, progressive, free and extrovert as championed by Western ethos against the traditional, religious, regressive, fundamentalist, and introverted ethos of Islamic society. It not only homogenizes the diverse history of Islam as a religion and Muslim societies across space and time into a monolithic picture but also conflates women's image to that of the entire class of people who identify themselves as Muslims.

The gender relationship among Muslims also supports the above viewpoint. There is a common assumption about Muslim women that Muslim men oppress them. Media exoticize Muslim women's image as sexually oppressed. For example, a 'New York Times' article by Caldwell (2005) on Hirsi Ali, who took refuge in the Netherlands in 1992, and in 2003, she became a member of the Dutch Parliament. In the article, Hirsi Ali was portrayed as a warrior who fought against the sexual oppression of Muslim women, indicating that Muslim women are sexually oppressed and only by agreeing to Western values and culture can they liberate themselves. In another article, Polly (1994) discusses the vulnerability of Bangladeshi Muslim women; he mentions that Muslim women live in abusive marriages because divorce is taboo in Bangladesh, so women have to live with their sexually abusive partners. Therefore, we see that Muslim women's subjectivity is circumscribed within the frame of culture and religion that transcends space and time. It gives a sense of timelessness, and any spatial references dilute, making them objects of exotic categories as defined and projected by the Western media.

Brown (2016) in 'The Guardian' discusses "Why Muslim women are unemployed". He said in his blog that Muslim women who are Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants are poorly employed in London. He mentioned the Quilliam survey result, which shows that only 0.3 % of women want to work professionally. Most Muslim women do not know English and have to take care of their household, so they cannot work outside. He also quotes British MPs' published report (2016), which suggests that Muslim women in Britain are 71% less employed in comparison to white Christian women with the same educational qualifications. The article points out, '*They face triple penalty: they are female, of minority background and Muslim'.* This opinion portrayed Muslim women as uneducated housewives who are backward because of patriarchal values and Islam.

Such image of Muslim women as oppressed and subjugated in Western media is not limited to mainstream media, but it also influences Western feminist discourses. Quinn (2019) discusses in her article how Western media supports Western feminists' stereotypical assumptions about Muslim women. She mentioned that Western TV Shows and print media narrow down the understanding of Muslim women to certain stereotypes; they are veiled and oppressed by Muslim men. This biased view of Muslim women in Western media further solidifies the essentialist and orientalist view of Western feminists about Muslim women. Bjoernaas (2015) argues that after the 9/11 incident, Muslim women have been seen as oppressed and Muslim men as their oppressors. The news related

to Muslim women is highly politicized and biased, and it shaped the idea of Western feminism about Muslim women. Muslim women are portrayed as they don't have agency and are submissive by Western feminists. Media present this view that Muslim women need to be saved from Islam and Muslim men, and this idea has strongly influenced Western feminism. Haq (2022) discusses the biases of Western media and Western feminism towards Muslim women. She argued that Western media and feminists saw Muslim women's bodies as a source to stigmatize Islam. She mentioned that white feminists represent Muslim men as barbaric, dehumanizing and oppressors of Muslim women. The veil is also much debated and stigmatized as the symbol of backwardness and oppression by Western media and Western feminism. Choudhury (2009) argued that after the 9/11 incident, Muslim women were considered the most oppressed women in the world. Muslim women have been seen with certain stereotypes such as veiled, restricted movement, subjugated, and domestic. Western media further spread this representation of Muslim women, influencing Western feminists.

Feminists have criticized this standpoint on several grounds. For example, Lughod (1993), in her ethnographic work on the Bedouin tribe, criticizes this Orientalist perception that Muslim women are backward. Lughod (2013) explained that religion is not the sole reason for the backwardness of Muslim women. She criticizes Western media and Western feminism for giving fundamentalist and essentialist frameworks about Muslim women. In the context of Egypt, she shifts the locus from religion to state, arguing that the Egyptian state is not providing equal opportunities to Muslim women and is reducing its responsibility to civil society. Therefore, Muslim women are a marginal section of society. Similarly, Mohanty (1984) argued that Western feminists define 'Third World Women' from an imperialist and colonialist lens. There is a need to reconceptualize the existing concepts and theories about 'women of color.' Western feminist ideology about 'Third World Women' is influenced by the West's hegemonic political ideology and media. She argued that discourses about 'Third World Women' should be based on their experience rather than Western women. Herman and Chomsky (2002) used the term' propaganda models', which indicates how dominating media houses propagate news in the interest of powerful nations and markets. The media usually works for those who provide funds to them, and the media propagates the state's political agenda. They keep their hope on the internet, which can provide a new and more democratic medium of communication to individuals, where people can discuss their experiences.

Portrayal of Muslim women in Indian media

A quick search on Muslim women in India reveals that the entire discourse on Muslim women in India is confined to specific typical socio-religious issues that also boost their image as overtly religious, docile, backward, and dependent. In recent times, the significant issues that invited the reference of Muslim women are civil issues, such as triple talaq, personal laws, uniform civil code, Muslim women's entry into Sufi shrines, etc., mark their visibility in media, as if the only concern of Muslim women in India is socio-cultural. They have nothing to do with developmental issues like education, jobs, etc. Indian media portrayed Muslim women as a backward subject and subjugated by their religion.

For example, India Today published a report by Ahmed (2004) about the 'All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) and how AIMPLB failed to give justice to Muslim women in the triple talaq case. All India Muslim Personal Law Board regulates divorce, marriage laws, and inheritance rights of the Muslim community in India. This article revolves around how AIMPLB failed to recognise that Muslim women face threats in their marital life due to this triple talaq provision. Barnagarwala (2019), in an article titled, 'Armed with law, Muslim women still in search of justice', points out that after the enactment of the Protection of Rights on Marriage Act, Muslim women are still facing injustice. Muslim women are still facing the triple talaq issue, and after their husbands abandon them, they struggle to get legal support. In The Times of India, Sengupta and Akbar (2021) wrote an article which discusses Muslim women's plight, even after the ban on *triple talaq*. It mentioned that many young Muslim brides are still abandoned by their husbands, and the new law is not enough to provide security in respective marriages. Similarly, Parveen (2023) discusses the Triple Talaq Law Act 2019 and its impact on Muslim women's lives. Stating that the enactment of the Triple Talaq Law failed to achieve its objectives; instead, it added a new dimension to the Muslim community of India.

Such portrayal of Muslim women goes hand in hand with other issues that are equally religious in content, like the practice of veiling in public. The Hindustan Times article written by Dutt (2006), portrayed the veil as a sign of suppression of Muslim women. Salman Rushdie also commented in that article that it's a 'way to take power away from women'. Similarly, another article in the Hindustan Times written by Singh (2010) supported the French government's ban on the veil to save Muslim women from their radical religion and make them more liberal and secular. In that article, the veil is considered an emblem of backwardness; therefore, Muslim women should not practise the veil. In another article in 'The Hindu', Suhail (2016) explained how religion is a cause for Muslim women's backwardness. That article mentioned that religious scriptures are unfavourable for Muslim women and construct inequality for Muslim women. That article portrayed Muslim women as a victim of polygamy and triple talaq. Krishnan (2022) discusses the recent issue of banning the veil in colleges of Karnataka. To maintain equality and integrity in colleges, the government banned the veil.

Another prominent issue that has made headlines in news media in recent times is the practice of female genital mutilation (FGM) and unemployment among women in some Muslim sects. In the online magazine of India Today, Abrol (2018) discussed that FGM is banned in several countries, such as Australia and the USA, but in India, it is not legally banned. It talked about the Bohra community, which is the Muslim community, and how this practice prevents Muslim women from attaining sexual pleasure. In The Times of India, Dutta and Bal (2023) mentioned that employment among Muslim women increased after COVID-19. However, those Muslim women who belong to the lower caste are unable to join the workforce.

Importantly, everyday issues like their educational backwardness, empowerment, financial independence, and equal rights are scarcely discussed in the media. This provides us with the impression that Muslim women in India have no other issue other than being the custodians of religion. Indian media outlets come close to the religious clerics in projecting Muslim women in such a light. According to the National Family Health Survey, NFHS II, 56.8% of Muslim women have no media exposure. A survey by Hasan and Menon (2006) on Muslim women suggests that around 59 per cent of Muslim women never attended school, and less than 10 per cent of Muslim women ever completed their school. The primary causes behind this low educational level are gender biases, early marriage, and financial constraints. As discussed above, Indian media discourse about Muslim women is confined to issues of personal law triple talaq, socioeconomic, educational backwardness, veil, and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). Media mainly focuses on religion and how religion is subjugating Muslim women.

This discourse is not just confined to media, but it has also profoundly influenced Indian feminist and academic circles. Rege (2006) argued that a large part of the feminist literature on Muslim women is related to the 'problem of talaq' and 'divorce'. Muslim women's voices are unheard and defined from the standpoint of upper-caste Hindu women. Similarly, Guru (2020) discusses the need to understand the perspective of women from marginal sections of society, such as Dalit and Muslim women. Muslim women are considered a homogeneous community who are victims of their religion. Gupta, Gokariksel, and Smith (2020) argued how legal battles of Muslim women became a sensation in media and Indian feminist discourse. She mentioned how the state regulates the narratives of gender equality and women's rights for its purposes. Women's organisations also take these issues as Muslim women need to be saved from Muslim men and religion. Agnes (2016) mentioned in her article that the media is focusing on more negative news regarding the court's judgement of triple talaq, inheritance rights of Muslim women, etc. The media tends to ignore the rights secured by Muslim women through their active political participation in legal battles in the court. Religion, thus, remains the essential milieu in which Muslim women have been seen and often backward and subjugated by religion.

The online contested space: counter views by Muslim women

The debate on media portrayal of Muslim women altered when Muslim women started using the social media platform to represent themselves. For instance, Iranian Muslim women have extensively used social media platforms like Facebook and X to show solidarity against the Iranian government to attain equal rights. In Outlook magazine, Boczek (2022) wrote an article about the Iranian Muslim women's website, 'Woman Life Freedom', to connect other women globally and organise their movement against the Iranian government. The website discusses issues like gender inequality, hijab law, marriage, divorce, and inheritance rights of Muslim women. That demonstration started after Mahsa Jina Amini's custodial case; she was booked under the hijab law because she wore the headscarf inappropriately. That movement was widespread globally through various social media platforms, such as Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. The main motive of this movement is Iranian Muslim women's demand for freedom of dress, political freedom, and equality. According to Amidi (2022) news article on BBC, the hashtag #mahsaaamini was tweeted and retweeted more than 250 million times in Persian and more than 50 million times in English within one month after her death. Women from across the globe showed solidarity with Iranian women's fight against the Hijab law. To show solidarity and support for Iranian women, a Swedish MEP cuts her hair during a speech. Masih Alinejad posted a video of cutting hair by French artists and wrote:

Alinejad (2022) This gave me chills. Juliette Binoche and other French artists cut their hair in solidarity with #MahsaAmini.

In another tweet, Taslima Nasreen, a Bangladeshi-Swedish writer and physician, tweets:

Nasreen (2018) More than 50 French artists have symbolically cut their hair in a video campaign showing support for the ongoing protests in Iran calling for freedom from the hijab. Great. I don't have much hair to cut. But I am with them, and I will always be with them.

In 'Time Magazine,' Barron (2018) wrote about Mona Eltahawy's movement against the sexual exploitation of Muslim women at the pilgrimage of Islam's holiest site of Mecca. Mona Eltahawy is a freelance Egyptian journalist who started the #Mosque Me Too movement on X. According to 2018 data from NPR, Mona Eltahawy's tweet was shared more than 2,500 times on X, previously Twitter. She posted her views on X and expressed her sexual exploitation during her visit to Mecca. She started that movement after she received an article from a Pakistani woman's Facebook post about her sexual harassment at Mecca. Mona Eltahawy tweeted on X regarding her sexual assault on Mecca during Hajj:

Eltahawy (2018) Men sexually assault women everywhere in sacred places and sexual spaces. Women of all faiths find it especially difficult to speak out because of taboos and shame around sex. Fuck taboos and fuck shame. The shame belongs to the assaulter. #1 priority for me is women & girls.

This post received 2.9k views, which represents that the impact of this post is high. Several women supported that movement and shared their cases of sexual harassment to show solidarity with other fellow sexually harassed women. Another woman also shared her experience on X:

Djen (2018) I was looking for souvenirs for my family, several other women accompanied me. And then this man just started to flirt and grabbed my hands tightly. Eying me from head to toe and caressing my hand. It happened only a few feet from Nabawi #metoo.

Another woman tweeted about her experience on Hajj:

Naddosh (2018) Sexual harassment during hajj is very common, especially during tawaf; women get grapes & squeezed repeatedly, and I talk from experience.

X provided a democratic platform to these women who faced sexual harassment during the hajj at Mecca, and they showed solidarity with each other.

Similarly, she started one more movement, # I beat my assaulter; in that movement, she talked about sexual harassment in secular spaces. Mona Eltahawy posted her experience on X:

Eltahawy (2023): I've lost count of the number of times I've been sexually assaulted, and I know that my reactions have spanned a spectrum, all of them valid. This is about the time I beat the fuck out of a man who sexually assaulted me. It was glorious. #IBeatMyAssaulter.

It got 2.9k views on X, which manifests that a good number of women supported her and shared their experiences of sexual assault.

Similarly, we see Muslim women's activism in India manifesting on social media platforms such as Facebook and X. Three organisations have been chosen, which vocal about Muslim women's rights, to understand Muslim women's activism on social media based on their followers and activity on X.

Muslim women study circle

Muslim women use social media to connect with their community and the world. For example, a 'Muslim women's study circle' is on X. They joined X in 2022 and have 275 followers. In that group, various Muslim women belong to different castes and classes, but they support each other. Muslim women in that group discuss social problems related to Islam and their community. This organisation focuses on secular and religious education. In one of the tweets, they discussed the issue regarding the entry of Muslim women into religious sites. They started their discussion with women's active presence in the Masjid at Prophet times. They posted:

Muslim women study circle (2022) The active presence of women in the Masjid during the time of the Prophet Muhammad is well documented and clearly evidenced in numerous Hadith. If the Prophet Muhammad had clearly indicated his desire that women not attend the Masjid.

There are several other issues related to the everyday life of Muslim women in India which they keep discussing online. Such discussion not only creates a degree of awareness among the women but also acts as a powerful tool for political mobilization.

Led by Foundation

Another Muslim women's group on X, which focuses on Muslim women's employment and skill development, is named 'Led by Foundation'. One of the co-founders of 'Led by Foundation', Dr Ruha Shadab, was invited to Ted Talks to share her inspiring story of starting the 'Led by Foundation' organization on X for skill development of Muslim women. This organization also works to employ Muslim women, and they raise their voices against biases of Muslim women's employment. In one of the tweets, they posted a video link on YouTube in which they talked about hiring biases regarding Muslim women, and they tweeted:

Led by Foundation (2023) For every 2 calls backs a #Hindu #Woman gets for a job, a #Muslim woman gets one. 47.1% #discrimination in #Indian job #industry. #BreaktheBias #StopHiringBias.

Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, BMMA

The famous Muslim women's organization, Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan, BMMA, operates through X and is led by Zakia Soman. Platform X provides them with a stable base to express their views regarding equal rights in marriage, divorce and other issues related to Muslim women. One of the tweets by Zakia Soman reads:

Soman (2022) Muslim women have been demanding reforms in Muslim personal law for last 2 decades but we have been ignored & the issue has been politicized. Thanks, @BDUTT & @themojostory for taking up such an important issue; yours is truly serious journalism! #MuslimGirls.

In another tweet of Zakia Soman, co-founder of Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) tweeted in support of Bilkis Bano. She suffered sexual violence in the Gujarat riot in 2002, and the Gujarat High Court released her culprit based on good behavior.

Soman (2022) #BilkisAdmission. What has happened is shocking and Immoral. The legality of the issue is highly questionable. These men were involved in heinous crimes. What message are we giving to the women of India.

The Karnataka Hijab issue is also a debated issue, in which Muslim girls' students are denied hijab on college premises because it is considered secular premises. Several Muslim women's rights activists were vocal about this issue. Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan also tweeted:

Bhartiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (2022) *Hijab is a patriarchal imposition. If girls are not being allowed in classrooms in Karnataka due to hijab, that is wrong. #ZakiaSoman.*

In the Indian context, Muslim women are organizing the group on various social media platforms, which mainly focus on empowerment in terms of education, employment, marital rights, divorce, and inheritance rights. However, their reach to Muslim women is still limited.

After analyzing Muslim women's activism on social media platforms, in the global context and the Indian context, we can say that Muslim women are organizing mass campaigns and raising their voices against inequality. Muslim women are not always oppressed as projected by the media; they are projecting themselves as agentive self. They are not homogeneous categories as portrayed by the media, but they are heterogeneous. They are shaping their agency and subjectivity through their activism on social media.

Findings of the study

After analyzing the leading newspaper articles on Muslim women, it has been found that both in the Indian and Western context, Muslim women are portrayed in stereotypical images. There are various ways through which media presented Muslim women as backward and suppressed. Headscarves, unemployment, triple talaq, personal laws, low decision-making power, and victims of their religion are the main focus of the media, which constructed a stereotypical and essentialist image of Muslim women. This essentialist image of Muslim women impacted both Indian and Western feminist's ideas about Muslim women. However, the use of the internet and Social media provides Muslim women the freedom to contest stereotypical images about them. X (previously Twitter) gives Muslim women's rights activists and individual Muslim women a platform to represent themselves. The finding of this study suggests that Muslim women present themselves as agentive selves through their activism on X. There are various manifestations of Muslim women's activism on X in the global context. On the X, Women's Life Freedom, Iranian Muslim women's movement against Hijab law, and the Mosque Me Too movement led by Mona Eltahawy are examples of Muslim women's agitation against inequality and sexual harassment. In the Indian context, various organizations are actively involved on X to raise their voices for issues related to Muslim women. However, their reach is limited to Indian Muslim women because they talk about issues of triple talaq and personal laws, which are specific to the Indian context.

Conclusion and discussion

The Muslim women's activism on social media shows that their standpoint is different from their popular media portrayal. They are projecting themselves as agentive self and heterogeneous entity. The existing literature on Muslim women's portrayal in media focused on how mainstream media, like leading newspapers, news channels, and magazines, portrayed Muslim women. This study will add more knowledge about Muslim women's activism on social media and how this activism is changing the oppressed image of Muslim women. The solidarity between Muslim women and other women manifested in the Iranian 'Women's Life Freedom' movement. Other women, such as Iranian diasporas, French artists, and Indian Muslim women, also stand in solidarity with Iranian Muslim women against Iran's Hijab Law. Indian Muslim women talk more about the issues that are specific to Indian Muslim women, such as triple talaq and personal law; therefore, the impact of their activism on social media does not have a global impact. Social media allowed Muslim women to connect globally with other women.

This paper suggests how Muslim women reshape the idea of agency, subjectivity, and identity through their activism on social media platform X. Muslim women are defying the old stereotypical portrayal of themselves in mainstream media by actively participating in social media movements. This work will help to understand the reader; in the internet age, social media platforms provide a democratic space to those whose voices are marginalized in dominant narratives, such as Muslim women. Therefore, social media platforms are important sites of contestation where the dominant negative discourses on Muslim women are questioned, challenged, and contested. It provides a platform to re-constitute various diverse ways of expressing their identity and womanhood.

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