Islamophobia and the Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Western Media

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ABSTRACT

The ethnic and Islamophobic trends were present in the western discourses since long but they increased in number and intensity in the post 9/11 scenario. The co-existence of Islamophobic trends in the European discourse did not only influence political and financial structures but also the social and cultural edifices. The paper attempts to analyze the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British media in the light of the available literature. The paper concluded that the British Muslims were framed as alien "Others" by the British media. The portrayal of "others" was further linked to the racist notions of Islamophobia. The dominant themes employed by the British press for the portrayal of Muslims included 'deviant', "immigrants", "dangerous", "problematic, and "oppressive". The western media's tendency of frequently engaging their own commentators for commenting on matters related to Islam and Muslims was considered as a main reason for biased representation of Islam and Muslims in the Western media. Resultantly it is always "Us" which is representing "Them" instead of "They" representing "Themselves". Thus the western media tends to portray Islam and West as opposites to each other.

Key Words: *Islamophobia; Islam; Muslims; British Media; Us and Them.*

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Introduction

Media is considered to have immense power in terms of attaching value and roles to the events, individuals, and groups of individuals which it covers. It is the result of these coverage patterns that policies and perceptions are built regarding social entities and ethnic groups. In the words of Miller "There are many different and conflicting ways in which the meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, who and what regularly and routinely gets left out; and how things, people, events, relationships are represented (by media)"[1]

In social frameworks where ethnic minorities have little or no social contact among other minorities and also with the majority, the power of media emerges as the primary definer [2] of minority portrayals in the society. Resultantly the role of media becomes even more crucial [3] and powerful in terms of constructing discourses which help in representing or misrepresenting ethnic minorities.[4] It is mostly argued by researchers that as an initial attempt the voices and concerns of minorities are mostly marginalized and ignored and even if they succeed in attracting media coverage it mostly ends in the construction of negative discourses regarding those minority groups.[5]

The literature on non-white minorities[6] mostly pointed towards the representation of those minorities as "non- Britishers".[7] The British Muslims are mostly considered as a heterogonous minority group with diverse ethnic backgrounds.[8] Despite the heterogeneous ethnic backgrounds of the British Muslims, the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British Media is significant because of the public anxiety attached to them. The political and social narratives attached to the Muslims are better understood in the form of ideas of cultural racism.[9]

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1 Miller David, Adam Briggs, and Paul Cobley. Promotion and power. *In The media: an introduction,* London, 2002, p.8

2 Hall Stuart, Charles Critcher, T. Jefferson, and J. Roberts Clarke. *Policing the Crisis*, 1978

3 Van Dijk, Teun A. *Racism and the Press*. Routledge, 2015.

4 Cottle Simon. *Mediatized conflict: Developments in media and conflict studies*, McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2006.

5 Hartmann Paul, and Charles Husband, *Racism and the mass media*, 1974

6 Fekete Liz, *Racism: The hidden cost of September 11*, Institute of Race Relations, 2002.

7 Gilroy Paul, *Cultural studies and ethnic absolutism*. 1992

8 Poole Elizabeth, and Elizabeth Sandford. *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, Tauris, 2002.

9 Modood Tariq, Richard Berthoud, Jane Lakey, James Nazroo, Patten Smith, Satnam Virdee, and Sharon Beishon. *Ethnic minorities in Britain: diversity and disadvantage*. Policy Studies Institute, 1997.

Although the concerns of Muslim Community in Britain regarding their misrepresentation in the media have been a part of the public discourse for a long period of time but the post 9/11 era saw a surge in Islamophobic trends. The study attempted to comprehend the representation of Islam and Muslims by the British media in the light of the available literature especially with reference to the notions of Orientalism and Islamophobia.

Ethnic Minorities, Racism and British Media

The representation of discourses and images related to Islam and Muslims in the Western Media is mostly hostile and negative.[1] Edward Said [2] argued that the ideological construction of these discourses is a result of the western concepts of imperialism which focused on strengthening the divide between the west and the East. It is also evident from the British media's coverage of issues related to asylum and immigration as those issues were mostly covered from racist angle.[3] The recent operationalization of racism has rather detached itself from the rudimentary assertions of biological and physical inferiority rather ideas related to racism are now mostly linked to nationalism.[4] Greenslade while while quoting Charles Moore, who was the former editor of The Times stated that "Britain is basically English speaking, Christian and White, and if one starts to think it might become Urdu speaking and Muslim and brown, one gets frightened"[5]

Such arguments are reflective of the British Media's approach which it adopted while covering issues related to immigration and Muslims. Britain's ethnic minorities have been frequently depicted by strife, deviance and contention.[6] During the 1970s and 1980s, media portrayals would in general condemn Britain's dark populace– disregarding social disparities and developing resentment at police strategies. The 1990s witnessed assaults on anti-racist activists; criticism on representatives of minorities; development of prejudiced legislation; effective vilification of the endeavors to create multicultural and anti-racist bigot plans.[7]

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1 Richardson John , and Elizabeth Poole, *Muslims and the news media*, 2006.

2 Said Edward. *Introduction to Orientalism. Media Studies: A Reader*, 1978, pp. 111-23

3 Finney Nissa, and Esme Peach. "Attitudes towards asylum seekers, refugees and other immigrants: A literature review for the Commission for Racial Equality." *Commission for Racial Equality, 2004, London*

4 Gilroy Paul, *Cultural studies and ethnic absolutism,* 1992

5 Greenslade Roy, *Seeking scapegoats: The coverage of asylum in the UK press*, Institute Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005,p.6

6 Cottle Simon, *Mediatized conflict: Developments in media and conflict studies*, McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2006.

7 Murray Nancy, *Anti-racists and other demons: The press and ideology in Thatcher's Britain." Race & Class* , 1986, pp.1-19

Lately fundamental ideas of race have been replaced by new cultural and social definitions which are based on the representation of human beings having a certain national and cultural identity.[1] This paved way for a new type of racism related closely with ethnicity. The ideas of ethnicity were also fully utilized by social researchers and strategy producers as a method of moving the meaning of race away from the biological being towards the cultural being.[2] Ethnicity is a more engaging idea than race not simply in light of the fact that it is innately social but also because ethnic classes are characterized somewhat through the cognizant endeavors of the individuals who belong to those ethnic classes.[3] It is also assumed that the distinctive basis for having a place with an assigned ethnic minority is also dependent on the skin shading.[4] Thus the individuals with non-white skin in Britain have routinely been labeled as 'others' whose culture will always be considered as an outsider and contrary to the culture of the host country.

It has been observed that racism doesn't stay static rather advances and adjusts to condition and circumstance.[5] It is also argued that the issues of asylum and shelter searchers have been overlapped with the issues of British Muslims as a result of which they were labeled as terrorists and this is another form of racism. For instance during the 1980s less people in the USA believed blacks to be racially second rated. This didn't imply that racism vanished totally. It was contended that rather than traditional racism, new and more unpretentious kinds of racism started to rise. Europe witnessed similar circumstances.[6]

With respect to media's portrayal of race and ethnicity it is considered that the media gives information where public awareness is fragmentary. Examination into the media's treatment of race throughout the years has recommended that its portrayal has been restricted in its topics and negative in its substance. Examination of the minority portrayal in the British setting can be summed up in two stages.[7] In the first stage issues related to immigration have been presented as a problem and secondly the issues related to minorities who were born in Britain were also presented as

1 Hall Stuart, David Held, and Tony McGrew. The question of cultural identity, modernity and its futures. *Modernity and its future* ,1992

2 Gandy Oscar , *Communication and race: A structural perspective*, Arnold, 1998.

3 Mason David, *Race and ethnicity in modern Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

4 ibid

5 Small Stephen, and John Solomos, Race, immigration and politics in Britain: Changing policy agendas and conceptual paradigms 1940s–2000s, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 47 (3), 2006, pp. 235-257.

6 Saeed Amir, The media and new racisms, *Media Education Journal*, 1999, pp. 19-21.

7 ibid

problems. From the "Cheating Asians" [1] to the "Islamic Fundamentalists"[2] minorities were presented in a negative manner.

Orientalism

European discourse not only influenced political and financial structures but also the social and cultural structures. It included the development of a specific discourse referred to as Orientalism. Orientalism argued that European discourse advanced the contrast between the "familiar" (Us) which generally refers to the West and Europe and the "Strange" (Other) which generally refers to the Orient and the East.[3] The concept of Orientalism[4] provided the framework through through which the connections between the 'West' (and the 'Rest') and Muslims specifically can be better understood. Samuel Huntington contends in Clash of Civilizations that the contemporary cold wars occur not only on financial matters or governmental issues rather on issues related to culture. Islam represents the most genuine danger to Western civilization. It is clear that the bias for Islam is rooted in the same fundamental principles which tend to maintain the supremacy of imperial wars and colonization.[5] Even before Huntington's theory Islam was introduced as a compromising other.[6]

In this specific situation, Islam was viewed as backward. In cross disciplinary studies including anthropology Arabs were held to be inferior, while politically it was also reinforced that the ideals of colonization would not only profit the West but will also empower the Orient.[7] European interaction with other populations across the globe included a cycle of portrayals which resulted in the rise of a specific discourse which further divided the world between the West and the Rest.[8]The divide was further established in the European prejudice against Islam as Miles rightly pointed that "European representations of the Islamic world extensively utilized images of barbarism and sexuality in the context of a

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1 Sivanandan, Ambalavaner, *A different hunger: writings on black resistance*, Pluto Press (UK), 1982.

2 Akbar Ahmed, *Living Islam*, 1993

3 Said Edward W, Orientalism reconsidered, *Race & class*,
class, 27 (2), 1985, p.15

4 Saeed Amir, The media and new racisms, *Media Education Journal*, 1999, pp. 19-21

5 Huntington Samuel P, *The clash of civilizations*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2000. 2000.

6 Halliday Fred, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle Middle East*, New York, 1996

7 Said Edward , Orientalism reconsidered, *Race & class*, 27 (2), 1985, p.15

8 Hall Stuart, David Held, and Tony McGrew. The question of cultural identity, modernity and its futures, *Modernity and its future* ,1992

Christian/heathen dichotomy"[1]

Orientalism gives an abundance of assets and verifiable documentation that shows how the philosophically built information on the Orient was both strong and intelligent. [2] The abuse of the Orient's assets and people groups was legitimated through the ethno driven language of Christian European narrative which helped in generalizing that the Muslim population of the orient was inferior as they were uncultured and barbaric. Stuart Hall also asserted that ""[….] the language of the west, its image of itself and 'others', its sense of 'us and "them", its practices of power towards the Rest' through 'the languages of racial inferiority and ethnic superiority still operate so powerfully across the globe today"[3]

The "Other" among "Us"

The general interest in the Muslim community in Britain rose particularly during the 1980s and 1990s. The gulf war also played a role in bringing the British Muslims to the limelight. Negative portrayal of Muslims in the British media was considered as a provocative attempt which further facilitated the ridicule of Muslims.[4]

The second and third generations of British minorities including Muslims have been presented as the 'Other' among 'Us'. These trends enhanced with the increase in marginalized representation of the Muslim community in the British media.[5] It is also argued that media helps in creating a certain type of moral panic by converging the crime and race related news stories.[6] Thus in terms of negative attention it is categorized against all immigrants and minorities and media plays a pivotal role in this.

Media discourses are intentionally fashioned to create a "criminal culture" with respect to Muslims and other ethnic minorities.[7] The disturbing situation in the Northern England has been particularly associated with British Muslim community instead of associating it with the whole of British Asian community (Saeed, 2004). The ethnic communities belonging to Bangladesh and Pakistan are particularly victimized as separatists and resistant by the British media. Resultantly

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1 Miles Robert, and Malcolm Brown, *Racism*. Psychology press, 2003

2 Said Edward , Orientalism reconsidered, *Race & class*, 27 (2), 1985

3 Hall Stuart, David Held, and Tony McGrew. The question of cultural identity, modernity and its futures. *Modernity and its future* ,1992, p. 318

4 Saeed Amir, Media, racism and Islamophobia: The representation of Islam and Muslims Muslims in the media, *Sociology Compass* 1 (2), 2007, pp. 443-462.

5 Wahab Iqbal, Muslims in Britain, *London: Runnymede Trust* ,1989

6 Hall Stuart, David Held, and Tony McGrew. The question of cultural identity, modernity and its futures. *Modernity and its future* ,1992

7 Poole, Elizabeth, and Elizabeth, Sandford, *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*, Tauris, 2002.

British Muslims[1] are represented in such a way that they are considered at odds with the rest of the British society. Media portrayal of Islam and Muslims is also misused for providing political cover to the issues which have no religious origin.[2]

How people acquire information about ethnic groups depends on the media portrayal as media plays a major role in formation of perceptions about ethnic minorities.[3] Van Dijk (1991) strongly argued that the power of media with respect to developing and reinforcing racism lies in the notion of agenda setting as media "does not only set the agenda for public discussion….but more importantly it strongly suggests how readers should think and talk about ethnic affairs"[4] . After 9/11 and the ongoing war on terror Western media often portrayed Muslims negatively. [5] The number of newspaper articles in which the word Muslim was mentioned increased significantly after 9/11.[6] Although there were instances where Muslims were represented in a more balanced and neutral manner by the western media but the overall portrayal did not indicate a positive representation of Islam and Muslims[7]. The misrepresentations by the western media are usually combined with the media attention attracted by the Muslim extremists. Western societies have readily accepted that certain acts of violence committed by a limited number of Muslims should be generalized in the form of an overall terrorist and fanatic culture. Resultantly the western media coverage of Muslims reinforces the discourses related to otherness of the Muslims in mainstream western societies in general and British society in particular.

There can be a number of reasons because of which the western media provides unsympathetic and marginalized coverage to Islam. One of these reasons can be traced to the western media tendency in frequently engaging their own commentators for commenting on matters related to Islam and Muslims.[8] Thus it is always "Us" which is representing "Them" "Them" instead of "they" representing "Themselves". It is further argued

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1 Modood Tariq, Sharon Beishon, and Satnam Virdee, *Changing ethnic identities*. No. 794. Policy Studies Institute, 1994.

2 Said Edward , Orientalism reconsidered, *Race & class*, 27 (2), 1985

3 Hartmann Paul, and Charles Husband, *Racism and the mass media*,1974

4 Van Dijk, Teun A. "Principles of critical discourse analysis." *Discourse & society* 4(2),1993, p. 245

5 Akbar S. Ahmed*, Living Islam*, 1993

6 Whittaker Brian. "Islam and the British press after 9/11." In *Conference on Islam and the media, London, UK,* 2002.

7 Waterson Jim, Most UK news coverage of Muslims is negative, *The Guardian*, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jul/09/most-uk-news-coverage-of-muslims-is-negative-major-study-finds

8 ibid

that the West is at odds with Islam and this rift has established a framework in which the knowledge about Islam is marginalized.[1] Thus the western media tend to portray Islam and West as opposites to each other as a result of which it helps the media in reinforcing stereotypes related to Muslims and Islam.

Islamophobia

The globalization concepts of West and Islam have been constantly competing with each other as Islamic ideologists have constantly refused to merge with the globalization ideals of the west.[2] This refusal of sharing the similar western values has resulted in increase in the fear of an Islamic resistance or revolution which in turn has manifested itself in the form of an orientalist narrative called Islamophobia.

"The word 'Islamophobia' has been coined because there is a new reality which needs naming: anti-Muslim prejudice has grown so considerably and so rapidly in recent years that a new item in the vocabulary is needed"[3]. Islamophobia draws its distinctions from the narratives that portray Islam as backward, manipulative, oppressive and in competition with the west.

Islamophobia is frequently explained as an unfair resentment towards Islam as it helps in advancing discrimination against Muslim communities.[4] Islamophobia is also rooted in the western ideology of white supremacy as the western media asserts the otherness of Muslims on the ground that whites are superior, more civilized generous and enlightened whereas Muslims as 'others' are violent, disorganized, criminal minded and irrational.[5] The dominant themes employed by the British press for portrayal of Muslims included 'deviant', "immigrants", "dangerous", "problematic, and "oppressive".[6] The portrayal of Islamophobic sentiments is also visible in the British media coverage as Daily Mail published an article stating "Young Muslims ... are encouraged to put loyalty to their faith above personal responsibility to their country of birth. They are brain- washed into treating any misfortune which befalls any Muslim in the world as personal insult."[7]

1 Ibid, p.163

2 Sardar Ziauddin, *Orientalism: concepts in the social sciences*, 1999

3 Trust Runnymede, Islamophobia: A challenge for us all, *London: Runnymede Trust*, 1997, 4

4 Weedon Chris. *Identity and culture: Narratives of difference and belonging: Narratives Narratives of difference and belonging*. McGraw-Hill Education (UK), 2004.

5 Trust Runnymede, Islamophobia: A challenge for us all, *London: Runnymede Trust*, 1997, p.4

6 Saeed Amir, Media, racism and Islamophobia: The representation of Islam and Muslims Muslims in the media, *Sociology Compass* 1 (2), 2007

7 John Richard, If they hate us so much, why don't they leave? Daily Mail, 2006, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-399515/If-hate-dont-leave.html

These and other examples from the British media strengthen Edward Said's arguments that both western politicians and journalists pave way for victimization of minorities including Muslims as a result of which they succeeded in painting a terrorist picture of minorities in front of the masses.[1] Miqdaad Varsi from the Muslim Council of Britain rightly pointed out to the British journalists that "You need to ensure that when you write a negative story that it is fair and reflective and doesn't generalize about all Muslims and feed into a broader far-right narrative".[2]

Muslim Council of Britain in one of their recent analysis concluded that majority of the news related to Muslims were published with a negative slant which adds to the increasing trends of Islamophobia. The mail on Sunday was considered to be at the top with respect to giving negative coverage to Muslims as almost 78% of its stories were reported under negative themes. In Contrast publications like Guardian, new Statesman and Observer were less likely to give negative coverage to Muslims. The study was done on 11,000 news articles and broadcasts.[3] In In another related study 60% of Tory members strongly believed that Islam is a threat to "western civilization" whereas more than 50% believed that British way of life is threatened by Islam.[4] The representation of Muslims Muslims in the UK print media is generally related to terrorism, clash between Islam and Christianity and depiction of Islam as a religion of extremists.

It is frequently asserted and framed in the British media that Muslims are incapable of fully participating in the mainstream social arena and thus should be labeled as 'others.' [5] Anti-Muslim sentiments have also been made part of the media discourses across Europe. In the wake of war on terror Muslims have been repeatedly identified as false nationals of Britain. The British Muslims in particular have been associated with acts of terrorism. Right after 9/11 The Mail published a cartoon of Muslim men standing outside British parliament while holding play cards which stated "death to America and Britain". The caption of the cartoon stated "Parasite: a Creature which obtains food and physical protection from a host which never benefits from its presence"[6] Although Exceptions can be traced in the British media

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1 Said Edward , Orientalism reconsidered, *Race & class*, 27 (2), 1985
2 Waterson Jim, Most UK news coverage of Muslims is negative, *The Guardian*, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2019/jul/09/most-uk-news-coverage-of-muslims-is-negative-major-study-finds
3 ibid
4 ibid
5 Gilroy Paul, *Cultural studies and ethnic absolutism*, 1992
6 Allen Christopher, Islamophobia in the media since September 11th, *Exploring Islamophobia: deepening our understanding of Islam and Muslims,* University of Westminster , 2001

where social responsibility was displayed by the editorial teams but still there is a considerable number of publications who have opted to report with discrimination and thus paved way for Islamophobic sentiments. The British media have intentionally overlooked the existing diversity in the Muslim communities and opted to generalize the negative spectrum across Muslim populations.[1]

Conclusion

Despite the heterogeneous ethnic backgrounds of the British Muslims, the representation of Muslims and Islam in the British Media is significant because of the public anxiety attached to them. Muslim portrayal in the British media helped in signifying the otherness of Islam and Muslims. With respect to media's portrayal of race and ethnicity it is considered that the media gives information where public awareness is fragmented. It has also been observed that racism doesn't stay static rather advances and adjusts to conditions and circumstances.[2]

The analysis of the existing literature on Islamophobia and Western media concluded that the media coverage has contributed to xenophobia, racism, Islamophobia and anti-Muslim sentiments. The British Muslims were framed as alien "Others" by the British media. The portrayal of "others" was further linked to the racist notions of Islamophobia. The dominant themes employed by the British press for the portrayal of Muslims included 'deviant', "immigrants", "dangerous", "problematic, and "oppressive". The western media's tendency of frequently engaging their own commentators for commenting on matters related to Islam and Muslims was considered as a main reason for biased representation of Islam and Muslims in the western media. Both western politicians and journalists paved way for victimization of minorities including Muslims as a result of which they succeeded in painting a terrorist picture of minorities in front of the masses . The biased framing of Muslims in the British media can be best summed up in the arguments put forward by Elizabeth Poole "The way these topics are framed then, gives rise to the expression ….that Muslims are a threat to British mainstream values and thus provoke integrative concerns; that there are inherent cultural differences between Muslims and the host community which create tensions in interpersonal relations; that Muslims are increasingly making their presence felt in the public sphere"[3]

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1 ibid

2 Small Stephen, and John Solomos, Race, immigration and politics in Britain: Changing policy agendas and conceptual paradigms 1940s–2000s, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* 47 (3), 2006, pp. 235-257.

3 Poole Elizabeth, and Elizabeth Sandford. *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims*. Tauris, 2002, p.20

Thus the western media tend to portray Islam and West as opposites to each other as a result of which it helped the media in reinforcing stereotypes related to Muslims and Islam. The discourse related to Muslims is mostly constructed from an orientalist approach as Islam and Muslims are constantly compared with the West. Resultantly the western media coverage of Muslims reinforces the discourses related to the 'otherness' of Muslims in the mainstream Western societies in general and British society in particular.