

# Ultimate Victim, Ultimate Aggressor: Media Depictions of Muslim Identities

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## Inception

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In October of 2014, a mosque in Cold Lake, Alberta was vandalized with graffiti that told Muslims to "go home" (Elliott). In 2015, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper justified his attempt to ban women from wearing the niqab during the citizenship ceremony to "crack down on violence" (MacCharles). In the wake of the Paris attacks, damages were inflicted upon a mosque in Peterborough, Ontario and were later declared to be a hate crime (Perkel).

According to Statistics Canada, over a million Canadians identified as Muslim in 2011. Although Muslims only occupy about three percent of the Canadian population, a significant portion of public discourse emphasizes Islam. Although scholars like Christopher Flood and Elizabeth Poole have discussed representations of Muslims in Western media, it is vital to continue to analyze the ways Muslims are portrayed in media discourses. As the ways Muslims are portrayed are renegotiated, so too must scholarly analyses of their representations.

In this essay, I explore the ways in which Muslims are constructed as the "Other" by Western discourses. In particular, I argue that Canadian and American discourses construct gendered characterizations of Muslim identity, dichotomously defining the Muslim woman as the ultimate victim and the Muslim man as the ultimate aggressor. I contend

that this dichotomy is a relational binary, in which the extremity of one side results in the extremity of the other.

Before I can begin my argument, I must clarify terms that are important to the very nature of this essay. “The West” is a term that is not clearly or consistently defined, but usually refers to European countries and the Americas. However, for the purpose of this paper, “the West” largely refers to Canada and the United States of America. Although Canada and the United States cannot be understood without their European roots and continual European ties, it is necessary to clarify that the majority of my research comes from Canadian and American sources and specifically concerns Canadian and American discourse.

The term “Muslim” is a troubled term. Muslim identities are vast and many, but a Muslim can be generalized as a religious adherent to the Islamic faith. At times, the term “Muslim” serves as a stand-in for “Arab,” and the two can be conflated. This is an intentional reflection of the popular Western conception, which depicts the two as inseparable and interdependent. Despite the disparity between the two identities—indeed, a non-Arab can convert to Islam and an Arab can refuse to adhere to Islam—media representations often blur the distinction.

This argument begins with an exploration of how Muslim societies are portrayed as the ultimate “Other”—the extreme antithesis to Western society and the values it upholds. This is the foundation in which gendered Otherness is constructed and consumed. Secondly, I examine the ways in which the media frames Muslim women as victims of an oppressive society who are in need of Western rescue. Thirdly, I delineate the depiction of the Muslim male as a terrorist, aggressor, and fundamental anti-Westerner. Lastly, I comment on the ramifications of this gendered depiction and the state of exception that is thus created.

## ***Establishing the Other***

Undoubtedly, there is a long-standing history of conflict between the Judeo-Christian West and the Islamic East. Enran Qureshi and Michael A. Sells contend that the history of conflict stems from the religious rivalry within Islam and Christianity, which they view as oppositional Abrahamic traditions (12). Though a detailed historiography of interactions between the West and Islam is not within the scope of this essay, it is important to note that the current conflict between the two is not new nor does it occur in a vacuum; it must be viewed within its historical context.

Edward Said argues that discourses surrounding Islam belong to a larger framework, which is Orientalist in nature. Orientalism can be understood as:

[A]n imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, 'different' one called the Orient, the other, also known as 'our' world, called the Occident or West. Such division always come about when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it. (Said 4)

Said goes on to argue that Islam, within Orientalism, is "looked at first of all as if it were one monolithic thing, and then with a very special hostility and fear" (4) with individual Muslims being portrayed in the media "either as potential oil suppliers or as potential terrorists" (26). In addition to this, Quershi and Sells delineate the dichotomy further, writing that "[t]he same West (defined as individualistic, enterprising, egalitarian, peaceable, and tolerant) is pitted against an East now embodied by Islam and characterized as fundamentalist, reactionary, terrorist, static, and oppressive of women" (12). With this, we can see that Westerners are depicted as civilized whereas Islam, the Other, is antithetical to "our" values. As with all dichotomies, grey areas are not acknowledged; there is the Just West and the Unjust Islamic East, and no in between.

Yasmin Jiwani outlines the arguments of Stuart Hall in her discussion of Canadian discourses around Muslim women. To illustrate Islam and the West in a binary relation is to assert power; the binary functions to naturalize differences as inherent and unchanging and to remove the Other from their history (61).

These depictions are not without repercussions. To establish a dehumanized Other that is backwards, antithetical, and unchanging creates a call for action. Sherene Razack outlines responses to this understanding of Muslims, declaring, “[o]nce defined outside modernity, evicted as it were to the uncivilized side of things, Muslims are also evicted from the law. The law, as it has long been held, does not apply to barbarians” (174). Because of the Muslims’ inherent lack of morality and civility, and the West’s inherent moral prowess, it follows that, “it is our [the West’s] moral obligation to correct, discipline, and keep [Muslims] in line and to defend ourselves against their irrational excess” (Razack 9-10).

As the above scholars have argued, Muslims as the Other are portrayed in terms of a binary. Whereas the West (“us”) is depicted as just, modern, and evolving, the homogenous East (“them”) is viewed as unchanging, immoral, unjust, and intolerant. The East will not adapt to modern or Western values on its own, but needs Western interference to join the trajectory of progress. This black-and-white understanding is troubling for a variety of reasons. Said writes that consumers of media are presented with “a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world” (26) but in a way that leads consumers to believe that the information is “fair, balanced, responsible coverage of Islam” (xi). This fundamentally flawed representation is the foundation on which gendered identities are formed.

### ***The Muslim Woman as Victim***

If one were to approach news media with no background knowledge of Islam, it would not be difficult for the viewer to conclude that one could

identify a Muslim woman as a niqab-wearing hyper-victim. Mainstream media stresses that Muslim females are objects of oppression, victims of an intensely patriarchal power, and in need of Western rescue (or, at the very least, our utmost sympathy).

Various scholars contend that discourses declare that the natural state of a Muslim woman is a state of violence and inequality. Other representations of Muslim women, few and far in between as they are, are littered with rhetoric of exception, not of normalcy. Jiwani calls Muslim women the “gendered hypervictim,” arguing:

In terms of the economy of representations that prevail within the mainstream Canadian media, then, it can be surmised that the veiled Muslim woman remains the abject and passive Other in contrast to her purposive and aggressive male counterpart. (79)

In a similar vein, Alsuttany states:

In innumerable ways, and from both ends of the ideological spectrum, these women have been represented as veiled, oppressed, and in need of rescue. The government and commercial news media have been central to the circulation of stories about the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ and the imperative to ‘save brown women from brown men.’ (70)

With this, Alsuttany asserts that both the political left and the political right define the Muslim woman as passive. An illustration of this can be seen in Sunera Thobani’s analysis of the white feminists’ arguments for and against a war on Islam (Thobani 141). The rhetoric surrounding Muslim women, with and without the context of war, is clear. Muslim women are victims of their oppressive culture. Muslim women are victims of abusive *and* violent men. Muslim women are passive victims of both the culture and their men. Muslim women, in all their passivity, need to be rescued; they cannot exercise agency and are therefore incapable of saving themselves. This representation aligns Muslim womanhood as objects of intense pity.

As consumers of news media and Western culture, we can attest to the obsession with the veiled Muslim woman. “[T]he veil itself has become an iconic sign of difference. . . . The veil thus comes to stand in for the mute, passive, and oppressed Muslim woman, a representation that discursively functions as a countersign to the liberated Western woman” (Jiwani 66). Discourses surrounding the veiled Muslim woman serve to flatter our own society and generate pity for those outside of it. Additionally, this functions to distract Westerners from the fact that we have not achieved a perfect gender equality, but instead aligns the West with morality and freedom: we, at least, are not our Islamic opposite (Alsuttany 82).

The representations of the Muslim woman as oppressed are intended to spark a strong emotional response—one of pity. Alsuttany argues that pity is a more appropriate term than empathy because pity still structures the person with the emotion as more powerful than the pitied subject (72). She goes on to argue that “[p]ity makes outrage easy; feeling sorrow for someone’s distress easily morphs into anger at the circumstances that caused the distress and thus outrage at the men, the culture, and the religion” (72). Mobilizing a public to feel pity for one and anger at another is to create a “state of exception,” a point that will be further delineated later on in this essay.

Generally speaking, the representation of Muslim women in Western discourses is one that emphasizes oppression and victimhood. I do not argue against the actual existence of violence in Islam, but rather aim to highlight that the experience of Muslim women is represented as *only* oppressive and violent. This portrayal, much like the portrayal of Islam as the ultimate and undoubtable Other, is one that suggests perpetual homogeneity. It suggests that all Muslim women experience the same things and it is not going to change unless the West interferes and changes it for them.

## ***The Muslim Man as Aggressor***

If women are seen as victims of a patriarchal, oppressive, and violent culture, then the men can be viewed as active enforcers of this culture and therefore of its intrinsic violence. If women are seen as worthy of Western sympathy, then the men can be seen as worthy of Western scorn, hatred, and even militaristic violence. The logic of the woman-as-victim and man-as-aggressor operates within a rationale that sees the woman as an exception to the brutal culture; she does not perpetrate it, but she is subjected to it. Conversely, the man is the perpetrator of the brutal culture and, therefore, brutal himself.

Alsuttany goes to great lengths to detail the ways in which various American television programs have attempted to provide three-dimensional Muslim characters. Through a wide array of techniques, writers and producers have employed strategies to diversify Muslim representation (Alsuttany 21-26). Although Alsuttany acknowledges that these attempts may have good intentions, she asserts that writers perceive their audience as “particularly sensitive and fed up with stereotypes” and thus employ “some modifications to avoid being offensive while perpetuating core stereotypes that continue to have cultural capital” (27). This, she argues, constructs an America in which viewers are led to believe that their society has moved past racism and into a multicultural utopia. However, while these television depictions were being viewed and consumed, “real Arab Muslims were being detained, deported, held without due process, and tortured” (28). In other words, these new representations make America (and similarly, Canada) appear post-racial and lull the populace into a false sense of superiority while racism harshly manifests itself in reality.

These new representations, better than racialized stereotypes, still implicitly put forth the discourse that Muslim men are a threat to Westerners. Alsuttany writes:

So long as Arabs and Muslims are represented primarily in the context of terrorism, our current crop of representational

strategies—for all their apparent innovations—will have a minimal impact on viewers' perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. (45)

The male Muslim identity is still tied to terrorism; in the way that Muslim women who exercise agency are viewed as the exception and not the rule, Muslim men who are not aggressors or terrorists are a deviation from the norm.

As previously stated, the definition of the Muslim man as aggressor relies on its binary opposite, the Muslim woman as victim. This gendered binary functions within a larger Orientalist binary. Razack writes:

Gender is crucial to the confinement of Muslims to the pre-modern, as post-colonial scholarship has shown. Considered irredeemably fanatical, irrational, and thus dangerous, Muslim men are also marked as deeply misogynist patriarchs who have not progressed into the age of gender equality, and who indeed cannot. For the West, Muslim women are the markers of their communities' place in modernity. (16)

From this passage, we can observe that Muslim women, the objects of the West's pity, are less "Othered" than their male counterparts. "Muslim women who are victims of violence are framed as deserving of sympathy, while Muslim men—who are explicitly or implicitly the agents of violence—are not" (Alsuttany 78-79).

Because Muslim men and Muslim women are viewed in binary terms (both gendered binaries and West-East binaries operating within Orientalism), their intensity is relational. The more oppressed and victimized a Muslim woman is, the more brutal and violent the man and his culture must be. The freer and autonomous a Muslim woman is, the more just the man and his culture must be. In these discourses, the hatred of the Muslim woman by the Muslim man is a signifier of Islam's overall hatred of Western values. For instance,

The oppressed Muslim woman provides insight, a vital clue, into why terrorism occurs: Muslim men oppress their women and regard the West with contempt for their equal gender relations. As a result, they want to subjugate the rest of the world to impose their way of life. (Alsuttany 75)

Even if a Muslim man is not a member of a terrorist organization, he cannot escape the position of perpetrator. “Even if not guilty of terrorism, Muslim men are still framed as guilty: guilty of anti-Americanism, misogyny, sexual perversion, and therefore the potential for terrorism” (Alsuttany 128). Because he is the agent of culture, a culture that is understood by the West to be the ultimate antithetical Other, he is immanently guilty of violence.

Alsuttany goes on to argue that the media regulates emotion in reference to Muslim identities. She writes that “[s]ympathy is regulated...by defining parameters around what should and should not be spoken, heard, and felt. Crucial to this regulation is the notion—flawed but widely believed—that our emotions are ‘natural’” (102). There is careful discourse, then, that deems Muslim women as worthy of sympathy and Muslim men as unworthy—tactics such as removing terrorism from the framework in which it occurs, pitting Muslim men as complete and undoubtable enemies of their own women, and consistently defining Muslim men in relation to terrorism work to regulate the sympathy of Western audiences.

### ***Saving Brown Women from Brown Men***

In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Gayatri Spivak states, “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (33). This is all part of a larger argument concerning colonial discourses and the allocation of power. Certainly, this narrative is applicable to the gendered constructions of Muslim identities found in Western discourses—although it is important to incorporate white women as saviours, too.

In “White Innocence, Western Supremacy,” Thobani delineates the ways in which white feminists exercise white privilege and supremacy when they become involved in Islamic rescue narratives. Even those white feminists such as Judith Butler, who are critical of other white feminists’ explicit displays of ethnocentrism, participate in a dialogue that centres and empowers whiteness and the West (135). Even when one is careful, it is hard not to fall within the “saving brown women from brown men” discourse (Spivak 33).

This discourse is one that is reiterated, time and time again, in Western media. The very binaries of West-as-good and Islamic-East-as-bad depends upon it; it is the West’s obligation as the morally superior to interfere with the East’s backwardness. Nathan Lean and John Esposito discuss how the labelling of bin Laden and al-Qaeda as ‘monsters’ after 9/11

relieved humankind of the responsibility for such flagitious displays of violence. Unbelievable human evils were projected onto a larger-than-life behemoth, giving a face to an omnipresent sense of incipient disaster. (19)

They argue that the political Right (and I would add, the political Left) operate an industry of Islamophobia that makes Islam seem like America’s most urgent and powerful threat, which then justifies the drastic measures taken to combat it.

The media’s gendered representations of Muslim identities functions to justify Western interference in Islamic societies. To save the helpless women victims, one must attack the men that enable the oppressive culture. The end—saving women—justifies the means, as it imposes a culture, militarizes foreign territory, creates a machine of fear, and ethnocentrically interferes in another culture’s affairs.

Miriam Cooke is quoted by Jiwani in “Doubling Discourses and the Veiled Other” in the following passage:

To defend our universal civilization we must rescue the women. To rescue these women we must attack these men. These women will be rescued not because they are more 'ours' than 'theirs' but rather because they will have become more 'ours' through the rescue mission....In the Islamic context, the negative stereotyping of religion as inherently misogynist provides ammunition for the attack on uncivilized brown men. (67)

Other scholars would likely contest that this binary construction creates a state of exception. As defined by Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, a state of exception is "situated at an 'ambiguous and uncertain fringe at the intersection of the legal and the political,' and would constitute a 'point of disequilibrium between public law and political fact'" (1). The overwhelming narrative of the oppressed Muslim woman who is in need of rescue legitimizes a state of exception in which Muslim men are tortured, denied human rights, deported, and discriminated against.

The harnessing of sympathy for the Muslim woman is an effective one. It demonizes Muslim men and legitimizes Western military action against Muslims in Islamic states. Stories of Muslim female victimhood "are used to rationalize the need to expel Muslims....Concern or pity for the oppressed Muslim woman, in other words, is used to advance U.S. imperialism" (Alsuttany 83-83).

In simpler terms, the more sympathy that is generated for the Muslim woman, the more Western populations are mobilized to help them. The more Westerners cry for the rescue of Muslim women, the stronger and more established the state of exception that surrounds Muslim men and Muslim society becomes. The stronger the state of exception, the more horrendous violations of humanity are allowed.

## **Conclusion**

Rhetoric is powerful. Words are not empty noises that remain only noises. Western media produces a discourse that describes Muslims only in relation to terrorism. Whereas women are consistently depicted as passive recipients of violence, hopeless victims incapable of negotiating their circumstances, Muslim men are inescapably portrayed as aggressors. Even if a Muslim man is not explicitly framed as a terrorist, he is still guilty because he is associated with a culture that is inherently violent and oppressive.

These gendered depictions operate within a larger narrative of a West-versus-Islamic-East binary. The West defines itself as the moral, modern, egalitarian society and conversely constructs Islam as its ultimate antithesis. This narrative, too, operates within a larger discourse of Orientalism. The consequences of such depictions are complex, severe, and incredibly troublesome. The harnessing of public sympathy for the Muslim woman contributes to a state of exception in which Muslim men are to be stopped from exercising their patriarchal violence at all costs. Sympathy for the Muslim women therefore results in the dehumanization and utter degradation of Muslim masculinity and justifies the drastic measures in which the West interferes with Islam, often in order to serve its own imperial interests.

One can only hope that there is a significant shift in Western thought and Western discourse that offers a more accurate and compassionate portrayal of Muslims, both “over here” and “over there.” Until then, little boys will be made of snips and snails and puppy-dog tails—but little *Muslim* boys will be made of bombs and fear: that they will (as we conjecture and as we fear) bring “over here.”

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