

Countless
stereotypes and
negative
representations exist



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I. Introduction

A countless stereotypes and negative representations exist about the Middle East by the Western media. It is known that media is very powerful source that shapes people's minds and opinions. For some people, media is the only source they acquire their information through, especially when it comes to other cultures and populations.

Western media coverage of the Middle East issues, Arab, and Muslim world is clearly a continuous subject. These stereotypes and negative representations have negative associations as Westerns assume that every member of a certain group has the same characteristics. As mentioned by Macdonald (2003), stereotypes homogenize people and put them under the same umbrella which results in biased pictures. While stereotypes can be sometimes positive, still negative stereotypes are much more problematic, causing conflicts. (Macdonald 2003).

It seems that Western media is have always been having the tendency to misrepresent Arab Muslim women as Islam came around. As Miladi (2010) said, Western does not know much about neither Islam nor Arab cultures nor traditions. As a result of this lack of knowledge, the Western media tends to represent Arab Muslim women as oppressed, victimized, and have no voice, and this is because of Islam, mainly the veil.

In his research paper, Morin (2009) pointed out that the veil is being misrepresented by the Western media since forever; the Western media is fascinated by the veil or the Hijab. The issue of veil and women who wear the veil is a common misunderstood concept in the West. Westerners often

think that this is a harsh custom that Islam requires of women. They claim that these women have no freedom or dignity for wearing these veils and that they look like ghosts in this custom. In some old movies, the Islamic custom is portrayed as a way for women to play with identity and her sexuality. But in fact, these veils actually help protect women. (Posetty, 2006).

Stereotypes may take the form of both physical stereotypes and mental stereotypes. The physical stereotypes are usually related to the concept of the veil as women who wear the veil are seen as anti-West and extremists. As for the mental stereotypes which can be very dangerous, it is caused by narrow-minded ideas and false data. Mental stereotyping of Arabs in the Western media includes portrays anti-Western attitudes, extremism and terrorism.

In fact, the Westerners have ignored the fact that Islam is a tolerant religion that gave women the right to be educated and the right to participate in political, economical, and social activities in their community. Women were also given the right to vote, the right to inherit property and take charge of their possessions (Miladi, 2010). Perhaps some of these rights are disallowed or denied by Muslim women today not because of Islam, but because of cultural traditions that should not be correlated to Islam.

The problem of these negative stereotypes has begun long time ago as it was rooted by the Arab misrepresentation. Stereotyping of Arabs has been dominating the Western media and was highly evoked since the incident of 9/11. All Arabs have been stereotyped as terrorists and extremists. It also

started with the theory of The Clash of Civilizations that was written by Samuel P. Huntington in 1997. (Macdonald 2003). In his thesis, Huntington stated that the conflicts between the West and the Middle East will be resulted by the clashes of religions, and cultures, and that there is a new enemy to the Western world that is emerging which is Islam.

According to Morin (2009), what also evoked the stereotyping towards Arabs and Muslim world is that the Arab media that is also practicing stereotyping of Westerners as enemies of Islam and Muslims across the world.

Somehow through these misconceptions, Western media is always under the impression that Arab women are caged in the Arab world and its culture as well as being oppressed and victimized just because of the way they dress. Because of these images, it is always neglected that there are so many business women in the Arab world and that the rate of education in the Arab world is very high among women who indicates that women are well educated at the Arab World as well as that they are granted almost the same rights of men (Ahmed, 1992).

In order to improve the situation in the Western media according to Ahmed (1992), it is the role of mass media to create better understanding about the Arab cultures, religions, and traditions about the Arab Muslim women. In addition, it is the Arab Muslim women's role in political, social, and cultural fields to change these stereotyping that is dominating the mass media.

II. Literature Review

Since the last couple of decades, the subjects of Islam, the Muslim community and especially Muslim women seem to have dominated the <https://assignbuster.com/countless-stereotypes-and-negative-representations-exist/>

Western media. It started with the excessive coverage of September 11, the war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the banning of the veil in Europe, to the terrorist attacks and suicide bombers in the Middle East. These are just a few images to name that the Western societies and countries have been absorbing in their daily lives, eventually forming their attitudes, perceptions and ideas about the Muslim world.

It all started with Samuel P. Huntington (1997) "Clash of Civilizations", according to Macdonald (2006). It was Huntington who came within reach of this problematic relationship between the East and the West. "Clash of Civilizations" is a part in his book that is called "The Rest Vs. The West." (Macdonald, 2006). After the Cold War ended, the desire to search for a new global ideological threat has emerged to replace the collapse of Communism. Since then, it was predicted by the Westerns experts that the Western World is facing a new enemy: Islam. Macdonald (2006).

Huntington notion pointed out that Islam has a noticeable contradictory vision and action to the Western ideology, ideas of liberty, and democracy. This phenomenon has been developed and spread into a discourse and got fully attention of the Western's (United States, the United Kingdom and its allies) perceptions and its relationships towards the world of the Middle East, the Muslims and Islam. As a result of such phenomenon and ideology, the stereotypical idea that Islam and its followers are anti-democracy and anti-Western has become fixed within the minds of the Western society. (Macdonald, 2006).

The acts of stereotyping persuade people to respond and behave in the same way that is both negative and prejudiced. The word Arabs is meant to portray a person from the Middle East, it also meant to portray this Arab as terrorist, ignorant, and a person that contradicts with the Western ideologies. In spite of the reality that these persons are from different countries, with varied cultures, attitudes, beliefs, and a diversity of religions, they are typify by one word " Arabs". (Cheney, 1986).

Several movies have been misrepresenting Arabs men and women through the years. It is has been pointed out by Cheney (1986), that Jack Shaheen, (2003), stated that 900 films done by in the American cinema showed how Arab men women and children shaped as different and threatening. Hollywood films from 1896 until today portraying Arabs as heartless, enemies, cruel, burglars, extremist in their religion, brutal murderers, and abusers of women. (Cheney, 1986).

History shows that since the beginning of cinema, Hollywood's movies have been misrepresenting Arab women. Clearly, film makers did not create these images but inherited Europe's pre-existing Arab stereotypes. These images have been created long ago; in the 18th and 19th centuries, European artists and writers offered fictional versions of women as bathed and submissive exotic " objects". As a result, through the time, the stereotype came to be accepted as valid, becoming a permanent part of European popular culture (Cheney, 1986).

In his book " Reel Bad Arabs", Shaheen noticed that " In Arabian Nights fantasies such as The Sheik (1921), Slave Girl (1947), and John Goldfarb,

Please Come Home (1964), Arab women appear as leering out from thin veils, or as unsatisfied, disposable 'knick-knacks' lounging on ornate cushions, scantily-clad harem maidens with bare midriffs, closeted in the palace's women's quarters and/or on display in slave markets" (Shaheen, 2001: 23, cited in Cheney, 1986). The stream continues in the third millennium. In Disney's remake of "Around the World in Eighty Days" (2004), for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays Prince Hapi, a Mideast sheikh with 'one hundred or so wives.' This means that films continue to show Arab woman as a slave for sex, even though the image of a terrorist dominated after 9/11.

A research paper aimed to analyze U. S. and international newspaper articles on Arab and Muslim women from 9/11/01 till 9/11/05, in order to understand how women who wear the veil are represented in western media. It was found that Reporters rarely give women the chance to speak to look beyond the stereotype and get to know Arab women. Whether oppressed, victimized or turned into a superwoman, that woman in the news is more often not caricature of the Arab and Muslim woman in real life. Readers have not yet able to receive a consistent and accurate representation of the diverse personalities, lives and opinions of these women. (Sakr, 2004).

It's been always known that TV shows influence Western people perceptions and attitudes towards various issues, especially when it comes to issues related to the Middle East and Arabs. So, most of the misperceptions towards Arab women are caused by the flow of information through TV stations. (Kaufer & Al Malki 2009)

According to Kaufer & Al Malki (2009), on the 28th of September 2009, Oprah Winfrey hosted the “ Goodwill Ambassador for the UNICEF”; the famous Lebanese singer “ Nancy Ajram” on her TV show on CBS station. In that show, Winfrey referred to Lebanon as being “ deeply conservative” and presented a documentary that shows Lebanese women veiled like the Afghani ones and compared these women with Nancy’s Ajram style and dance moves. With no doubt, Oprah’s documentary misrepresented Lebanese women and created misconception in the minds of Western people about Lebanese women who are the most modernized women in the region. In fact, Nancy Ajram style and fashion represent a large segment of Lebanese females. Statistics show that 75% of the Lebanese women are unveiled and have freedom of dress; they have their full education that exceeds that of men with 44 % compared to 40 % of men.

The media is fascinated by the portrayal of Arab women and they way they dress. According to Ahmed (1992), when it comes to portraying Muslim woman, the media in the West seems to be attentive and obsessed by the way they dress which is the veil in particular which has resulted in a great number of reactions and debates. These debates shows that the veil is perceived as a sign of cultural difference in the Western world as it differentiate Arab women from Western ones. (Ahmed, 1992). Muslim Arab woman are always badly portrayed as the shapeless and ghost women in their Islamic dress . they are really confusing the western normal people as it’s not their fault that what they are seeing on TV is that it’s the fault of the western media.

The Negative stereotyping and reactionary reporting have historically symbolized coverage of Islam and Muslims and have been reflected clearly in the theory of Orientalism created by Edward Said in 1978 which states that the East and its populations are considered backward, barbaric and outsiders to Western society. (Posetty, 2008). As a result, it seems that the media helps in creating the image of the Muslim women as the oppressed other, which will lead to imprecise conclusions, stereotypes and misperceptions of these women. (Macdonald, 2006).

According to the Orientalist theory, when women are portrayed, they are portrayed as being oppressed, exotic, mysterious, and shy. In addition, the Western media have always been portraying Arabs as violent, stupid, and cruel people that treat women as objects and that they are marginalized in their own society, and that the East all alike in their image for the West. (Macdonald, 2006).

Therefore, when the Western media frames women as sexual slave and oppressed by men as they are abusing their women, beaten, and humiliated, they are being truthful as this is the image that has been always stuck in the Westerns minds. In fact, the West has been stereotyping Arab women since forever, and they didn't change their look for the Arab women till now. Photographs and French 19th Century paintings represented Arab women as property, toy of men, submissive and still, dependent on a man who is the only motive for their survival. (Kaufman, 2009).

Terms such as the veil, the harem, female circumcision helped in the formation of such misconceptions as well as gave the impression to some of

the associated images with the oppressed Muslim woman. The problem is that these perceptions have been incorrectly generalized with no differentiation. (Gwinn, 1997). This problem has made it harder for the veiled Muslim women living in the West, as they tend to suffer more from the intolerance from the way they dress, in addition, they are hardly accepted in the Western communities. (Mohanty, 2005).

Arab women in immigrant communities and who are living in Western societies, are victims of these negative stereotypes and gender based media representations. As Morin (2009), noted that these women face negative media coverage that is based on cultural misconceptions and the recent political conflicts that have spoiled Arab-Western relations. As a result, Arab women in immigrant communities cannot win the fight for better media recognition while they continue to be viewed inside the limit of traditional Arab-Islamic stereotypes. (Morin, 2009).

As Posetty (2008) stated in his article, in the portrayal of Muslim women, attention is frequently focused on the way they dress, with their clothing seen as a symbol of their threatening, alien status. Images of Islamic dress are increasingly used in the media as visual shorthand for dangerous extremism, and Muslims all over Europe are suffering from the consequences of such associations. The main problem as Ahmed (1992) pointed out, is that the act of veiling among Muslim women or the veil itself is often associated with the lack of traditionalism and backwardness that does not fit into the modern society and among Western women who do not need to veil (Ahmed, 1992). This phenomenon suggests that we can reach the other cultural

difference and how the West is fascinated with otherness and still continues within the Western media towards the Muslim world (Ahmed, 1992).

Ayish (2010) pointed out in his paper that the Western media tends to portray Arab men as aggressive and abusers of women, and that they control women. Media portray that the women is always wearing her veil, staying at home raising children and only obey her husband who she fears. Newspapers studies has showed that Western illustration of Muslim marriage issues is vague and this is because the lack of the knowledge of foreign cultures and religions One could disagree that the major issue is Islamophobia, many Western journalists, unfamiliar with Islam religion, have a tendency to view the faith as cruel, backward and the contradictory of tolerance. (Ayish, 2010).

Morin (2009) stated in his research that stories investigated about Muslim women have shown that Western news reports represents women as the oppressed, mistreated wife, who is obligated to a prearranged marriage by her parents or obligated out of a marriage, and that she is helpless and voiceless in both situations.

Another disproportionate as stated by Ayish (2010), Sometimes, the Arab Muslim women is represented as the money hunter, who does not think about who she marries as long as the man she is going to marry is rich enough to indulge her hunger for money. In these situations on the other hand, Arab Muslim men think with different greed, they are sexually deprived and tends to treat women as sexual objects. The men are also harsh and controlling, playing with women's feelings and threats women

through oral divorce. Women are thus represented by the Western media as weak and have no rights which permit men to claim superiority (Ayish, 2010).

Dominant images of the veiled Muslim woman are always covered in the Western media to present the Muslim woman as a victim as well as being oppressed. (Ahmed, 1992). The veiled of Arab Muslim women has always been misrepresented by the media as it has become a symbol of the oppression of the Muslim woman. This representation as stated by Ahmed (1992), has been highly evoked since the event of the 9/11. As noted in Posetty (2008) research paper, Alison Donnell argues that the September 11 terrorist attacks resulted in media representations of veiling as an object of mystique, exoticism and eroticism and that the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference.

The oppression of Muslim women has been regularly used in Western media as suggestive of the barbaric and pre-modern characteristics of Islam. As Helen Watson comments in her article ' the image of the veiled Muslim woman seems to be one of the most popular Western ways of representing the " problem of Islam"'. (Posetty, 2008).

According to Ahmed (1992), the veil has become the typical symbol of women's oppression in Islam, and is perceived as it creates hostility to Westerns. In fact, the Western media has ignored the fact that veiling as a practice existed before the rise of Islam, especially in Syria and Arabia. It was also a custom among Greeks, Romans, Jews and Assyrians, and not only

to Islam. At that time, the veiled Arab woman was perceived as respectable and protected. (Ahmed, 1992).

However, as Ahmed (1992) pointed out, the veiled woman is usually represented as having denied pleasure, fun, or bodily self-expression. In some of the Western conceptualizations veiling is used as a means of performing femininity self-exploration and play with identity.

With these rising and continuous prejudices against Muslims and, especially, Muslim women, it seems to demonstrate that there is still a huge gap, a barrier that appears to prevent a sense, approval and understanding towards the Muslim 'other'. And by 'the other' we mean 'the oppressed', 'the traditional-bound', 'the factory-worker', 'the poor', etc. (Macdonald, 2006).

As mentioned before, besides the veil, discussions of the circumcision, polygamy, the sharia (Islamic) law, the harem, forced marriages, etc, are just a few issues that have made this group of women fit into the absolute, homogenous 'oppressed Muslim woman' category. (Macdonald, 2006).

As noted in Falah & Nagel (2005) paper, the problem lies when these visual images tend to portray Muslim women as a stereotypical figure; an oppressed figure suffering from a harsh culture. The veil especially is the major theme that is associated with the limitations and the oppression of Muslim Arab women as it was constantly deployed and replayed again in our visually dominated culture. Falah & Nagel (2005) argue that the veil is not only representing the oppressed Muslims and Muslim women world, but also the hidden assumption about the superiority of the West in relation to that world. In this case, the figure of the veiled Muslim woman that is being
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represented through the media, is tending to represent these women as passive victims, muted, untraditional, and oppressed, which therefore creates a cultural-ideological barrier with the Western women. Thus, the problem is that the danger that is resulted from these representations of veiled Muslim women tends to create a division between Western women (as modern, liberated) and Eastern women (as backward, oppressed), while also ignoring the diversity of practices, views and experiences of these women. As Falah & Nagel (2005) pointed out, it seems important that the question on how to communicate with the other who is culturally and traditionally different has become one of the most urgent and immediate agendas within North-South/West-East relations and interactions. What is needed is an understanding of this sense of 'urgency', 'gaps' and 'barriers' that links to the Western's knowledge of the 'veiled Muslim woman' (Falah & Nagel, 2005). As a result, veiled Muslim women become muted and misrepresented.

Another major feature found in the Western media especially in advertising is the imagined perspectives such as the myths and fantasies Western culture has about Islam, the Muslims, and especially, veiled Muslim women. This means that not only misconceptions and misunderstandings towards Muslim women have been continuous in modern times, but it has also become widespread and universal by the advent of modern technology. (Falah & Nagel, 2005).

Miladi (2010) pointed out in his research paper that modern images of Muslim women in American advertisements, argues that Western advertisers tend to spread stereotypes and the wrong representations of the veil and Muslim women in order to appeal to consumers. As a result, advertisers use <https://assignbuster.com/countless-stereotypes-and-negative-representations-exist/>

certain images of Muslim women that have been historically fixed in the Western mind, such as the harem, the hammas (public baths), the mysterious veiled woman or the oppressed woman living under an oppressive ruler or men and use this to attract consumers.

The veil especially is itself is considered as an enormous marketing tool, as marketers often use the veil in order to sell sex. (Miladi, 2010). The use of the oppressed women and the veil in advertisements will make the Western consumers think that by buying the advertised product as well as buying the favors of the mysterious woman behind the veil. (Miladi, 2010).

The problem as stated by Miladi (2010), is that Westerners are usually buying certain products for buying these imaginary images of the 'other'. As a result, through the continuous and repetitive collective exposition to the media, a larger collective imagination will continue to be created and produced about this image of the imaginary veiled Muslim woman "other". As mentioned by Gwinn (1997), the oppressed veiled Muslim woman in the ads may also be connected to the rising prejudices and debates that surround Muslim women and the veil in the Western world.

The oppressed stereotypes of Arab Muslim women as stated by Ahadi (2009), has negative impacts on those women that is very obvious. Stereotypes occur when individuals are classified by others as having something in common because they are members of a particular group or category of people. Media stereotyping of women as objects and helpless beings creates very low expectations for society's Arab women. As mentioned by Morin (2009), women living abroad face distinctive

discriminations from the Western communities. Western women are always considered as superior to Arab Muslim women especially, the veiled ones. In fact, Arab Muslim women are being oppressed by the negative representations created by the Western media. In addition, these representations may impact on these women psychologically as Western populations perceive the veil as a barrier between them and the veiled women.

III. Body

Numerous stereotypes and defaming of Arab Muslim women have been controlling the western media. Samuel P. Huntington wrote a theory called “Clash of Civilization” about Islam has different believes and values that contradict with the Western idea of liberty and democracy, and that Islam is the solo enemy of westerns and the main reason that the world will not going to improve. Islam and Arabs have a way of thinking and believes that is very different than the west has. And that the west see that the road to freedom and democracy of the societies is blocked by the Islam ideologies that block the world from reaching freedom and democracy at its fullest point, from here the stereotyping of Arab Muslim women began.

The stereotyping of Arabs in general has taken its fullest load since the incident of 9/11. Westerns have blamed Muslims and Arabs for this tragic incident, and they started to look at them as the main enemies of the west and that if there are any terrorists in the world they are Muslims or Arab Muslims. “ The westerns have been Arabs have been subjected to discrimination and violence since 9/11, a Muslim girl for example that works in a rental car company was simply fired because she was told that she

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cannot wear her veil, also a hotel employee stated that he was cursed many times and that people called him Taliban and Osama”.

Following the September 9/11 attacks on the USA, stereotyping of Muslims, and Muslim women began with such great hatred toward Muslims and Arabs. That the Islam and Muslims are terrorists, thieves, spiteful, merciless, extremist, vicious murderers, and abusers of women. The beginning of the stereotyping of women in the western media was that the women are abused by the Arab men, and they are beaten and they are sex tools for the men, and they abuse them mentally and physically, and that they only please the wishes of men without thinking, and these are some examples of the way of the western media portrayals of Arab Muslim women.

After the attacks of 9/11, the world initiated a campaign against Islam and they started condemning Islam as a religion of violence and terrorists. Surrounded by all these accusation there were people who needed to understand the accuracy of the religion of Islam, to know if it is in fact a religion of terrorism or not?. The overstatements of the media reporting after 9/11 attacks, lead the people to be convinced that the Arabs and Muslims are terrorists and they are cruel and heartless that they want to demolish the west. Hollywood and media personnel are also responsible for making the people believe that the Muslims and Arabs are terrorists.

Film creators, and Cinema producers continue to make movies and films that target the Arabs as a terrorists and murderers, they stereotype the Arabs with the “ 5 B’s”, which are Billionaires, Bombers, Belly dancers, Bedouins, and Barbarians. Jack Shaheen made a movie called “ Reel Bad Arabs”

demonstrated that the western movies industry are fanatical with portraying Arab women in their movies, and they portray the Arab women from the western point of views, and they didn't change anything during the years of portraying of Arab women, it's the same point of view.

Jack Shaheen said that the portray in western media of Arab women are mostly as slave girls, a woman wears veil that shows all her body, they are belly dancers that seduce men, barbarian, they are gold diggers, that they are willing to do absolutely anything for the sake of their well being. Jack Shaheen in the part of the western portrayals of Arab women as gold diggers, and barbarians and gypsies is right and I agree with him in this part.

Furthermore, the remake of the Disney movie " Around the world in 80 days" they show Arnold Schwarzenegger as an Arab Sheikh, that have over a 100 wives, that are slaves just for sex. This shows that the Arab men are not pleased with just one woman or wife; they need more from everything, even from women. This part tackles a very important issue which is " Shariaa" Islamic law, which states that the man has the right to marry 4 wives at the same time, and this believe of marrying more than one wife is totally rejected in the western believes and ideologies from the beginning, they don't understand this part from the Islamic law to talk about it or to misrepresent it like this in their movies. Even though they portray Arab women in diverse descriptions, Slave girl, playful, self centered, but after the September 9/11 attacks, the terrorist image was the image that controlled over the mind of the western people and the western media.

The TV manipulate the people in a huge way, it affects the attitude, behavior, believes and the opinions of the people. Media people take gain of this point, and the western people are badly informed about Arabs and Arab women, and that their information about Arabs is from movies and TV shows. The image there are consistent in the movies is that the Arabs are terrorists, they take this part and they stereotype Arabs and Arab women without studying them or their culture, they stereotype them in the way they would like the world to see them in it. they have succeeded in making the people when they hear the word Arab or Arab women they think of terrorists, cruel, merciless, barbarians, gypsies, robbers, monsters, beaters of women, use women just for sex, women are slaves.

Its widely known from the western media and western image what is the image the Arab have in general, the image that have started by the Arab are Orientalists about Harem of the Arab, Arab dancing, Arab women are locked in doors and they are not allowed to get out except with the permission of her husband, and that the women are substandard than men, they are not allowed to be involved in public issues. These are the idea and images that the western have about the Arab women, in western media and cartoons regrettably.

The majority of Arabs are passive to the stereotypes of western media toward them, but for the Arab women the issue is very sensitive. Western media is fanatical about the dress code of Arab women, mostly the Veil of the Arab women. Arab women are portrayed as overweight, loose-fitting women, in their loose dress and their unattractive shaped veil that doesn't show the feature of their body, they portray them even in caricature and <https://assignbuster.com/countless-stereotypes-and-negative-representations-exist/>

some magazine and programs. The concept of the Arab veil for the western was always that the Arab women have the life of suppressed and the victimized, poor, isolated creature politically and culturally that is forcibly is wearing this veil and is being like this. According to Gwinn (1997), he tackled the point that the veil of the Arab women is reflecting in the western media to be the well-known method of representing the Arab women and to represent the dilemma of Islam. The fact is the veil was in the pre Islam era, was the custom of Romans, Jews, and Greeks. But after the Islam had spread and the Muslim women started to wear the veil as God said to cover their hair, the west started to stereotype the veil with Islam and Muslim women, and finally terrorist's women.

The veil of Arab women is distinguished as a threatening to the peace and as a terrorist symbol and it's also seen as a alien as declared by Posetty (2008) in his article. The way Arab women dress and the veil is seen in the western media as a symbol of terrorists. Consequently, the Arabs are suffering from the result of these stereotypes all over Europe and the west countries, that make them in a continues threat every minute of everyday due to these portrayals.

According to Ahmed (1992), the issue of veiling of women is that the concept is associated to the lack of traditional values and backwardness that doesn't go with the