

# Media (Mis)Representations

## Muslim Women in the Canadian Nation

BY KATHERINE H. BULLOCK AND GUL JOYA JAFRI

*Après avoir analysé la représentation médiatique des Musulmanes au Canada et la réponse des femmes les auteures tentent de démontrer que l'identité des Musulmanes sera exclue de la condition "femmes" au Canada tant et aussi longtemps qu'une meilleure compréhension des cultures musulmanes et des croyances islamiques ne sera pas mieux intégrée.*

This article aims to demonstrate that Muslim women's identities are excluded from the construction of "women" in the Canadian nation. Canadian women's identities, like those of other so-called "first-world women" have typically been constructed against the "other" of the so-called "third-world woman." The "Canadian woman" is all that the third-world woman is not: progressive, modern, liberated, free, educated, autonomous, and so on (Mohanty). Since Muslim women in Canada are usually seen as coming from the third world, practices associated with Islam (especially visible ones like wearing a headscarf) can be seen as the importation of "backward" third-world values to Canada, rather than being viewed as "Canadian" practices in their own unique way. To demonstrate this, our focus in this article is on the representation of Muslim women in the mainstream Canadian media, as it is our conviction that the media, defined here as print and broadcast information programming (i.e. newspaper, audio, TV), both reflects and shapes Canadian debates over who belongs and who does not—that is, Canadian notions of "nationhood."

Our analysis is based upon information collected during a community project, "Muslim Women Speak Out: Towards a Fair and Accurate Portrayal of Muslim Women in Canadian Mainstream Media," sponsored by the Afghan Women's Organization in Toronto from 1997-1998, and funded by Status of Women Canada and the Multiculturalism Program, Department of Canadian Heritage. The project had several phases: four separate focus group sessions where Muslim women from a range of ages and backgrounds came together to discuss the representation of Muslim women in the media; the compilation of an annotated bibliography about the representation of Islam, Muslim women and other minorities in the media; the compilation of a list of civic organizations devoted to media advocacy; and the issuance of a report summarizing the project and its findings (Jafri). An advisory committee comprising members from different

Muslim organizations, media representatives, and media advocacy groups met regularly and guided the project. The project aimed to improve Muslim women's media literacy and advocacy skills.<sup>1</sup> Based on the information gathered during this project, especially from the focus group sessions, we argue in this article that Muslim women's identities will continue to be excluded from the construction of "women" in the Canadian nation until there is a better understanding of Muslim cultures and Islamic beliefs.

### The representation of Muslim women in Canadian mainstream media

The media does not determine citizens' thoughts and opinions, but it does play a significant role in suggesting to the nation who "we" are, who belongs, and who does not. The media not only shapes personal and national identity but is the lens through which reality is perceived (Henry). Both visual and textual representations of "nationhood" in print and broadcast media shape our perceptions of "others" whether positively or negatively (Van Dijk). Which faces are presented as "real Canadians," and which are not?

Our argument is that Muslim women are presented as outsiders: as foreign, distant "others," and as members of a religion (Islam) that does not promote "Canadian" values, but anti-Canadian values such as indiscriminate violence and gender oppression.<sup>2</sup> Representative headlines include: "Two Unveiled Women Murdered, Muslim extremists suspected" (*Vancouver Sun* 1994); "Wearing a uniform of oppression" (*Globe and Mail* 1993); "Shrouded in black, women rendered invisible, voiceless" (*Toronto Star* 1995); "Stoning reveals mistreatment of women in Iran" (*Montreal Gazette* 1994); and "A veil of tears in Algeria" (*Winnipeg Free Press* 1994). Thus while the media is supposed to be neutral and "democratic" it can often reproduce and reinforce racist discourse, including bias against religious communities (Henry).

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Although “the media” is not a monolithic, undifferentiated entity that necessarily intends overtly to exclude Muslim women, there are dominant and recurrent themes of Muslim women that prevail. Sajidah Kutty’s study of the image of Muslim women in western culture finds that three personas tend to be attributed to the Muslim woman. The first is the “harem belly-dancer character,” the mysterious and sexualized woman of the “Orient”; the second is “the oppressed Muslim woman,” often represented as the *hijab* (headscarf) wearer or the woman who is unable to drive; and, finally, there is the “militant Muslim woman,” often shown in *hijab* with a gun and military clothes (14). These personas are in line with the general Western “cultural consensus” (Said 1981: 48) of Islam as a static, backward, exotic and barbaric religion—a discourse on Islam better known as “Orientalism” (Said 1979).<sup>3</sup>

Research on the portrayal of Muslims in Canadian print media shows that Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women are pervasive. Islam and Muslims are usually covered in the foreign affairs section, meaning they are presented as outsiders, not as members of the Canadian nation (Gowlett). A review of five Canadian dailies between 1993 and 1997 found 96 articles on Muslim women (Jafri).<sup>4</sup> Seventy-three of these articles (76 per cent) were about Muslim women in other countries—such as Iran, Algeria, Saudi Arabia and France—and only 23 (24 per cent) were stories relating to Muslim Canadian women. This kind of imbalance in coverage emphasizes the Orientalist paradigm that would have Muslims as “other” to the “us” of the Canadian reader. This is in spite of the fact that there have been Muslims in Canada at least since the beginning of this century, and that, according to the 1991 Census, there are now over half a million Muslims in Canada, who would also be reading the newspaper as “Canadians.” The Canadian media focus on Muslims as foreigners is in line with media portrayals of Muslims as outsiders in other Western countries, notably the U.S., which undoubtedly has a significant impact on Canadian media portrayals.

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Wilkins’s study of 230 U.S. press photos of Middle Eastern women specifically, found that the most common stereotypes are of women as victims who are passive, veiled, and impersonal, in accordance with the framework of Orientalism. The exception is the mention of only one female politician. Wilkins argues that this is a reflection of both the operational practices of editors, who assign a “news value” to items, and of a moral and political discourse that assigns an ideological value to these photos (51).

What of the 23 articles found to be about Muslim Canadian women? The opportunity to rupture

the Orientalist image of Muslim women as “other,” by focusing on Muslim women in Canada, was not taken by the media. For a start, all but one article presented the Muslim women as outsiders due to their Middle Eastern or South Asian origin, or “immigrant” status. Emphasizing the “immigrant” status of Muslim women ties into the larger racialized discourse in Canada about who is/is not a “real” Canadian, with the white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant identity posited as the norm (except in Québec, which puts forward the white, French, Catholic persona as the “real” Québécois), and all others as deviations. There were only three articles about Muslim women as “Canadian women” looking at their lifestyles, choices, challenges, activities, contributions, and activism. One article made reference to a Caucasian woman who had become Muslim, while there was no reference at all to Black Muslims in Canada. Thus Orientalism, by its implication of “Muslim as Easterner,” also negates the identity of Black Muslims. Orientalist stereotypes are overlaid by a racialized representation of who is a Muslim, who is a Canadian, and who is a Canadian Muslim.

A second failure to rupture the Orientalist discourse on Muslim women is evidenced by the fact that a full 20 of these 23 articles (87 per cent) were specifically about the issue of women wearing the *hijab* in Canada, as if that is the only relevant aspect of Muslim women’s identity. Whether in the guise of the exotic Oriental beauty, the veiled and oppressed victim, or the scarf-wearing, gun-toting fundamentalist fanatic, this constant linkage of Muslim women to *hijab*, and *hijab* to oppression/violence, reinforces the Orientalist paradigm of Muslims as un-Canadian.

A significant portion of the articles on *hijab* revolved around the media reaction to the controversy in Québec over the expulsion of Québécois school girls for wearing *hijab* in school. This was a controversy sparked by the refusal of a school in Montréal to allow a teenage girl to attend school while wearing *hijab*. It occurred immediately prior to provincial elections in Québec and amidst the discussions about the impending separation of Québec from Canada and what kind of “Québec” it could/should be after independence (Lenk). As Lenk demonstrates, headlines in newspaper articles during this period furthered an Orientalist discourse that speaks of the inherent, fanatic, violent, and threatening nature of Muslims: “Muslim veil threat to harmony in French schools, minister says” (*Vancouver Sun* 1994b: A18); “An act of faith or a veiled threat to society?” (*Toronto Star* 1995a: F5); and, notoriously, “*Foulard. Le Complot: Comment les Islamistes Nous Infiltrent* [The Veil. The Plot: How the Islamists Infiltrate Us]” (*L’Express* cover page).

Newspaper photographs also often show veiled women holding guns or supporting causes defined as fundamentalist.<sup>5</sup> Such stereotyping is so pervasive that it constitutes a reality for many readers. For example, Mona LeBlanc wrote a letter to the editor of *The Globe and Mail*, January

4, 1995, to object to Jeffery Simpson's opinion piece (written in response to the Québec controversy, "The Current Objections to Muslim Clothing are Simply Wrong-headed") in which he argued that Muslim women should have the right to wear *hijab* if they so desired:

Simpson's argument against opponents of the *hijab* is careless at best, dishonest at worst.... leaving aside the connection between the *hijab* and women's oppression, which is obvious but will, no doubt be picked up by other readers, I fail to see the [Sikh's] turban and the [Mennonite's] bonnet as threats of holy wars against those who do not share their wearers' beliefs. And yet, there is such a link between the *hijab* and jihad. Rest assured that neither I nor most other "wrong-headed objectors," I'm sure, believe for one minute that all *hijab*-garbed females are gun-toting terrorists at heart. That is not the point. The point is the ill-advised and ill-timed use of a highly loaded symbol when many in the West are growing weary of the rise in fundamentalist Muslim violence.

Canadians were asked to consider whether or not wearing *hijab* passed the "litmus test" of being Canadian, but given the linkage of the headscarf to oppression/terrorism, the answer was already given. No one would welcome such practices into Canada; the conclusion had to be that the scarf as a symbol of these un-Canadian (but Islamic) values must be rejected.<sup>6</sup>

Because of this Western cultural fixation on Muslim women's dress as a symbol of oppression, Muslim women often have to focus on that aspect of their identity as well, even if they would rather talk of something else. Five of the 23 articles that focused on Muslim women in Canada were written by young women in response to popular Western anti-*hijab* sentiments, including the Québec controversy, in which they asserted that *hijab* was their choice as Muslim Canadian women. Only one article written by a journalist espoused a similar view, in which women's individual opinions were expressed ("Their Canada includes *hijab*" A1). It is a positive sign that media space is being given to the voices of Muslim Canadian women, though giving them space to discuss the veil is not much of a departure from the reductive notion that a Muslim woman's essence is her veil, or that all Muslim women are veiled.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, the media focus on Muslim women as veiled, and the veil as a symbol of oppression/violence ignores the sociological complexity behind the decision to cover, and the multiple meanings "covering" has for Canadian Muslim women. For those who do choose *hijab*, several factors have an influence. Many see wearing *hijab* as a fulfillment of their spirituality (Hoodfar; Cayer; Bullock; Zine). Others use it as an anti-racist statement (Cayer) or as empowerment against Western cultural

pressures for women to be slim and beautiful (Mustafa; Yusufali). Issues of class are also involved, with some women in favour of covering, but feeling impeded by their upper-class heritage which emphasized the backward nature of covering (Cayer; Bullock), and so on.

By contrast the media does not portray the plight of Muslim women who live in secular Muslim countries that oppose, often violently, women's choice to cover. Nothing is made in the media of the Tunisian government's edict banning the *hijab* from government work places, schools and universities (Bullock). Rarely is there sympathy for the Turkish women who cannot attend university while wearing *hijab* (Bullock 145). And when mention is made of secular Muslim states banning covering, the articles use more moderate language, such as "crackdown" as opposed to "forced," or in other cases, more complacent headlines ("Egypt bans long veil at school"). This omission by Canadian media reinforces the impression that only religious ideologies, or states claiming Islam as the foundation of their laws, are controlling women's bodies, and that secular ideologies, or states, are always benevolent or emancipatory towards women.

In sum, it is clear that Muslim women are predominantly presented to the Canadian public as foreign, "exotic," oppressed, or threatening "others" rather than as one's "unexotic," unthreatening next door neighbours.

### **The impact of negative media coverage on Muslim women**

The Canadian mainstream media (positive exceptions notwithstanding) represents Muslim women as foreigners, outsiders, not part of the circle of "we," and, as evidenced by the associations with violence and gender oppression, often as potential carriers of anti-Canadian values. How do Muslim women themselves feel about the coverage of Muslim women and Islam? How does it affect their sense of self, if at all? These were some of the questions asked of 25 Muslim women attending three focus group sessions in February 1998 as part of the research for the "Muslim Women Speak Out" project mentioned above. Not surprisingly, overall, these women were not happy with the media coverage of Islam in general and of Muslim women in particular.

In terms of coverage, the feeling was that the media paid too much attention to sensationalized or violent events in the Muslim world that were linked to, and/or explained by, "Islam." It was also felt that that coverage was frequently inaccurate, or if not inaccurate, then drastically simplistic such that complexities and

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nuances were left out, allowing a negative stereotype of Muslim women and/or Islam to develop in the (uninformed) viewer's mind (Jafri). Some women who had lived in Canada for more than 20 years pointed out that coverage has improved remarkably since they first arrived, when there used to be no coverage; other women noted that newspaper coverage was improving because it was increasingly portraying "lifestyle" aspects of being Muslim, such as Muslim holidays. So, while non-Muslim Canadians are often not conscious of the general media bias against Islam and Muslims, often having, in fact, their opinions of Muslim women shaped by the negative stereotypes, the interviewees were acutely aware of the problem. Older participants were aware of some of the small positive changes in representation we have mentioned in the above section.

The negative (mis)representation of Muslim women in the popular media, and the fixation on the *hijab*, often makes fellow Canadians hostile to, or suspicious of, those Muslim women who choose to cover. Many women had anecdotes to share about being accosted or approached by strangers unhappy with their headscarf. Sometimes the negative responses by fellow Canadians led to crises of self-esteem, confusion about identity, and doubt about one's faith, especially for the younger women, as the following anecdote illustrates. A counsellor spoke of the time she tried to help a young woman who had been turned down for a job because she covered. Her sister, who didn't cover, had been accepted:

And they said to [the sister who covered]... "The way you dress up, you know, the clients come here, and we will get, you know, they will complain." But she is fluent [in English], she is born here!... She is traumatized ... and you are trying to help her out, and to work out this feeling... The girl has no confidence! She has no self-esteem, she has no confidence anymore! (qtd. in Jafri: 35)

Another young woman remembers the media coverage of the Gulf War, when she was in Grade eight, making her question her identity as a Muslim: "Everything I was reading [about Saddam Hussein] was so negative ... that in a way you start to question your own people, you just believe what ever you read." (qtd. in Jafri 36). Such media stereotypes thus created identity crises for women who, whether they wore *hijab* or not, struggled to maintain a Muslim identity in the face of largely negative imagery of Muslims.

Yet most women remarked that having to deal with these kinds of negative reactions had made them stronger, more knowledgeable and more proud of their Islamic heritage. One woman said,

all the people who have made comments [about the *hijab*], or stared at me made me a stronger person....

It forces you to question who you are all the time....  
Because you are "out there," 'cause you are saying that you are proud to be Muslim. (qtd. in Jafri: 36)

These quotations show that the prevalence of negative media stereotyping of Muslim women has a mixed impact on Muslim Canadian women. Nonetheless, all would agree that the elimination of negative media portrayal would improve the daily lives of Canadian Muslim women.

### **Becoming Canadian: some Muslim women's solutions**

Earlier in this article, we argued that while the media does not determine Canadian citizens' views of Muslim women, the media does play an important role in defining the "nation," and later we pointed out that at present, by and large, Muslim women are defined in the media as outsiders. The focus groups sessions revealed that while many Muslim women feel hurt by this exclusion, their strategy is not to reject "Canadianness" as an option for themselves, but, rather, to try and expand the boundaries of "Canadianness" so as to include themselves and their identities. Their concept of Canada was of a multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious nation that was committed to respect and tolerance for the diverse ways of life represented by so many different groups; a Canada committed to democracy, and social and economic justice; and a Canada that valued and encouraged their contribution as women to the public sphere either as professionals or in volunteer organisations. They did not believe that their faith committed them to values that are un-Canadian. In fact, an un-stated assumption of the focus group sessions was that helping improve media coverage of Muslim women would improve their quality of life as Canadians. If Islam and Muslims were better understood, the thinking seemed to be, people would accept them as full members of the Canadian nation. One woman commented that "[Muslim women] should be portrayed as who they are ... [i]n terms of most of us, [even when we wear *hijab*], we are all Canadian, born here, brought up here, going to university (qtd. in Jafri 38)."<sup>8</sup>

Nearly all the focus group participants believed that media coverage of Muslim women would not improve magically, but rather through hard work and activism on the part of the Muslim community—letter-writing campaigns, liaising with the media, increasing the number of journalists who are Muslim, and so on (Jafri). Others added that Muslims should develop media literacy skills in their children, so that they are able competently to analyze, read, and respond to negative stereotypes. (In fact, several participated in the media literacy workshop during the project and also joined the media advocacy group that was formed.) In this sense, most women recognized the need for greater advocacy and public relations efforts as being the most effective means of improving media coverage,

but also seemed to consider it their responsibility—and not the media's—to effect changes.

Some women argued that Muslims should also improve their knowledge of Islam, so that they could meaningfully comment on the complexities involved in media coverage of Muslims—such as being able to identify cultural practices from normative Islamic prescriptions. For them, the issue was a matter of both media and Muslims having misunderstood the truth of Islam, as opposed to being a matter of political positioning or a discursive practice embedded in representations of the Orient.

Another woman suggested an important way to improve coverage would be to broaden the scope of Muslim input, so that Muslims were seen to be part of Canada, and not just called upon to comment on things “overtly” Islamic:

If I owned my TV station.... I would hire Muslim women to do the financial and political analysis on the news, and cover areas where it is seen that Muslim women do not [currently] go near.... To see a Muslim woman in *hijab*, reporting on the news, a big fire over here, and blah, blah, blah, and just have it be, normal. (qtd. in Jafri 38)

This suggestion picked up on an earlier comment by a woman who had complained about the narrow portrayal of Muslim women:

Why can't someone come and ask me, like “What is the best way to compost?” You know, why can't we know about those things? Why can't we have an opinion about Free Trade? (qtd. in Jafri 32)

Such comments reflect women's desire to “belong,” and for their daily concerns, which resemble those of other Canadians, to be included, rather than their being included only as marginalized Others.

These comments emphasize our point earlier that Muslim Canadian women have been narrowly portrayed, largely in association with the *hijab*, rather than being shown as multi-dimensional human beings.

## Conclusion

The struggle towards gendering the nation involves, necessarily, diversifying the nation. We have argued that for the Canadian nation to include Muslim women as full citizens, there needs to be a better understanding—by media, and by non-Muslim Canadians—of Islam in general, and of the diversity of Muslim cultures and beliefs in particular. The media, while not a monolithic institution, is playing a crucial role in defining “Canadianness” to the nation. And as we have shown, at present, Muslim women are presented by the mainstream media largely as “alien and scary” outsiders.

Muslim women are committed to initiating change in current media representations, and we call on the media to respond positively to these initiatives. Only then can the media be said to be [self]critically engaging in dialogue regarding its representations of gender and culture and, as a result, playing a constructive role in diversifying (current images of) the Canadian nation.

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<sup>1</sup>The Canadian Council of Muslim Women and MediaWatch were project partners; Gul Joya Jafri was the project coordinator and Katherine Bullock was a member of the project's advisory committee.

<sup>2</sup>Gowlett's study of the coverage of Islam in mainstream Canadian newspapers, 1983-1985, found that over a six-month period in 1985, “Islam appears most often in stories that can be coded, in some way, as violent” (80). Twenty-four issues of *The Globe and Mail* during this period had an average of two stories per day which made some reference to Islam: 46/53 dealt with violent subject matter and the remainder with tourism, restriction of freedom, and the military (80-81). Twenty-five issues of *The Montreal Gazette* had just over two stories per issue making some reference to Islam, and 50/54 dealt with violent themes (81). *The Toronto Star* had between one to two stories a day out of thirty issues mentioning Islam with 43/48 being coded as violent while most of the remainder dealt with Islamic law, tourism, and Hajj (81).

<sup>3</sup>Orientalism, a field of study originating in the late eighteenth century, was initially focused on the philological study of the languages of the “Orient.” Orientalists subscribed to generally accepted Western popular views that the Muslim world was a civilisation wholly different (in its “essence”) from that of the West, and one grounded in fanatical and barbaric beliefs that prevented it from becoming “modern” and “civilized.” Fascination with the tales of the *Arabian Nights* did much to disseminate these views amongst the European public (as now with the Disney movie versions of the exotic/barbaric “Orient” in *Aladdin*.) Since Edward Said's analysis, “Orientalism” is a term that describes those holding such attitudes.

<sup>4</sup>News articles found using the keywords “Islam” and “woman/women” in a search of the CBCA (Canadian

Business and Current Affairs) index for the period 1993 to 1997. The search covered five Canadian dailies—The *Calgary Herald*, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Montreal Gazette*, the *Toronto Star* and the *Vancouver Sun*—which means there have been between three and four articles on Muslim women per paper, per year.

<sup>5</sup>For example, see photograph in the *Toronto Star*, October 25 1997, A10.

<sup>6</sup>Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, "Prime Time News," July, 1995—a documentary that was prompted by the Québec controversy.

<sup>7</sup>As Watson commented: "The plethora of books about women behind, beyond or beneath the veil may give the impression that Muslim women's main activity and main contribution to society is being in a 'state of veil.'" (141).

<sup>8</sup>Only one newspaper article, ("Their Canada includes *hijab*") which was also cited above, expressed this sentiment. However, as the article's title indicates, it is only "their" Canada—and not the Canada of *all* Canadians—which includes *hijab*.

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