

SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF FRENCH MUSLIM VEILED WOMEN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE ECONOMIST AND THE US TIMES

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Western media is creating the notion of Islamophobia among world at large. Islam and Muslims are related with radicalism and violence. In view of Ban on veil in France 2004, the pictorial representation of French Muslim veiled women by western press which considered to be objective, free and independent is studied. The present Qualitative study applied semiotic analysis on seven pictures of French Muslim veiled women in The Economist and eleven pictures in The US Time from year 2004-2010. The results revealed that The American press is presenting French Muslim veiled women in more neutral way as compared to the British press as far as pictorial representation is considered. The study conclude that British media is framing the French Veiled women as oppressed, conservative, extremist and creating the notion of Islamophobia among the minds of the readers.

Keywords: *Islamophobia, Extremist, Conservative, Framing and Oppressed.*

Introduction

Islam is the name of negativity in the West, due to the distorted images, developed and manipulated by the media. It is generally believed that Western and United States mainstream media often misrepresents and inaccurately interprets /portrays, Islam, Islamic world and its manifestation. ¹Media sets frames to play up or play down a particular event. Media being a fourth pillar of the state and mouth piece of the society has responsibilities to be fulfilled. ²

The Muslim world faced a drastic criticism by media after the attack of 9/11. Another controversial debate raised in 2004 when French government passed a law that declared unlawful any clothing representing a student's religious affiliation. Although the law did not specify any particular religious group or symbol (type of clothing), it was clear to most observers that the law was meant to prohibit Muslim girls from wearing headscarves in French public schools³. The depiction of French veiled Muslim women in western media is highly important. The media is framing this reality according to its demands and policies. This leads the researcher to explore the status of Muslim veiled women in France. Women are treated equally to men in Islam, conception of Islam are marked by a desire for personal interpretation, individual application and a reading of Quran that emphasized equality between men and women. Women are free to do whatever they want to

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do with their bodies and covering the whole faces is their own choice.⁴ Unfortunately in many parts of the world women is still debating for her rights likewise in France veiled Muslim women are marginalized and are treated with an indifference. In recent years the projection of Islam and specially Muslim woman in media raised many controversial questions among the minds of its readers. To answer these questions the framing analysis of the published pictures in the selected magazines was made to assess the role of media in this regard.

France is a country of multiculturalism and people belonging to different races and communities are living there still the true practice of multiculturalism seems diminished in France. Racism exists in France in employment, choosing among candidates, housing, attitudes towards its foreign population. The researcher explained the concept of Born in France but still not French. There is a reluctant and unwillingness to accept Muslims as a part of French society and treat them equally. The ban on veil put French Muslim women in threat.⁵

Islam is currently the second most practiced religion in France, and in 2010 two third of the immigrants to France were Muslims. It is evident that Muslims no longer remain a minority in France. Muslim veiled women like other French women have equal right to live in that place with complete freedom and liberty but unfortunately the situation seems completely opposite.

“ The British Veil Wars” maps the space of the British debates on Islamic women's apparel and identifies the political conditions and structures that direct the non regulation of its practice in public institutions, such as schools. The article argued that despite the poignant political dilemmas caused by the 2006 'veil debate' on the niqab (face veil) statutory regulation against its practice was not foreshadowed and the reasons most succinctly identified against its non - regulation is due to not only Britain's citizenship regime but also because of the church and state establishment as well as Article 9 of the European Commission of Human Rights. The article leads to reflections about the process by which the veil became constructed as a response to the political imperatives and failures of British multiculturalism.⁶

According to French high council of integration France is a home to four million to five million Muslims, defined by culture rather than religious observance of whom up to half have French citizenship. It seems that Muslims are no longer minority in France, most of them are

born French and deserves to have equal rights like other French citizens.⁷

To keep in review the above debate, the present research work aims to focus on the framing of French Muslim veiled women in selected magazines, following hypothesis are formulated:

H1: Western media is framing French Muslim veiled women in a neutral way.

H2: The US press is framing French veiled Muslim women in a neutral way as compared to The UK press.

The two mainstream weekly magazines of UK, The Economist and of USA The US Time from year 2004-2010 were selected for the study because they were considered to be neutral, independent, objective and have higher readership. To review the framing of French Muslim woman in these magazines all the published pictures during the selected time period were reviewed objectively.

Studies related to veil and Islam phobia

Veiling has made Muslim women victim of racism and Islam phobia in society at large and patriarchal control within communities. This article is about the Muslims women in Toronto, Canada. These young girls faced discrimination in schools due to practicing their religion. These women try to reinforce traditional values and at the same time try to redefine the terrain of gender, faith and identity.⁸ Islamophobia is creating in Europe. World value survey and European value survey was conducted to explore that Islamophobia has become a cultural, political and religious phenomena in Europe and many people take Islam as a religion of intolerance.⁹

Method

Semiotic analysis has been applied to analyze nineteen pictures of French Muslim veiled women from the magazine The U.S Time and eleven pictures of French Muslim veiled women from The Economist. Semiotics, or science of signs is primarily concerned with how meaning is generated at the level of signs, and their relationship to other signs within sign systems.¹⁰ Though originally conceptualized in relation to spoken and written language, semiotics has subsequently been developed and applied to diverse social objects and practices, including news images; the technique of discourse analysis has its roots in this science.

Following units of analysis are selected to analyze pictures and their preferred meaning.

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- Camera Shots
 - Composition
 - Levels of Signification

Categorization

Particular studies have been productive to the extent that the categories can easily be formulated.¹¹ For the purpose of semiotic analysis of selected photographs these categories were defined. In the following categories visual data was categorised for analysis the intended or preferred meaning of the picture.

Operationalization of the categories

The study is divided in to three categories, in first section the Category A is based on camera shots, second section of Category B comprises of composition and third section on Category C that is level of significance. The selected pictures of both magazines are analysed on the basis of formulated categories.

Category A Camera Shots

Close up shot is used to draw the attention of the viewer to focus on expressions and emotions.

Extreme Close up (ECU) implies to more clinical details of face . Mid Shot showed people from waist up or simply the head and shoulders. Long shot A view of a scene that is shot from a considerable distance, so that people appear as indistinct shapes.

Category B Composition

Horizontal/Vertical

Image made up of straight lines, either vertical or horizontal, appearing static. A posed photograph as portrait seemed to draw a boundary around the moment, fencing it off from what happened before and after the shutter was clicked.

Diagonal

Images bisected by strong diagonal lines that appear to continue beyond the picture frame, showed that the shot has been abstracted from a continuous flow of action. It conveyed a movement and dynamism in the still image.¹²

Category C Level of Signification

First level of Signification (Denotation)

This referred to the manifest, common sense an obvious meaning of the sign. It describes relation between the signifier and signified within the sign and of sign with its referent in external reality. The term

denotation has been operationalized as women covering her full face and body with cloth is titled as veiled women.

Second level of Signification (Connotation)

This implied the latent meaning of what the text signified and worked at a more subjective level of perception and experience. It described the interaction between sign that meets with the feelings or emotions of the users and the values of their culture. The connotation in this study referred to French Muslim veiled women signified as Liberal or conservative, peaceful or extremist and oppressed.

Finding and Analysis

This Section comprises of qualitative analysis of French Muslim veiled women pictures published in *The Economist* and *The US Time* during the year 2004-2010. This section discussed the portrayal of the French Muslim veiled women in western media in context of Islamophobia.

Framing French veiled Muslim women: A Qualitative analysis

The images of veiled Muslim women are framed in a particular way socio-political context in *The Economist* and *The U.S Time* magazines from the year 2004 to 2010. Semiotic analysis has been applied to analyze the pictures published in these magazines. Since one of the most important purpose of visual analysis is to generate meaning at the level of signs and their relationship to other signs within sign system¹³. The semiotic analysis has its roots in techniques of discourse analysis. These images are analysed in context to explore how veiled Muslim woman is portrayed in the selected magazines. 11 pictures from *The U.S Time* and 7 from *The Economist* were analyzed that published during the year 2004 to 2010.

Analysis of Pictures of veiled Muslim women published in *The Economist*

The selected pictures are of veiled Muslim women in whom a woman is wearing a head to toe dress that also covers the face but not the eyes. Categories were developed to operationalize the themes presented through the selected pictures.

The picture published in (*The Economist*, 12 October, 2006) comprises of a close up of veiled woman looking behind. This single image gave the concept as if woman is oppressed and had fear in her eyes. She is looking behind it connotes that someone is following her. The other key concept comes this picture the picture is taken in horizontal composition, it means that the consensus of the veiled woman were not included during taking the picture. The veil is a piece of cloth that

covers the face of the woman it shows that willingly or unwillingly a woman is not allowed to show her face to others.

The close up shot of the veiled woman represents that the emphasis is made only to her veiled face not to her whole body. It also connotes that the only identification mark of Muslim woman is her veiled face.¹⁴

The picture published in (The Economist, 16 October, 2004) comprises of image of Muslim women covering their heads with flags of France but their faces are uncovered. This picture signifies that these Muslim women are peacefully opposing for their rights. The close up shot is taken and the more emphasis is made on the woman in the middle as she is looking at the cameraman. This posture shows as if she is willingly allowing cameraman to take her picture and it seems it is a diagonal picture but as far as other women in frame are concerned are not looking at the camera. The picture connotes that Muslim women are protesting in a peaceful way against the ban on headscarf in France.

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The picture published (The Economist, 15 January, 2004) under the title "veil of tears" comprises of signifier mid shot of two unveiled women holding play cards in their hands. These women are wearing headscarf and lifting play card on which "Levoile, DROITET and "Liberte" is written which means "the veil, and right and freedom". This emphasized that the Muslim women are protesting against the ban on veil in France by titling that veil is their right and they should be free to avail this right. The following image seems diagonal because the both women are looking at the camera and seems aware of the fact that they are being captured by the eye of the camera. This picture seems very supportive it signifies that the Muslim women of France are not in favour of veil ban. They are protesting for their rights.¹⁶

The picture published in (The Economist, 13 May, 2010) denotes a Muslim woman wearing burqa lifting a carry coat having her baby in it. This picture seems very supportive as if the veiled woman is shooed in a long shot and it connotes that the equal importance is given to her whole personality. This picture also signifies that veiled woman in France freely performing their routine activities even in the veil. This picture shows that if a woman is passing by a shop as many framed pictures and paintings are at her back. The carry coat having a baby signifies that this veiled woman is mother as many veiled women are born French or immigrants of France. It highlights the responsibilities

which she is performing being a mother and it also signifies that veil is not a hurdle for her to perform her activities.¹⁷

The picture published on running story of (The Economist, 10 May, 2010) under the title “A debate on burqas, Liberte’v Fraternite”. It signifies a mid-shot picture with two women in one frame. The one woman is in veil and the other is wearing tight fitted brown t-shirt having deep neck and a hand free is hanging around her neck. This picture signifies a comparison of a veiled Muslim woman to a woman following western culture. Both women are walking on the street. In this picture the emphasis is made on the comparison of both French women. The veiled woman seems oppressed and the unveiled woman seems liberal and independent. The picture connotes comparison of both women that they are opposite to each other.¹⁸

(The Economist, 13 May, 2010) comprises of a signified long shot of veiled Muslim woman lifting a hand carry with one hand and carrying a hand bag on other hand walking in the street. This picture also signifies a horizontal composition because the woman is not looking at the camera may she is completely unaware of the fact that she is being shooed through the camera. The veil after being banned in France connotes as symbol of oppression, extremism and conservativeness.¹⁹

The picture published in (The Economist, 14 January, 2010) comprises of a picture of veiled woman in which extreme close up is taken of her face and the emphasis is made only to her eyes which are uncovered. The same notion is perceived by the researcher in pictures 8 and 9 where the emphasis is only given to the covered faces and eyes of the veiled Muslim women. The close up shot signifies intimacy. The stress is made on the comparison of veiled Muslim woman and western women. The picture comprises of long shot of veiled Muslim woman and western black woman who are framed together. This connotes that women wearing black burqa in France are banned but not the black women. It also shows as if these two are opposite to each other.²⁰

Analysis of the pictures of French Muslim veiled women published in The U.S Time

The picture published in (The U.S Time, 22 April, 2010) under the heading “Quotes of the day” signifies close up of veiled Muslim woman covering her face with white scarf, only her eyes are visible it signified intimacy. The following picture seems diagonal as if the veiled woman is looking directly at the cameraman it can be signified

that her consensus are involved during taking the picture. The caption made underneath is very symbolic in nature as it states that "The ban must be total or it's incomprehensible". In 2004, France banned all the religious symbols like sikhgarpal, jewskull cap and veil but this statement connotes that the practical under the implementation was only made regarding the Muslim veiled woman. This statement clearly demand that the ban should be made on all the other contentious religious symbols equally or it should be incomprehensible means should not be included. This statement denotes the views of Muslim veiled women in France.²¹ The picture (The US Time, 5 April,2011) denotes a woman covering her face as veiled Muslim woman having a passport in her hand. The signifier extreme close up signified the emphasis is made on her veiled face and eyes. Her eyes signified as if she is protesting against the ban imposed on her. The caption beneath the picture denotes the statement from her behalf that is "This law will keep woman at home....if it becomes unbearable , if it becomes persecution, I'll leave France."This is highly symbolic statement from veiled woman' behalf. This clearly describes the conditions of veiled Muslim women in France in which she denotes through the words that this law will keep woman at home. It connotes that law of banning veiled women in France will put the woman in slavery and if it will become unbearable and persecution then it will force veiled women to leave France. It gives insight to the feelings of veiled Muslim woman regarding the law to ban veil in France.²²

The picture published under the heading of " Quotes of the day" (The US Time, 11 April,2011) comprises of sign of veiled women having mobile in her hand is analysed. The signifier close up signified the emphasis made on her veiled face. The statement published under the image is highly symbolic in nature that "I am calling on all the free women who so wish to wear the veil in the street and engage in civil disobedience". This statement symbolizes the efforts of this young veiled Muslim woman to unite all the free women. The word free women explains that veiled women are not oppressed rather they are liberated and free to wear whatever they want to wear.

The mobile phone in the hand of the woman signified freedom of expression and communication. It also connotes their free will.²³

The image Published in (The US Time,14 July, 2010) signifier close up shot signified intimacy and association. The eyes of the veiled woman are visible having a spark and hope in it. It connotes that veiled

woman being banned in France still have ray of hope and wish for life, it also connotes that they are peaceful, liberal and also willing to perform their positive role towards society. The caption beneath this picture "To fight an extremist behaviour, we risk slipping towards a totalitarian society". Here, the extremist behaviour is titled to the ban on veil in France and it also criticized the French society as totalitarian society which does not allow autonomous bodies to prevail.²⁴

The picture (The US Time, 3 May, 2010) of four Muslim women in one frame denotes different Islamic veils. One woman with headscarf only, one with blue chadder, one with black veil and one with burqa. These four pictures in one frame connote all the Islamic dress worn by Muslim women for the purpose of hijab.²⁵

The picture published in (The US Time, 4 February 2004) denotes a young girl with headscarf seems student as the name of the school is framed in the picture. A long shot signified context. The young girl with headscarf is standing and looking at the camera and smiling. This picture denotes that even headscarf was banned in France. The caption made under the image states that "School rules: one student gets ready to comply with the new law banning headscarves". It symbolizes that after the ban made on headscarf in France still this young student wore it by choice. It can also be interpreted that Muslim students were not in favour of this ban.²⁶

The picture published in (The U.S Time, 1 February, 2004) consists of female student wearing headscarf asking question to her teacher in the class room. This is very symbolic picture as it was published during the early time period when French government imposed ban on headscarf in schools. This picture is supportive in a sense that even Muslim student has right to practice their religion in France freely. She raised her figure to ask question from her teacher this act connotes that even Muslim woman have freedom of expression. The Christ sign that is also visible on the wall of the class room exhibit that the ban was imposed on all religious symbols but practically the situation is completely opposite because the Christ sign is displayed even at the wall of the class.²⁷

The image published in (The US Time, 23 April, 2010) has a back of the veiled woman passing through a shopping mall. The long shot of a woman signifies the strength of the character presented in this image. The caption underneath this image is highly symbolic as "narrow view". Sarkozy says that France cannot "welcome" face veils. This

statement was made by the president of France Sarkozy that face veil are not welcome in France. It represents the narrow view of France. Although France claims to be a secular state but this ban seems contradictory to the secularity of France.²⁸

This picture in (The US Time,23 August, 2010) has two opposite cultures in one frame. The long shot of veiled women and modern woman signified the notion that a comparison is made in one single image. This shows as if both are opposite to each other.²⁹

The picture published in (The US Time,7 December, 2009)also supports the same notion that two women with their children in pram are framed together. One woman is with veil and other is without veil. The back of the veiled woman is covered and her face seems ignored by the photographer whereas the face of other woman without veil is captured in the frame.³⁰

Conclusion and Discussion

The role of media in formulating and misrepresenting the facts and figures according to their frames is very negotiable. Multiple researchers mentioned in their research work that international media sets frames to play up or play down a particular issue.^{31, 32 33} The present research explored how French Muslim veiled women are framed by mainstream media and proved them to be conservative, oppressed and threat to sovereignty.

The semiotic analysis of the pictures of veiled Muslim women revealed that veiled women is presented in more extremist, oppressed and conservative way by The Economist as compared to The U.S Time. It shows that veil is related to extremism by the selected magazines.

The seven pictures published in The Economist showed that French veiled Muslim women is presented in an oppressed manner as most of the pictures are taken in a horizontal composition that showed that the stress is just made on their veiled faces not on their whole appearance .The published pictures related to protest showed that French veiled Muslim women is against the ban on veil and they are protesting in a peaceful manner lifting play cards in their hands rather than in destructive manner. Another picture of French veiled Muslim women carrying a carry coat published in The Economist symbolises that French veiled Muslim women are performing routine activities like other women and veil is not a hurdle in performing their routine activities. Another highly symbolic picture of two women in one frame, one picture of a women wearing low neck fitted shirt without

covering her face and other of a veiled women connotes that woman without veil is liberal and woman with veil is oppressed. The framing of eleven pictures of French veiled Muslim women in The US Time revealed that more coverage is given in The US Time as compared to The Economist. The pictures of French veiled Muslim women published in The US Time showed the French veiled Muslim women are not willing to leave their homeland. The woman holding a pass port in her hand expressed her feelings by negating the ban imposed on veiled women. The other French veiled Muslim women with a mobile phone in her hand connotes that she is trying to unite the other veiled women. The mobile phone signifies freedom of expression and lo connotes her free will and her efforts to unite other French veiled Muslim women. Most of the pictures of French veiled Muslim women are taken in extreme close up shot in which her eyes are prominent and they showed a ray of hope , it symbolized that they are peaceful and liberal. The other picture of a young French Muslim student wearing headscarf showed that young student carry headscarf by choice not by force. Another picture of young female student wearing headscarf in a class room raised a hand to ask some question from her teacher showed that Muslim woman have freedom of expression in France. The other picture of a woman wearing a blue eyeliner in her eye connotes that French veiled Muslim women enjoy their life as other women do. The long shot of French young girls in one frame compared French women with veil shown as conservative and without veil as liberal. It showed the biasness of the media regarding the ban that only veiled Muslim women were being criticised by these magazines. Overall the study rejected the H1 and accepted the H2 hypothesis that western press is not presenting the French Muslim veiled women in a neutral way. The above analysis gave insight to the fact that the U.S time represented the veiled Muslim woman in more neutral way as compared to The Economist as far as the pictorial coverage is concerned.

Recommendations

The researcher has proposed following suggestions for the future researchers:

- Future researcher can be advised to adopt the method of critical discourse analysis to analyze the latent discourses in the data.
- The researcher also advises further researcher to focus on notion of multiculturalism as France is a multicultural society and the perception of Muslims in this society is still not positively debated.

The researcher advises to interview the veiled Muslim women to analyze their stance.

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