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REPRESENTATION OF ISLAM IN WESTERN MEDIA AND LITERATURE

Fatema Begum Laboni*

***Abstract:** Representation of Islam in Western media and literature has categorized Islam under few characteristics like 'fundamentalist', 'terrorist', 'anti-Western' etc. Moreover, the 9/11 attack in the USA, US invasion into Iraq and Afghanistan and the huge propaganda, analysis and opinion of those events afterwards in the media, is found stereotypically identifying the whole race of Muslims as terrorists. The declared 'War on Terrorism' by the USA and comments of many US scholars on it make the situation worst because of the reductive meaning of the chosen words indirectly validates any type of US attacks on any Muslim nation. Beyond Belief by VS Naipaul, Satanic Verses by Salman Rusdie, Clash of Civilization by Huntington and some articles by other US scholars like Michael Ledeen, David Hanson and Robert D. Kaplan show some stereotypical points of view of Islam. This paper reveals that representation of Islam in these writings and in the media is biased and stereotypical. To support this revelation Edward Said's Covering Islam and to clearly understand the politics of representation Stuart Hall's theory of representation is used. Stereotypical representation creates nothing but distance between the Westerns and the Muslims. To remove the distance we must clearly understand the politics of representation of Islam and the Muslims.*

***Keywords:** Islam, Fundamentalism, Western media, Representation, Stereotype, Terrorism*

“The traditional Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as political anarchists and as tyrants at home subjugating their women have been disseminated in the media as caricatures and stereotypes. Very often the news that is shown about Muslims centers around negative stories.” (Akbar and Donan 1994).

Introduction

We use 'sign' and 'signifier' to understand our world. We give names to all human emotions, feelings, and also give name to abstract situations like love, hate, fundamentalism, liberalism etc. When we describe different races or

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cultures, we try to understand them by attributing these qualities on them; and hence construct some feasible meaning and identity to explain the world. No meaning is fixed and no qualities can be finally attributed to a thing or fact. This suggests that stereotyping a religion to some fixed characteristics goes against the idea that meaning is arbitrary. So, Islam, in the media and literature, must be analyzed in terms of the changing situation of the world. In Western news channels like CNN, BBC and AFP, the major sources of world news, Islam is a targeted focus mostly when the news is about the Muslim terrorist attacks or Islamic fundamentalism. Eventually, after Goebbels' 'big lie' theory, repeated and frequent propaganda creates a false identity that Muslims are generally fundamentalists and terrorists. Western media representation of Islam needs attention because it is very stereotypical, reductive and influenced by political and economic policy of the Western World. After the Second World War this type of representation sparked as America started spreading its power around the world. America was involved with the Middle East countries in terms of both political and economic reasons. Specially, the production and distribution of oil in the Middle East, Western interest in it, and other political motive of exerting power over Arab area, are the basic issues working behind this stereotyped representation of Islam. Books like *A Bend in the River*, *Among the Believers* and noble prizewinning book *Beyond Belief* by VS Naipaul, *Satanic Verses* by Salman Rusdie, and *Clash of Civilization* by Huntington show some stereotypical points of view of Islam. For example, VS Naipaul in *Beyond Belief* and *Among the Believers* have described Islam as a religion without any potential. In media, Muslims and Islam are mostly focused when the news is about any terrorist attack, veiled women suffering under Islamic fundamentalism, or some bizarre 'fatwa' is given. Although terrorism is a modern world crisis, Muslims are the primary suspects in the media after any terrorist attack. It seeks to identify that Islam as a religion, by its rules and regulations, has the potential to be dangerous and violent. Western news agencies seldom cover the Hindu, Jewish or Christian fundamentalism and subsequent terrorism with the same gravity. If we do not understand the politics of this biased and stereotypical representation, it will only create distance between two cultures.

Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to understand the influence of media and literature in building the stereotyped perception of the Muslim world and to find the causes and issues for biased representation of Islam.

Methodology

The present article has followed qualitative method. All the information and data used here are from primary and secondary sources.

Literature Review

According to Stuart Hall, representation is a complex issue of using language and producing meaning, which is bound upon the sender and the receiver of meaning. Any representation cannot be said to be objective. Language is the privileged medium in which meanings are produced, shared or exchanged. Language produces meanings which are arbitrary. Representation has three approaches:

Reflective: In this approach meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in a real world (Hall: 97). For example, a rose reflects a flower existing in the world.

Intentional: In the intentional approach the speaker or the author is the source of meaning. The speaker or the author represents whatever he or she intends to represent, so, the meaning produced remains unique to the producer.

Constructionist: This approach shows the social aspects of meaning. There is a complex relationship of things in the world, and our conceptual understanding. As things do not have intrinsic meaning we construct meaning for them. This is a public or social character of language. The symbolic system known as signifying practice helps this social characterization of meaning. For example, when we see a red light in a traffic signal, the red color does not express anything uniquely, still it conveys 'stop' to us. This codified meaning is imposed by human and accepted and shared by them. Thus meaning is constructed and accepted on the basis of an agreed upon convention.

Apart from concrete objects, 'sign' like words can also suggest some imaginary concepts like war, love, and friendship. These things impact on our conceptual understanding, which is very much unique and individual. But we are able to communicate because we broadly share the same conceptual map. This shared conceptual map is exchanged or communicated through language, sounds or images. We can call these 'signs', which works to create a meaning system of our culture. 'Signs' cannot only be language but visual

images, whether produced manually, mechanically, electronically, or digitally, even music can be sign when used for producing meaning.

“These elements-sounds, words, notes, gestures, expressions, clothes-are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they are but what they do, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it. They signify. They do not have any clear meaning in themselves. Rather they are the vehicles of media which carry meaning because they operate as symbols, which stand another metaphor, they fiction signs.” (Hall 97)

Meanings are produced not only through language but also with electronic media, photographs and computer and through internet. So, representation is a circuit of culture where language and meaning are connected. “Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of culture”. (Hall 97)

Picture, word, image, dress-up, things etc. jointly can create meaning. For example, in recent times black-bearded and white-robed men or women with a scarf or black veil remind us of the Muslims. More recently any black bearded Muslim in the Western countries may simply evoke a doubt of being terrorist or extremist. To understand why this happens, we have to understand the word stereotyping.

Stereotyping is one of the components of signifying practice, which ‘reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes difference’ (Hall 97). Sometimes some features are pointed out as stereotypical. Human being using codes signify themselves into various sects, cultural religious, ethnic groups. Each group has its own cultural and linguistic traits imposed and practiced by them. Many traits can be called stereotypical of a society or individual. There are some stereotypical features of each religion. Stuart Hall accepts that stereotyping has a connection with power. To prove this he uses Foucault and Said’s idea. Foucault’s concept of ‘discourse’ shows the power relation in producing knowledge in a specific period of time. His major ideas about discourse are related with power and knowledge. Foucault deals with the various aspects of knowledge produced in the field of human and social science. He has called this process ‘the subjectifying social science’. A discourse is established by ‘discursive formation’. That means acceptance

and use of knowledge in various fields of institution of a society. A discourse is reflected in the administrative, social, political or any other institutional sector. Creating discourse can be a subjective practice and tool of exerting power and creating 'other'. So representation can be a tool of creating 'other'.

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* has shown how the 'orient' other is created to subdue the 'oriental' people. Orientalism as a discourse is shared, referred to and used in various literary political, social aspects of the 19th and 20th century Europe and later by U.S.A. The West's/Occident's attitude to Islam is dominated by a simplified generalization of the attitudes and characterization of the Orient. Geographically, the drastic division is based on: the larger part is the orient, and the rest is the Occident. Another point is thinking of the Orient, as 'other' and this 'other' has uniformly been considered an inferior part of the world. Still the large Orient has 'a greater potential for power (usually destructive)' (Said 1997: 4). So, according to the West, it needs to be checked or dominated. In understanding the Orient and in explaining it, the Occident had the view to exploit it. The 'Orientalist' discourse is created by the West to fulfill their colonizing power policy. Later, according to Said this policy is adopted by America to subdue the Arab world for its political, economical interests.

Stuart Hall's intentional and constructionist theory of representation using 'sign', stereotyping certain culture and work of stereotyping having relationship with discourse and power are the core issues to understand the representation of Islam in Western culture.

Representations in the Media

Media has now assumed the super power to create and also to destroy the world order, ideology and philosophy. In the year 2000 Gerald Levin, chief executive of AOL-Time Warner, told to CNN that he believed the media business would soon become important than government and education (Rattansi 2001: 85). Media can bring a non-existential thing into life; can create instantly an imaginary thing into being and make the world shudder with fear or threat or with pleasure and consolation. People, who have no other access to know the world outside except the media, can easily be diverted from the fact and local issues going on inside a story or incidents.

Here mainly television, newspapers, journals, films and fictions of present time will be focused. The media, particularly the western media, represents what the most people now learn about 'Islam' and related issues. The media frequently uses some labeling for Islam and for the Muslims as 'terrorist', 'fundamentalist', 'Jihadist', 'anti-Western' etc. For example: "Yet Islamic fundamentalism is growing force in Egypt" (Newsweek, October 26, 1992); "Women are house bound and initial relief over the Taliban victory is fading." (Time, 14 October, 1996); Karachi is the nerve centre of militants including *Harkatul Mujahidin*, which Washington has declared a terrorist soap" (Newsweek, July 3, 2000). These labeling do not justify the features of majority of Muslim people around the world.

The post-September 11 situations have made the representation more reductive and complex. US campaign called 'war on terrorism' after the attack and its focus in the media, has not ended the threat, rather it seems to increase day by day. The media coverage and the negative publicity is the basic ideological weapon of the terrorists to spread terror, which they gain by using media's interest in serving instant news of any attack in the world. Moreover, "news channels around the world now depend on no more than a handful of sources for their visual materials. Three television news agencies - America's Associated Press (APTN), Britain's Reuters, and Agency Press France - provide about 80 per cent of the world's news pictures". (Rattansi 2001: 86) These few channels are the major sources of global news, which sometimes, lack the neutrality.

Edward said has given several examples of media representation of Islam in *Covering Islam*. Since the early '70s, the US has been watching 'the return of Islam' in the forms of: shortage of energy supply, oil price raise by OPEC, the public concern of expensive fuel bill, the Iranian hostage crisis, resurgence of 'radical nationalism' in the Islamic world. Said gives an example of this irresponsible representation in a *New York Times* phrase: 'Shia's penchant for martyrdom'. It was invented to explain the strong Iranian resistance to Iraq's incursion. It exemplifies lack of understanding of the real import of the word 'Shia' and confusing it with the war; the media people's habit of resorting, often erroneously, to generalized terms at hand without researching much. Lack of cultural knowledge and access to local languages, news that demonstrate "the Islamic mentality" or 'anti-Americanism' came into focus and the other went unnoticed. It is in the 70s that Iran and Afghanistan issues suddenly brought Islam into American

consciousness. At that time Muslims have been caricatured in the media, literature and art, mostly as 'oil suppliers' or 'terrorists' or 'blood thirsty mob'. News related to Islam and the Muslims were victims of 'selective perception', 'biased equation' and equating fixed abstraction with complex reality'. The name Islam thus becomes a fixed signifier and stereotyped code. Said finds it interesting that 'Islam' or primitive-savage is pitted against 'West' or civilized. Said refers to a striking Con Ed Commercial on OPEC and oil prize raise.

"In order to make a point about alternative energy sources for Americans Consolidated Edison of New York ran a striking television advertisement in the summer of 1980. Presenting stills and clips of OPEC personalities-e.g. Yamani and Qaddafi- and other easily recognizable Arab people-e.g. Khomeini and Arafat-anonymously, the solemn voice over ominously tells that these robed figures' control America's sources of oil, eventually the American's feel a combination of anger, resentment, and fear for these all-male cast of villain"(Said 1997)

Edward Said in *Covering Islam* shows representation of Islam in recent Western media and literature is to some extent political and exposes the affiliation of power and knowledge. The stereotyped representation of Islam in the media and in the works of experts is working for the interest of the West and the US. Study of Islam by the West is largely neither objective nor non-political. An accurate research on Islam would show the huge difference between academic descriptions of Islam and the particular realities to be found within the Islamic world. Expert's opinion and the common generalization are again caricatured in the media. Islam became a kind of scapegoat for everything the West does not happen to like about the new world's political, social, and economic pattern.

Representations in the Western Literature

In Western critical analysis, journals and articles, instead of understanding and reconciliation, an unfortunate assertion of the compulsory discrimination between the West and the East is established. Although, through talk show in the media and articles in various journals, there were attempts to critically analyze US foreign strategy, they were not a bit influential to change the situation. Here are some influential discourses of war and terror by US

intellectuals after September 11, 2001. These can be cited as the documents of legalizing the war and foreign policy of US.

The first text, *Warrior Politics: Why Leadership Demands a Pagan Ethos* is by Robert D Kaplan, a chronicler and journalist for the *Atlantic Monthly*. According to Kaplan, a return to the warrior way of one's state and dominating others is desirable in contemporary times when war and violence cannot be avoided. After the September 11 attack, according to his ideas, the people must be angry, vengeful and full of hatred so that America can win the war and thus American values can remain dominant wherever US soldiers are sent to fight. Brave leaders of the country should understand that war is a reality and they cannot shy away from wars. He glorifies war as a political practice. (Kaplan, 2002)

The second discourse of war under scrutiny is by Victor Davis Hanson. Hanson is US military historian, who in autumn 2001 after the terrorist attack wrote a series of reflective essays about war at home and in Afghanistan. Most of these essays were published in the national review (many of them online) and were designed to gain some popular appeal. In them Hanson vents his anger and that of (he believes) the American nation. This anger is directed at the terrorist, the regime that support them, and also at those few Americans (leftist academics as he envisions them) who do not appear to support all our war. One of the basic principles of Hanson believes is that the Western culture is unique because:

“it is missionary and altruistic, whereas the rest of the human condition is and has always been tragic. ‘We’ are the only culture that has cared to deploy ‘efforts to ameliorate the savagery innate to all peoples at all times’”. (Debrix 82)

Another writing is *The War Against the Terror Masters: Why it Happened, Where we are now how We'll Win* by Michael Ledeen, a scholar at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, a *Wall Street Journal* contributor and a former counter terrorism expert at the National security council. He says US war on terror should be directed at a group he broadly and vaguely refers to as the “terror masters”. Ledeen explains that his terror masters are not just those who attacked on September 11, but more importantly those in Iraq Iran, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Palestine could have supported Middle

Eastern terrorism for decades and want the destruction of the US. Ledeen believes that the war initiated in Afghanistan in 2001 and brought to Iraq in 2003 should be an endless one and that US forces should destroy the 'terror' regime in the Middle East until none of them is left standing. (Ledeen 2002).

Kaplan, Hanson, Ledeen and those in US foreign policy and geo-political circles who agree with their views, have stereotypically reduced the USA's quest for meaning only to terror and war. They have taken war as the ultimate end in political affairs. About them François Debrix in *Third World Quarterly* says:

"They encourage hatred towards enemies that may not even have been named yet. By openly propagating these kinds of discourse, these scholar's texts render the prospect for peace (in Iraq, the Middle-East and everywhere else) in 21st century ever more difficult to achieve" (Debrix 2005: 1157).

This type stereotypical discourse deepens polarization of two cultures. Not only these critics, but many novelists in their literary works have narrowly revealed their beliefs about particular culture and religion. The 2001 Caribbean Nobel laureate in literature, V. S. Naipaul, has written in his books *Among the Believers: An Islamic Journey*, and in *Beyond Belief*, about how people in Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia's original cultures are subdued and erased by Arab cultural imperialism in the form of Islam. *Beyond Belief* is the result of his five-month journey in 1995 through Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia—lands where descendants of Muslim converts live at odds with indigenous traditions, and where dreams of Islamic purity clash with economic and political realities. Naipaul does not believe that Western civilization is in decline. 'That's a romantic idea,' he said harshly. 'A civilization which has taken over the world cannot be said to be dying. [...] It's a university idea. People cook it up at universities and do a lot of lectures about it. It has no substance.' The 'philosophical diffidence' of the West, he maintains, will prevail over the 'philosophical shriek' of those who intend to destroy it. Naipaul has called Islam 'parasitic on that world,' meaning that the Islamic world itself creates very little, it can only feed off the achievements of others. The economic development of India and China, he said, will 'completely alter the world,' and 'nothing that's happening in the Arab world has that capacity' Crucial to Naipaul's argument is what he sees as the imperialism of Islam. 'Everyone who is not an Arab who is a

Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands ... The disturbance for society is immense, and even for a thousand years can remain unsolved'. V.S. Naipaul is optimistic on behalf of the West; he does notice a loss of cultural confidence, which multiculturalism is the most obvious indication of. Western Europe today lacks 'a strong cultural life,' making it vulnerable to *Islamization*. He happens to think Islam is the most openly dangerous in the modern world. He says Muslim women shouldn't wear headscarves in the West. In *Among the Believers* Naipaul argued vehemently that modern life had shaken up 'static or retarded' Islamic societies. Islam's central flaw, as he wrote, was at 'its origins ... to the political issues it raised; it offered no political or practical solution. It offered only the faith... This political Islam was rage, anarchy.' (Naipaul 1998). This idea of Islam being violent and having obvious animosity with the West is also established in Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilization* by saying 'Some Westerners [...] have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamist extremists. Fourteen hundred years of history demonstrate otherwise.' (Huntington 1996).

Edward Said in an interview has criticized his ideas as an 'intellectual catastrophe of the first order' which revealed a dislike of Islam as "the worst disaster that happened to India'. According to Said "*Beyond Belief* is based on nothing more than this rather idiotic and insulting theory ... that most Muslims are converts and must suffer the same fate wherever they are... Muslims who are not Arabs are inauthentic converts, doomed to this wretched false destiny." Said has criticized Naipaul's opinion in an interview, in which he said: "Muslim fundamentalism has no intellectual substance to it, therefore it must collapse". Said argues, Naipaul did not clarify what 'Muslim fundamentalist' he had in his mind and what he meant by 'intellectual substance'. For Naipaul and his readers Islam covers everything that civilized, and Western, rationality disapproves of. Samuel Huntington and Naipaul are this type of intellectuals who contend that Islam is a major threat international; security (despite the fact that all of the belligerent countries with nuclear weapons are non Muslim.)

Analyzing Few Words frequently Used to Stereotype

If we analyze few words used to stereotype Islam we will get that how reductively those words are associated with Islam. First of all the word 'fundamentalist' is actually taken from Christian Europe and used to refer to

the Muslim revivalist movement (Ahmed and Donan 1994:14). No Islamic scholar and academics are consulted to get the proper meaning. To the West the word instantly reminds nothing else but the religious strict rules regarding women's makeover, punishment by mutilation and stoning.

Another word 'terrorist' and 'terrorism' is derived from 'terror' originally refers to a period characterized by political executions, as during the French Revolution from May 1793 to July 1794. 'Originally conceived as an instrument against monarchist traitors, the Terror of the Committee of Public Safety (of which Robespierre was the most prominent member) soon began to kill Republicans as well. (Thackarah 2004: 264). Not only in Muslim countries, Terrorist attacks, coup and other underground forces are effective for centuries in Ireland, Italy Columbia, Japan, Columbia, Nepal and many other countries. But after the Second World War, there is a tendency of stereotypically focusing the Muslims and Muslim countries as terrorists.

The next most commonly used word 'jihad' is represented in the media in a quite differentiated way from its origin. Jihad is misleadingly understood as 'holy war' synonymous with the idea of crusade in Christianity. Muslim identity is now stereotyped with this word. The original derivation of the word is not unalterably, focusedly on war using arms. In 'hadith' there is reference of struggling against one's one instinct prone to immoral attitude is called primary 'jihad' and secondary 'jihad' is war with arms against the enemy, using arms against the one who hold arms against you. Self-defense, saving one's own and people's property from attack, defending one's freedom of religion and protecting the society from disorder, are the criteria mentioned to hold arm against oppression. The words used in the Holy Koran (2:190); (4:75) ;(22:40) to express this kind of attack is not 'jihad' but 'katil'. But for the suitability of using this word in perseverance, sacrifice and labour one need in doing war, it was frequently used to refer to armed struggle against the declared enemy of Islam who wants to willingly destroy it. The book under the single title of 'Kitab al-jihad' mentioned the rules of war and weapons under this single title. Thus the word, in short, by its later use, represented only the idea of war with arms. The repeating open call for 'jihad' against America and anything non-Islamic, by the Al Qaeda and Taliban regime is well known to the world through media coverage. Hamas delimits the concept by applying it to ending the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Hamas popularized the notion of 'jihad' by giving it a different

meaning than that of Islamic 'jihad'. While many Muslims believe in this principle, most other Muslims believe the notion of 'jihad' is best understood in terms of spiritual rather than physical struggle. Some extremist Muslims confuse religion with a love of death and this lead them to suicide bombing and killing other Muslims which is totally forbidden in Islam; hence these extremists follow things which are self contradictory and whimsical. The single 'sign' 'jihad' signifies in various forms, in various classes of people. But the present media, by frequent use of the term, irrespective of actual analysis of its use in each particular case, has stereotyped and reduced the word to represent any violent action, which is a must for every Muslim, against the Jew and the Christian.

Conclusion

Differences among various cultures, ethnic groups and religions and their divergences constitute the marker or identifier of a particular culture. These differences create diversity. So, they should not be used do make a culture high and make another low. Whether Muslim or Christian, black or white, one group must know and represent another more elaborately, logically and respectfully. A balance of economic and political dominance must be built to create a sensible, co-operating and consolidated relationship between the powerful countries and the rest of the world. Scope for dialogue between cultures must be built. The main concern of this paper is how a gap is stretched between Western people and the Muslims by the contemporary stereotypical representation of Islam. Men have the capability to use meaning either to create peace or hatred and destruction. Any type of representation must be directed to impartiality, clarity and dignity to create a world free of confusion and hatred. Media news of violence must be presented in a way so that any more violence is discouraged and the real causes of violence can be mitigated. Media is the spokesman of the modern world, so it must be strong enough to focus the reality. Islamic usage of different types of Arabic word must be clearly used and described in media and literature. Apart from the media coverage, the intellectual practices in the West must be careful enough not to stretch the gap between cultures. Naipaul, Huntington, Hanson, Kaplan, and other scholars of the West must embrace a liberal view of the world. It must be understood that terrorizing the enemy and constant fear of future clash can never bring peace to the world.

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