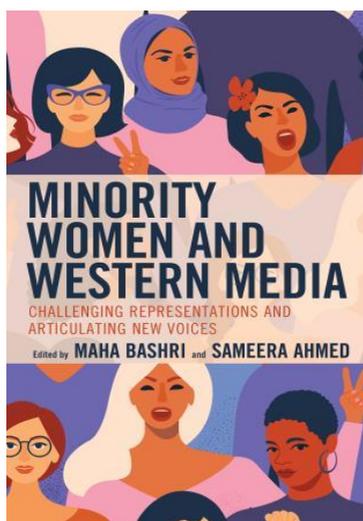


BOOK REVIEW:

Minority Women and Western Media

Challenging Representations and Articulating New Voices



Authors: Maha Bashri, Sameera Ahmed.

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Reviewed by: **Tasneem CHOPRA**

*Sir Zelman Cowen Centre, Victoria University
Melbourne, Victoria, Australia*

Imaan KHAN

InTouch Multicultural Centre Against Family Violence in Australia

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Minority Women and Western Media explores the experience of intersectional discrimination of minority women in media outlets over its seven chapters. The impact of this collectively, is evidenced in case studies of unique, marginalising representations of women of colour, including Muslim women and women with disabilities, manifesting in sexism, racism and ableism. Maha Bashri and Sameera Ahmed have collated perspectives that transcend borders and political agenda -all linked by a unifying thread of challenging patriarchy and misogyny passing as authority.

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Inclusion, Exclusion, and Belonging – Maha BASHRI:

This article interrogates the role of the media in constructing public perception of national identity which cannot be underestimated. Bashri highlights the extent to which negative depictions of groups of people directly impact their treatment and subsequent alienation becomes a matter for societal reform.

She qualifies this showing how in the US, despite growing number of Muslim women living in the United States, mainstream news corporations, including progressive broadsheets like The New York Times, continue to portray these women through an oriental lens. This is despite the population of American Muslims in the United States reaching over 3.45 million, comprising peoples of diverse demographic backgrounds who continue to be portrayed in mainstream media as a monolithic entity.

Between an oriental and male gaze, Bashri explain how women are perceived as passive objects lacking the agency to tell their own stories; a marginalisation amplified for minority women, contending with racism as well as sexism. For Muslim women in particular, Western media has consistently portrayed Muslim women according to one of three tropes: The Harem belly dancer (mysterious and sexualized); The Oppressed Hijabi; and , The Militant Gun Wielding Muslim fighter.

Bashri's analysis of US media between 2007 and 2017, in The New York Times alone, witness over published 120 articles published, comprising 44 photos of Muslim women in an overwhelmingly orientalist image, to accompany political stories. The impact of such loaded imagery correlated directly with a fear mongering agenda that plays into a belief that American and Muslim cannot be synchronous entities.

Through both a data analysis and dissection of imagery, Bashri makes a compelling case for the agenda of US media being premised on a foregone conclusion about Muslim women, devoid of nuance and yet teeming with hyperbole.

Reinforcing or Reframing Dominant Views? – Khulekani MADLELA

In this article, Madlea explains how historically, the weaponisation of women's hair has been leveraged as a marker to control their identity, especially for black people. Naturally occurring black and often curly hair has been denigrated in preference for fairer features, premised on capitalist economies' idealised standard of beauty. Even publications targeted at black audiences prefer artificial hair over natural hair.

She discusses how in South Africa, the rampant aftermath of apartheid lent itself to women struggling for social recognition and trying to make themselves and their hair more seemingly acceptable in various ways, including; relaxing, straightening, sewing on weaves, and wearing wigs. In 2016, several black female students at Pretoria Girls High School were instructed to straighten their hair or risk being barred from writing examinations.

Madlela mentions that in recent years, increased access to the internet and social media has enabled black women to gain more authentic insight and finally embracing their natural beauty with pride. A review of 50 articles from 4 black South African bloggers (ByLungi, Natural Sisters, Cape Town Curly, and Lebo Kutu) canvassed trends and passion for natural hair generally making social change via educating people.

Her analysis of the sociocultural discourse on this issue reveals black hair as a construct was an affirmation of African identity. The argument that the hair narrative has subsequently ventured into political, economic, well-being, scientific, psychological and textural discourses becomes self-fulfilling.

Drawing a Portrait of Refugee Representation in Turkish Newspapers – Beris Artan ÖZORAN and Ilgar SEYIDOV:

In this article, Ozoran and Seyodov challenge the intention of conventional Turkish media, in its representations of refugees and asylum-seekers, conflating this portrayal with how they are perceived by the dominant citizens.

The authors reveal Syrians are more visible than Iraqis and Afghans, and that refugee women are generally underrepresented in depictions. Since the 1990s, Turkey has received many immigrants from Middle Eastern and Asian-Turkic republics. Despite there being fewer Syrians than Afghans and Iraqis, there exists a tendency in Turkish media and academia to conflate the terms “Syrian” and “refugee”.

Their analysis of media portrayals over 3 years reveal that refugee and asylum-seeker women are significantly underrepresented across all three cultural groups. This worldwide trend of focusing on male-oriented stories has the effect of misrepresenting the proportions of men and women living in the world and framing men as the cultural standard. Specifically, with percentages of men and women represented under “Crime” and “Victimization”, refugee men tend to be represented as dangerous criminals and refugee women tend to be represented as victims of crime, especially murder.

Out of the 1,600 stories viewed by the authors, only 141 are focused on women and women's issues, many of which focused on victimization. And when the stories of refugee women are published in Turkish newspapers, they often told through the lens of Turkish women observing their struggles rather than the refugees themselves.

These writers demonstrate how the erasure of minority voices spotlight a gap on Turkish media's capacity to report inclusively, thus making a case for journalistic reform.

On "Getting Yassmined" - Leticia ANDERSON and Kathomi GATWIRI:

Anderson and Gatwiri expound on the experience of women of colour in Australian media, as one of frequent marginalization and being silenced under a predominantly elite, white male dominated, parochial empire. In particular, the author's show how minority women who attempt to challenge white dominance in public forums are often unable to do so without being threatened with violence on social media and/or having the careers ruined.

It is clear from the premise of this article, an acknowledgement that Australia is a settler-colonial society, constructed upon an identity of heteronormative, working-class, white masculinity. Since its white settlers occupied its land in 1788, Australia has struggled to reconcile its white colonial and non-white native elements. The authors explain how for decades, mainstream media has thrived upon deploying negative and exclusionary stereotypes to instill fear, spike ratings and sell an agenda. To wit, Aboriginal communities have been consistently misrepresented with their communities and culture the subject of denigration and right wing media ire.

In one case study, the writers detail how Serena Williams during the 2018 US Open, in a dispute with an umpire became the subject of grotesquely racialised caricature in the nation's highest selling tabloid, „The Herald Sun“. This racialized, sexualized prejudice against women of colour known as “misogynoir” was defended by supporters of the cartoonists, who maintained that a black woman of Williams' social class couldn't experience racism.

A second case study shared occurred in 2017 on Anzac Day (25 April), when Australian Muslim commentator, Yassmin Abdel-Magied wrote a controversial post on Twitter “LEST. WE. FORGET. (Manus, Nauru, Syria, Palestine. . .)”. This post caused outrage for linking Anzac Day with the offshore detention centres and conflicts in the Middle East - an association deemed unacceptable to the media establishment. Despite deleting the tweet and apologizing for offence caused, Yassmin was harassed and threatened by many high-profile members of the media, political establishment, publically,

spilling into and a broader communal backlash fuelled by a media rampage. Ironically, some of her most vociferous detractors were also among Australia's biggest advocates for free speech.

The authors share how free speech is not evenly divided among all Australians. And that the experience of being severely punished by the media over something rather innocuous has come to be referred to as "getting Yassmin-ed". The offensive caricature of Serena Williams and multitude of death threats attributed to Yassmin Abdel-Magied indicate how racism and sexism intersect when reporting on women of colour.

Finally, it is clear from their analysis, the writes see the advent of more independent media outlets availed to social media sites having a vital role in challenging the mainstream media's portrayals of Muslims, Africans and other people of colour, exposing bias, political corruption and holding leadership increasingly to account.

Iranian Women and the Media - Zahra JAFARI

In this chapter, Zahari Jafari alludes to th Iranaian women's identity in Western media to be conflated with symbols of oppression, without interrogating experiences of agency from the perspective of women themselves.

This analysis defends the idea that wearing head coverings/ chadors did not have any Islamic implications until after the revolution and that women were just as, if not more oppressed during the military dictatorship under the Shah's rule. Further, Jafari asserts that women in today's Iran are not held back by Islam in the way the media would have their viewers and readers believe.

The notion that progressive reforms in Iranian media have allowed for a diverse range of opinions not possible under the former Shahs, is an assertion backed by the mention of numerous outcomes. These include: that many female activists and state critics who spoke out against the representations of women in the state media under the Shah were tortured and jailed for their dissidence; in 1997, Mohammad Khatami was elected the fifth president of Iran by almost 70% of voters who was a reformist/moderate who supported freedom of speech, tolerance, and civil society; during his two terms, he made some political reforms in an effort to improve gender equality, arguing for the flexibility of Islamic doctrines in addressing gender issues; and the media and film industry releasing several films centered on autonomous female protagonists and the struggles of women in Iranian society.

In essence, this chapter affirms the position that contrary to media perceptions that women in old Iran were not better off under Western imperialism but in fact availed to greater opportunities and respect under its own native government. Jafari maintains the revisionist approach of Islamic frameworks, post the Shah reign, remain embraced by Islamic feminists and moderate clerics.

While the subject of the hijab/chador continues to be hotly contested outside of Muslim countries, the weaponisation of it within Muslim countries, like Iran- has largely been a function of Western media inciting the topic, under the guise of faux liberation. Jafari's staunch defence of Iranian people and their elected leaders having the capacity for self-determination, is a bold retelling of western media tropes.

Silencing and Victim Blaming of a Woman who Stutters - Sigal BARAL-BRANDES and Debora FREUD

Using the example of the 2016 TV series *Goliath*, this study demonstrates how intersecting sexism and ableism in a patriarchal society can hurt women who stutter. The authors contest that we live in a culture that upholds the rhetoric of personal responsibility and the myth of having total and autonomous control over one's body. As a result, victim blaming and shaming is especially common, particularly for women and disabled folk who are often subject to violations and control of their bodies by others'.

The article explores how, since the early 20th century, disability has been either largely underrepresented or presented exploitatively in popular media and culture. Disabled characters are almost always pathologised and portrayed as deeply ashamed of their disabilities. Women with disabilities are also disproportionately represented in media, and it is argued that this is perhaps due to a lack of creative interest in representing such women for whom womanhood has been marred; they are already defined as vulnerable, dependent.

The authors found media portrayals of people who stutter (PWS) are particularly harmful in their stereotypical depictions of characters who have highly exaggerated stutters and are defined by deviant personalities, of being weak, comic, unheroic, nervous, or evil. When it comes to women who stutter, their media portrayals are even less common and arguably more damaging owing to the intersection of their gender and disability and the conflation of the resulting discrimination.

This article used Feminist CDA to examine the character of Lucy Kittridge, a character in the TV series *Goliath* who is an attorney with a mild stutter that is implied to be the result of her being put in difficult, stressful situations. From a traditionally. Feminist perspective, Lucy is a symbol of the typical “can do girl” or “new woman”, young and educated and striving for independence and self-reliance. She is physically attractive and is fully devoted to her career. However, the authors find that once Lucy’s successful working womanhood is interrupted by her disability and her stutter is firmly established as part of her character, she succumbs to the label of vulnerable, sexually undesirable, incompetent, and unprofessional.

The authors conclude that whilst Lucy’s necessary physical attractiveness is not wholly marred for viewers, the media tropes persist. In a culture that views a woman’s physical appearance a significant component of her value, a stutter is viewed as a grave physical and personhood imperfection, particularly when exhibited by a woman. Lucy’s competence and qualifications in her career is ultimately crushed by the sexist and ableist work environment, where her stutter impedes her performance of femininity, thus deeming her personally and professionally unacceptable and ostracised.

Women in British Muslim Media – Sameera Tahira AHMED

In this article, Sameera Ahmed explores how since first publications began in 1989 the „British Muslim media’ has experienced a revolution in scope and purpose; spanning three decades of burgeoning social justice movements and global political unrest.

She posits that there exists a stark generational gap in the Muslim, particularly in South Asian communities. While older generations are concerned with particularistic media reflective of their cultural and ethnic origins, this is less important for younger, British born generations. This may be owing to the fact that in the UK there is more collaboration and participation of women, non-Asians and non-Muslims socioculturally; rendering ethnicity as far less critical to Muslim identity.

Ahmed notes that the Muslim media’s shift towards exposes on social justice and intersectionality are attributed to the emergence of female voices; particularly owing to the aftermath of 9/11. 9/11 led to increased public interest in Islam and lead to a rise in media coverage of Muslims and the community taking up journalistic arms to reconstruct a more humanised and balanced discourse on contemporary Muslim life that offers positive, a political alternatives to the negative portrayals of Muslims in hard news.

Post 9/11 Muslim women in particular had the opportunity to challenge damning religious stereotypes, particularly those regarding Muslim women in the Western media. This emergent generation of female voices offered consumers nuanced perspectives on the British Muslim's experience and led to mass media organizations beginning to abandon the old stereotypes in favour of more diverse and representative frameworks incorporating voices from the Muslim community itself.

Ahmed concludes that the increased presence of Muslim women's voices in post-9/11 media (both Muslim and mainstream) is a sign that the media landscape has begun to abandon the old reductive stigmas of being a Muslim woman in Britain and is accepting a greater variety of voices from the Muslim community. The author's rendering of the more progressive version of British Islam and British Muslims who are gaining agency and legitimacy in defining their narrative, is a powerful response to mainstream media's stronghold.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest were reported by the authors.