

**The Weak, the Powerless, the Oppressed:  
Muslim Women in Toronto Media**

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As of late, Muslim women have become media darlings. Their stories are everywhere: the international football federation thinks that their veils pose a danger to them and other players on the soccer field, campuses across Canada are re-evaluating their policies after a report by the Canadian Federation of Students slammed them for not doing enough to accommodate the needs of female Muslim students and in one horrifying case, a Muslim father has been charged with murdering his teenage daughter in a family dispute that allegedly began when she refused to wear the veil.

It's a dizzying amount of coverage for a group that has traditionally been invisible in media. But what, exactly, is all of the coverage saying about Muslim women in Canada? This paper will attempt to answer this question, by examining the coverage of Canadian Muslim women in mainstream Toronto media. For the purpose of narrowing this broad topic, this analysis will focus on media coverage of the Ontario government's decision regarding whether Islamic law, known as Shari'a, should be allowed in the province. The aim of this paper is not to discuss Shari'a, but instead focus on how Canadian Muslim women were portrayed in the media coverage about Shari'a in Ontario. It will rely on this coverage of Shari'a to build a portrait of Muslim women in Canada. It will argue that the coverage stripped Muslim women living in Canada of plurality, diversity and agency.

Many studies that examine the portrayal of Muslims in the media are rooted in Edward Said's Orientalism theory. After scrutinizing the portrayal of the East by the West, Said deemed the images false, romanticized and Orientalist, and hypothesized that they stemmed from a subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arab-Islamic peoples and their culture (Said, 1978). Lane expanded on this to show that the majority of "race" coverage in Western media is based on a discourse of "fantasies" that organize the meaning of racial and ethnic identity (Lane, 1998). While Said's work has been criticized for overestimating the dominance of Orientalist discourse in Western media, his theories are heralded for the groundwork they laid in examining the power relationships among cultural groups (Karim, 2000). Karim furthered Said's ideas about power, discourse and Muslims and found that terrorism, hostage-taking, hijacking and religious wars have become synonymous with the identity of Muslims, and that these narratives are often supported in North American media (Karim, 2000).

Few have specifically considered the portrayal of Muslim women whose lives, as racialized women, are subject to multiple hierarchies of power (Macdonald, 2003). In her examination of how these hierarchies translate into Western media images of Muslim women, Macdonald concluded that Muslim women were often presented as a homogenous group of victims and denied of their voice. Jiwani, in her analysis of *The Montreal Gazette* and *The Globe and Mail* found that media coverage of Muslim women simply reinforced the "binary oppositions between the liberated West and the oppressed East, with women centered as the site of these competing discourses" (Jiwani, 2005). The result was that Muslim women were silenced and objectified (Jiwani, 2005). Some have focused on media's fascination with Muslim women and the veil. Watson

commented that the dominant image of the veiled Muslim woman in Western media is one of the most popular ways of demonstrating the problem with Islam (Watson, 1994). Macdonald found that images of veiled Muslim women were “repeatedly deployed in Western media to present the Muslim woman as victim and to derogate Islam” (Macdonald, 2003). While these studies all found that Muslim women were postulated as outsiders, denied of plurality and represented as victims in Western media, there was no differentiation between the media representations of Muslim women living in the West and their counterparts around the world. This study builds on these previous studies and differentiates between these two groups. From these past studies, it is hypothesized that the same flaws will be found in Toronto’s mainstream media coverage of Canadian Muslim women.

### **Shari’a law in Canada**

In 1991, landmark legislation was introduced in Ontario that paved the way for faith-based arbitration. The legislation was heralded as a success for multiculturalism and a faster, cheaper and less destructive means of settling family disputes than heading to court. Soon after being introduced, Ontario’s Christian, Jewish and Ismaili Muslim communities started to take advantage of religious arbitration to settle custody disputes or negotiate child support after marital breakup. While the Ismaili Muslim community is often viewed as a more moderate sect of Islam, they are bound by many of the same cultural practices as the wider Muslim community and, while its interpretation is vetted by a living leader, they follow a religious practice that is derived from the Koran. In 2003, when the wider Muslim community of Ontario asked for the same right to use Shari’a to settle family disputes, there was a backlash from human rights groups.

Shari'a, or Islamic law, is interpreted from the Koran. It is often used in countries around the world where Muslims are the majority; from Bangladesh to Turkey to Indonesia. Its application varies greatly, depending on the sect of Muslims, the culture of the country and the extent to which women's equality has been embedded into society's ethos.

Critics of Shari'a charge that it is inherently discriminatory because only men can initiate divorce, sons are entitled to inherit more than daughters and men are often automatically awarded custody of children after divorce. Others argue that Shari'a could be integrated into the Canadian system in a way that respects Canadian laws and does not discriminate against women. Many claim that Muslim countries recognize only Shari'a law, meaning that Shari'a rulings are necessary for any Canadian who may eventually live in a Muslim country. Others have argued that family disputes are already being arbitrated by Shari'a in Ontario and that its recognition within the provincial system will allow for better protection of all parties involved through the implementation of rules and standards inherent within legal recognition and regulation. In the manner in which Shari'a was being proposed in Ontario, both parties would have to enter into it voluntarily, all decisions would be subject to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the final decision would be conditional on the protection of women's rights.

The outcry from human rights groups prompted the Ontario government to appoint former NDP attorney-general Marion Boyd to review the Arbitration Act. Boyd found no evidence that women were being discriminated against in faith-based arbitration and recommended that Muslims in Ontario should have the same rights as other religious

groups to settle family disputes through faith-based arbitration. After more than a year of protest from human rights groups, on September 12, 2005 the McGuinty government of Ontario put forward legislation to ban all forms of religious arbitration in Ontario.

Throughout the controversy, *The Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post* all published editorials that endorsed allowing Shari'a law in Ontario. Haroon Siddiqui, in explaining the stance of *The Toronto Star*, wrote: "The dominant theme of the news coverage is clear: Medieval Muslims want to import the misogynistic Islamic penal code to Canada. And Queen's Park is crazy to even consider it....It does not matter which side of the debate you are on. What does matter is that none of the above is true or logical." Siddiqui went on to explain that *The Toronto Star* supported Shari'a in Ontario because not doing so would be tantamount to treating Muslims differently than other religious groups (Siddiqui 2005:A17). Siddiqui's comments seemed to be pointed towards *The Toronto Sun* whose opposition to Shari'a in Ontario, was framed in the concern that "we think there is no practical way that women appearing before these Islamic tribunals will not be doing so under duress" (Editorial 2005:20). *The National Post* echoed *The Toronto Star* in saying that Muslims should enjoy the same legal rights and added that "Westerners should get beyond this knee-jerk reaction." They also voiced that the protections built in to the proposed version of Shari'a in Canada were more than enough to ensure that it would be practiced fairly (Editorial 2005: A14). *The Globe and Mail* supported Shari'a for different reasons. "If Ontario simply throws up its hands and says no to the Muslims, it will have done nothing to stop any retrograde practices that are already going on," read their editorial (Editorial 2005:A16).

### **Methodology**

In order to test the hypothesis that Toronto media coverage denies Canadian Muslim women of plurality, diversity and agency, all coverage regarding Shari'a in Ontario from *The Toronto Star*, *The National Post*, *The Toronto Sun* and *The Globe and Mail* that appeared during the month prior to the Ontario government's decision on Shari'a has been drawn out (August 12, 2005 to September 12, 2005). As the debate about whether to allow Shari'a was confined to Ontario, these newspapers were specifically chosen for the fact that they are the four most widely-circulated newspapers in the Greater Toronto Area, where much of the debate took place and home to one of the largest Muslim communities in Canada. While the Ontario government had been considering allowing Shari'a since December 2004, this analysis was narrowed to a one-month review of print media to enable a thorough consideration of a manageable number of articles, headlines and photos. The specific month was deliberately chosen, as it came at a time when media had had more than a year of the debate to inform themselves.

Throughout the one-month snapshot of coverage, a total of 32 articles and 12 photos were found. The articles were divided into 15 editorials or comment pieces and 17 news pieces. Also included within these pieces were four news articles from The Canadian Press, one news article from Canwest News Service and one editorial from *La Presse*. These articles were included, as each was chosen and had material added or deleted to fit the specific newspapers included in this analysis. This analysis drew on qualitative and quantitative indicators to perform a content analysis of the coverage and applied a theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis on the articles, photos and

headlines. The analysis sought use the coverage of Shari'a law to answer the question, what is a Muslim woman in Canada?

### **Findings & Discussion**

In almost all of the articles and photos, the portrayal of Canadian Muslim women within the coverage of Shari'a in Ontario fell victim to some combination of the three patterns stipulated in the hypothesis. As will be outlined below, Muslim women were often portrayed as the other, with clothing strategically used to position them as outsiders. Muslim women were overwhelmingly presented as a homogenous group, absent of any diversity. They were consistently portrayed as weak and powerless, rather than agents of change.

As the focus of the coverage was on Shari'a, the appearances of Muslim women were irrelevant. Despite this, commentary about the dress of Muslim women featured prominently within the coverage. There was little mention of the fact that many sects of Islam do not wear any traditional clothing and do not require women to be veiled. At a protest that took place days before the government decision was expected, Mubin Shaikh and his wife, Joanne Sijka, came to counter the protests and show their support for Shari'a. More attention was given to their clothing than their message; as he, with a long beard, traditional Muslim dress and hat, featured in six photos and she, dressed in a burqua, featured in three photos. In all of the photos, they were pictured surrounded by, and arguing against, white women.

As noted by Macdonald, Muslim women often suffer from a "mapping onto Muslim women's bodies of narratives of either resistance against or liberation from extreme versions of Islam" (Macdonald, 2006). Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an outspoken critic

against Shari'a and Islam, is featured in two photographs that focus almost entirely on her unveiled face. An editorial by *The National Post* reinforces the message behind these photos in saying that Hirsi Ali "comes across as articulate, passionate, elegant and clearly secular" (Fulford 2005: A16). In contrast, Sijka, described in the articles as a Polish-born Muslim convert, was defined as an extremist Muslim by her appearance. She was referred to as "the only woman in the crowd wearing a burka," (Leong 2005: A6) by *The National Post*, while *The Globe and Mail* epitomized Macdonald's concept of mapping narratives onto Muslim women's bodies in detailing a confrontation that arose between "the crowd, many of them immigrant Muslim women without hijabs, questioned why Ms. Sijka wore the burqua, sparking a spirited debate about Islam" (Jimenez 2005:A10).

Media's preoccupation with the veil may provide a means through which the cultural differences and characteristics of Muslim women can be emphasized and the traditional stereotypes of Islam, such as a total determination of women's lives through religion, abuse by men and living in a backwards society can be reinforced (Fernea, 1998). It also allows for the implication that liberation comes in the form of unveiling (Khan, 1995; Hirji, 2006). The recurring imagery within the photos showing a veiled woman facing off against white women served to heighten the contrast between Muslim and Western experiences, with the context of the protest against Shari'a hinting at the superiority of Western culture. Many of the articles align accounts of abuse under Shari'a with images of veiled women or Muslim clerics. In doing so, the media "attributes generic qualities to the veil that belong primarily to specific misogynistic patriarchal structures responsible for moulding the contours of daily life" (Macdonald, 2006). This use of opposition coverage to clearly outline the boundaries of normal and

“other” are not new to Canadian media. Epitomizing this coverage is the warrior versus the SQ photo taken during the Oka crisis. Much in the same way, we see Muslim women being defined photographically as the “other” in contrast to their white, “normal” counterparts.

The coverage portrayed Muslim women as a homogenous group, denying them of plurality and diversity. Broad, general statements were repeatedly used to describe Muslim women. Statistically speaking, homogeneity among Muslim women in Canada is impossible. According to the 2001 census, there were just over 579,000 Muslims in Canada. Close to 138,000 were Canadian-born and nearly 140,000 immigrated to Canada more than fifteen years ago (Census 2001, Statistics Canada). The diversity among Muslim women can be elucidated in more than just numbers; the Muslim community in Canada consists of Muslims from Turkey to Uganda who can be further stratified into several sects of Islam.

While most of the articles mentioned that faith-based arbitration was being practiced by Ontario’s Jewish and Christian communities, only four articles made mention of its use in the Ismaili Muslim community. None of the articles thought to examine how Ismaili Muslim women have fared since the introduction of faith-based arbitration into their community. There was also little mention of the heterogeneous nature of Shari’a. While critics widely asserted that countries such as Iran use Shari’a to deny women’s rights, there was little consideration given to the cultural elasticity of Shari’a.

Perhaps the most important and prominent characteristic of the coverage of Muslim women during this time period was their consistent portrayal as weak, powerless

women who lack agency. *The Globe and Mail* noted that “there’s a legitimate worry that some women (and their children) are vulnerable because they don’t speak English or French, because they are intimidated by family members or communities, and because they have little familiarity with Canadian rights protection” (Editorial 2005:A16). A *National Post* editorial takes it even further, stating that the chance that Muslim women may be forced into accepting settlements that violate their rights “seems reasonable, as Muslim women are often far less educated than their fathers and brothers” (Fulford 2005:A16). *The Toronto Sun*, in an editorial worries, that Shari’a, even if limited to family arbitration “could gravely discriminate against Muslim women who, if they’re not aware of their legal rights here, could feel pressured into it against their will” (Editorial 2005:18).

Interestingly, Muslim women are denied agency by those who are both for and against allowing Shari’a in Ontario. Regardless of the side of the Shari’a debate that the speakers are on, these arguments that deny Muslim women of agency are consistently framed by media as logical and rooted in truth. *The Globe and Mail* quotes a protester against Shari’a saying that “in reality, many Muslim women are isolated, with no idea what their rights are under Canadian law” (Jimenez 2005:A11), while *The National Post* quotes a protester complaining that “the victims of these laws will be ones we will never hear from” (Leong 2005:A6). In the same article, a supporter of Shari’a argues that Shari’a law is necessary to protect vulnerable Muslim women who, “don’t know the law. They are put into our mainstream courts, what happens to them? They are at a great disadvantage” (Leong 2005:A6). Again, the diversity of Muslims living in Canada—

almost one-quarter of them born in Canada – give these claims little basis save stereotypes.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, as Shari'a was being proposed in Ontario, it would have been a process that both parties enter into voluntarily, all of its decisions and outcomes would have been subject to the Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the implementation of any decision would have been conditional on the protection of women's rights. While this was addressed in many of the editorials that discussed Shari'a, it was ignored in news articles that framed the protests as legitimate. This was perhaps due to the enormous time constraints that news reporters face, often forcing them to rely on the facts offered by their sources rather than research on the issue. Many of the news articles quoted protestors who underscored the idea that despite all the protections that would be built into the Canadian application of Shari'a, Muslim women were so weak and powerless that they would still be violated.

Perhaps the most powerful evidence regarding the consistent presentation of Muslim women as weak and powerless was their silence. Despite the fact that most of the debate centered on how Muslim women would be treated under Shari'a in Ontario, Muslim women were sourced a total of only ten times in 32 articles. This omission served to eclipse Muslim women's own diversity of voice and stifle their self-definition. Three of these were anonymous sources, who refused to give their real names out of a fear of retribution. Irshad Manji, quoted once as being against allowing Shari'a law in Ontario, is also include in this tally. Not included is Hirsi Ali, a self-proclaimed secularist who is quoted three times as a Muslim woman and Homa Arjomand, who headed the protests against Shari'a in Ontario and was quoted thirteen times. While

Arjomand hails from Iran and was raised as a Muslim, she told *The Toronto Sun* that “she is no longer a Muslim, though her family is.” The article went on to quote her saying, “I am a humanist now.” Oddly, before these quotes, she is introduced with the phrase, “some of the most vocal opponents of Shari’a law are Muslim women” (Blizzard 2005:17). She is the only source in the article. The extensive coverage given to these two women led *The Toronto Star* to ask “is it an accident that the only Muslims the media idolize are those who attack Islam or the broader Muslim community?” (Siddiqui 2005: A17).

In contrast, non-Muslim women were quoted eleven times in protest of Shari’a, discounting all government sources. Prominent Canadian author and secular humanist June Callwood was sourced three times and her name appeared, along with 10 other prominent Canadian women, in an open letter to Dalton McGuinty, printed in *The Globe and Mail*, urging him to ban all religious arbitration in Ontario. Not one of the authors was a Muslim woman (Atwood *et al.*, 2005:A23). Muslim men were sourced a total of three times in protest of Shari’a.

When it came to being in support of Shari’a in Ontario, Muslim women were quoted twice as being in favor (this was included in the total of ten Muslim women sources noted above) and Muslim men were sourced seven times with similar views. Apart from government sources and a non-Muslim male academic who was quoted twice, there were no other supporters sourced.

The traditional practices of newsgathering may be to blame for some of these patterns in the coverage of Muslim women in Canadian mainstream media. As explained by Poole, “newsrooms tend to be dominated by a social elite, often white, middle-class

and male, that relies upon institutional news sources, such as government or corporate spokespersons, and operates within a set of commonly constructed values” (Poole, 2002). This structure tends to privilege dominant voices over marginalized ones, meaning it allows little room for the incorporation of Muslim voices (Hirji, 2006). This is in combination with the reality that the social networks of most journalists do not often include Muslim women. This may also lead to a lack of familiarity with Muslim women that may force journalists to rely on stereotypes when reporting on Muslim women and the issues that affect them (Karim, 2000). Ironically, many of the Muslim women most familiar to media, such as Irshad Manji, are Muslim women who do not fit the stereotypes. Yet despite this, media continue to view powerful Muslim women like these as exceptions and generalize all other Muslim women in Canada as oppressed victims.

Drawing on the logic behind Said’s analysis, power relations among groups in Canada may also play a part in fostering these patterns. Aside from the few Muslim women who spoke out for or against Shari’a, the majority of Muslim women appeared repeatedly as silent victims throughout the coverage. But who is silencing her? If Muslim women do not speak out, is that the fault of the media, the women or, as highlighted repeatedly in the coverage, perhaps the men around them who forbid them to do so? Some of the answer is in the lack of Muslim women sourced about the Shari’a debate. Reporters could have made more of an effort to interview more Muslim women, even covertly, in order to get their points of view. When Muslim women are given a voice, such as in the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali or Irshad Manji, they speak in terms that are comfortable to the West as they rally to liberate the oppressed Muslim woman. But as Macdonald asks, “can the subaltern speak in a way that discomfits the powerful?; in a

way that makes us uneasy in our skins, and that requires us to engage in dialogue: and not in the easier responses of pity or romanticized admiration of ‘the other’” (Macdonald, 2003). In the media coverage of Muslim women during the Shari’a debate, there seemed to be little room for voices other than ones that were comfortable. Regardless of whether this avoidance is intentional, it works to the benefit of the most powerful groups in Canadian society. As Jiwani explains about Muslim women in Western media, “as mute witnesses to their oppression, they underscore the liberated, egalitarian and benevolent nature of the ‘imagined community’ that is...Canada” (Jiwani, 2005).

The discourse generated by media has larger implications for Muslim women. Journalism has long been thought of as a mechanism by which some groups gain acceptance and are normalized within society (Baderoon, 2003). Internationally, the continued perpetuation by media that gender inequity is inherent to Islam and is a wrong that requires righting has been argued by many to have given legitimacy to the war in Afghanistan (Stabile & Kumar, 2005; Hirji, 2006). Here in Canada, the continued denial of voice to Muslim women lends strength to the idea that Muslim women are powerless victims in need of saving, an imagery whose potency is evidenced in the large numbers of non-Muslims who protested against Shari’a in Ontario (Macdonald, 2006). If media is indeed instrumental in defining what is normal, as Baderoon argues, this imagery serves to ostracize Muslim women from the mainstream.

This paper has argued that mainstream media coverage of Muslim women in Canada tends to posit Muslim women as outsiders in society, deny them of plurality and diversity of voice and present them as weak and powerless victims. These flaws have led Muslims in Canada to increasingly turn to alternative media, such as the Montreal

Muslim News, to tell their stories and foster a sense of community that includes and represents them accurately (Hirji, 2006a). This trend begs that mainstream newspapers work to eradicate the stereotypes of Muslim women in Canada that plague their pages, or risk losing an audience among this uniquely placed group of women.

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