

## Contesting the Representation of Muslim Women: A Discursive Exploration of Religious Belief in *I Am Malala* and *Let Her Fly*

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### Abstract

*Important as religion is to behave socially, its complex nature has remained the staple concern of literary narratives. The enigma of religion is particularly evident in the life narratives of Malala Yousafzai (I Am Malala, 2013) and Ziauddin Yousafzai (Let Her Fly 2018). The selected texts have been studied using the Theory of Representation (1997) to investigate the representation of Islam by applying the legitimization strategies proposed by Theo Van Leeuwen in his book Discourse and Practice (2008). Islam and its practices have been exploited by detailing specific practices related to Muslim women with lesser consideration of Islamic injunctions that benefits its adherents. This study concludes that in the representation of religion, the selected authors have misrepresented the ideologies, belief systems, and values of Islam by reinforcing negative stereotypes of Muslim women as subject to religious practices that use the body as a site of patriarchal domination and religious constraints.*

**Key Words:** Postcolonial Perspective, Stereotypes, Representation, Binary Dichotomy, Science, Faith, Religion

### Introduction

The distorted image of Islam has prevailed in Europe's imagination. The tragic event of 9/11 somehow ruled this recognition that caused "the continued proliferation of anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic sentiment and expression" (Allen, 2004, p. 1). In the aftermath of 9/11, this prejudice and hatred against Islam and Muslims increased, which made Muslims the victims of verbal and physical attacks. Anti-Muslim and anti-Islam expressions became more extreme, more explicit, and extensively tolerated. The British press reports that "many women wearing hijab or other traditional Muslim attire had been spat upon and verbally abused" (Allen, 2004, p. 5). Correspondingly, beard and turban became the symbols to identify Muslims and became discriminatory targets. As a result of this increase in anti-Muslim and anti-Islam feelings, Muslims have been demonized and are subjected to prejudice in various fields of life. Anti-Muslim discourses are based on the perception of Muslims as people who are against modernity. These discourses depict Muslims as barbaric and backward who are unable to adopt modernist ideals of the Western world. Most Western critics blame Islam as a tool to imprison women in their homes, while Islamic Feminism puts forward conflicting arguments. One group claims that Islam and its rules give rise to problems for women: the other group states that the existing revival of Islam and religion are the reasons for women's freedom, the protection, and honour of their status and role rather than making them sex objects as in West. The majority

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of Euro-American feminists and Asian feminists consider Islam as a source of oppression and subordination of women by patriarchy under the religious label.

Though specific stereotypes about Muslims and Islam prevailed even before the collapse of the Twin Towers but after this catastrophic incident, these stereotypes embraced specific structures to represent Muslims as "bearded Muslim fanatic, the oppressed, veiled woman, the duplicitous terrorist who lives among us" (Yaqin & Morey, 2011, p. 2). This led to the distortion of specific dimensions of the life and traditions of Muslims and discredited their existence and diversity. The body of Muslims has appeared as praying, bearded or veiled, which was not connoted with the importance of these rituals. Moreover, the behavior, dress, and body of Muslims are not taken as cultural markers rather "as a kind of moral index, confirming non-Muslim viewers of these images in their sense of superiority and cementing the threatening strangeness of the Muslim Other" (Yaqin & Morey, 2011, p. 3). Not only the television programs and films promote the stereotypical and violent image of Muslims and Islam, but a number of post 9/11 American novels also contributed to anti-Islam and anti-Muslim expressions and sentiments. These texts act as subtexts that deal with the issues of "identity, ethnicity, colour / race, hybridity, multiculturalism, and cultural assimilation" (Awan, 2010, p. 529). Those Muslims who practiced religion are presented in these novels as extremists who possess a simple mind, and the concept of morality has been negated in these novels. The novels which are written after 9/11 aim at presenting Muslims as 'orient other' who is a threat to society. Amid these anti-Islamic discourses, the two selected texts, *I Am Malala* (2013) and *Let Her Fly* (2018), written by the Muslim authors, are particularly important for their (mis)representation of Islam. A reductive image of Islam has been portrayed in the selected texts as it has been represented as a regressive and fundamentalist religion. They have presented the faith of Muslims as the principle cause of tyranny and their backwardness. Therefore, the current study focuses on the portrayal of religion in the selected narratives in order to highlight the biased approach of Malala Yousafzai and Ziauddin Yousafzai, who have contrasted science with faith and overlooked the social, political, historical, and economic discrepancies of Pakistani society which overshadow the religion practiced there.

### Conceptualizing the Theory/Method of Representation

Stuart Hall's theory of *representation* (1997) has been employed in the present study. The act of representation uses language to produce meaning. This meaning is assured and shared between the sender and the receiver. Language is a medium to produce and exchange meaning that is arbitrary. As stated earlier, there are three different approaches of representation, namely Reflective, Intentional and Constructionist. The reflective approach states that "meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in a real-world" (Hall, 1997, p. 97). The meaning is in the real world person, idea, event, or object. It means that language functions like a mirror to represent already present reality. Intentional approach associates meaning with the intention of the author as it depends upon the narrator and producer. The constructionist approach proposes that "things do not have intrinsic meaning, we construct meaning for them" (Laboni, 2015, p. 79). The social aspect of meaning has been emphasized through this approach. A social character has been assigned to language by the Constructionist approach to socially characterize meaning and produce the codified meaning.

Stereotyping is another feature of representation which naturalizes, reduces, fixes and essentializes differences. (Hall, 1997) Certain characteristics are identified as stereotypical and codes are used by human beings to 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" (Laboni, 2015, p. 80). Stereotyping refers to the judgment and representation of others in some ways which authorize inadequate social relations. It lessens the social status of those being stereotyped and diminishes them to specific fixed and permanent attributes which humiliate them to accomplishments only in harmony with those dispositions. It is said by Jones & Colman (1996) that "stereotypes are generally viewed as the maladaptive extreme of the cognitive processing continuum, and

serve to perpetuate social conflict and discrimination” (p. 844). Anyone who is linked with a stereotype is then chiefly perceived through that alleged attribute that is considered as decisive of what they are doing and who they are.

The method of analysis is based on the legitimation strategies suggested by Theo Van Leeuwen in *Discourse and Practice* (2008). These legitimation strategies answer the ‘why’ questions like why one should do this. Or why one should do this in this way? Following strategies are analyzed in the present study so as to investigate the point of view of the author and discursive construction of truth with regard to Islam:

### **Authorization**

Authorization means the legitimation of discourse by an allusion to the authority of persons, traditions, customs and law who bestow some sort of institutional authority.

### **Personal Authority**

Personal authority legitimation is bestowed in people due to their role and position in an institution. These people do not need to invoke any explanation for what they say and they “may choose to provide reasons and arguments” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 106). Personal authority answers the questions that ‘why I should do so?’ or ‘why is this in this way?’ by simply saying ‘because I say so’.

### **Expert Authority**

Expert authority offers legitimacy by “expertise rather than status” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107). The utterances of expert consist of certain approvals and assertions that “a particular course of action is “best” or “a good idea.” No reasons need to be provided” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107). This legitimacy can be explicitly stated by declaring the name of an expert (who is famous in the given context) instead of giving proofs and arguments.

### **Role Model Authority**

To legitimize the claim, the examples of role models or opinion leaders are followed by people. These role models can be the media celebrities or the members of the peer groups. The fact that “these role models adopt a certain kind of behavior, or believe certain things, is enough to legitimize the actions of their followers” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 107). This legitimacy sometimes includes some endorsements like cool, experienced, wise, smart and so on.

### **The Authority of Tradition**

This legitimation strategy is invoked by “keywords like “tradition, practice, custom, habit” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 108). The implicit/explicit response to the ‘why’ questions is that ‘it is true because it is what we have always been doing or we usually do.

### **The Authority of Conformity**

The authority of conformity has an implicit message that, “everybody else is doing it, and so should you” or “most people are doing it, and so should you.” No further argument” (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 109). This legitimacy is occasionally shown by high frequency modality such as majority, many, most and so on.

### **Moral Evaluation Authority**

Moral evaluation legitimation strategy is based on values instead of an imposed authority without validation. Moral evaluation is exhibited by certain discourses of moral values, and it is also asserted by words like bad

or good, "which freely travel among moral, aesthetic, and hedonistic domains and often combine with authority legitimation" (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 110).

### Analogy

Analogy is the legitimization of moral evaluation by drawing a comparison between two activities. This legitimation answers the question that 'why one should do it?' by implying that one should do it "because it is not like another activity which is associated with negative values" (Leeuwen, 2008, p. 112). The analogy can be stated implicitly or explicitly by using conditions of comparison and similarity conjunctions.

### Representation of Religious Belief in *I am Malala* (2013) and *Let Her Fly* (2018)

Malala, in *I Am Malala* (2013), recalls the days when she and her friends gave interviews on the two TV channels, ATV Khyber and on Dawn TV. At a time of the political insurgency caused by the Pakistani Taliban's in the Swat valley, Malala, along with some other friends she was interviewed by both the local and international media to tell the world about the circumstances in her hometown in those turbulent times. Her memory of those interviews, however, is interspersed with the assumed restrictions that her friends had to face due to the veiling practices of the religion. Malala says that as her friends "turned thirteen or fourteen my friends' brothers and fathers did not allow them because they had entered puberty and should observe purdah, and also they were afraid" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 117). Personal authority tradition is applied by Malala, who associates Islam and purdah with the subordination and oppression of women, and she ignores the restrictions that the Taliban had imposed on women's education. It was a temporary phase in Pakistani history when the forceful presence of local Taliban's created hurdles for the females of Swat valley to get an access to their educational institutions. These restrictions were the prime factors behind the subordination and oppression of women, but they have been negated by Malala. Instead of exposing those political enigmas which created gendered limitations then, her emphasis remains on the age of puberty as a problematic phase in the lives of Muslim girls of her valley that curtailed their movement outside the house, and this imprisonment is in turn associated with the act of observing purdah as per the religion.

Similarly, on another occasion, Malala recalls her fifteenth birthday and says that she turned to fifteen on 12 July "which in Islam means you are an adult. With my birthday came the news that the Taliban had killed the owner of Swat Continental Hotel" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p.193). Malala's tone gets ironic while asserting that according to Islam, fifteen years is an age which regards a female as an adult who then is ordered to be secluded to the house with almost irresistible force. Here lay one of the crucial problems for the Muslim girls in her surrounding face, but Malala being a daughter of the liberal father was free to go in public to develop her human capabilities. As a consequence, Malala implies that reaching the age of puberty not only condemns the Muslim girls to mindless activity and tedium at home but also blocks their access to the public sphere. She hides and ignores the religious rulings that give a complete code of conduct for the adult Muslim female when outside in public and to continue their responsibilities inside the house. In its place, Malala's narration immediately turns to the killing of the owner of Swat Continental Hotel. This shift from the discussion of puberty on the pretext of religious misogyny to the murder of a businessman leaves the reader with the impression of religious orthodoxy of Islam. In another place in her autobiography, she says that one day she was in school with her fellows and "was hungry but because we were fifteen we could no longer go outside" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 201). In order to misrepresent Islam, firstly Malala employs the strategy of moral evaluation authority by referring to the concept of female puberty in Islam, and then she applies her personal authority to give her personal viewpoint regarding female adults when she says that they were fifteen so they could not go out to buy any food. She pronounces fasting as a kind of punishment for being deprived of food. By blending two different strategies in her narration regarding Islamic practices of puberty and fasting, Malala gets into religious predicaments. As she advocates the

freedom for women to exercise their choices, she reaffirms the stereotypes of Muslim women's oppression.

Malala describes the traditions of her village, Swat. Elderly women gathered at one place to sing their traditional songs which are known as *happy*. Some women were habitual of sharing folktales with their younger generations. After discussing the traditional folktales of songs, Malala says that the women of her hometown "hid their faces whenever they left their purdah quarters and could not meet or speak to men who were not their close relatives" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 54). Afterward, she distinguishes herself from other Muslim women and says that "I wore more fashionable clothes and did not cover my face even when I became a teenager" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 54). Likewise, at another place, Malala presents herself as a unique and confident girl in comparison to other girls by saying that "I was different to the other girls as I did not cover my face and I used to talk to every teacher and ask questions" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 152). Malala applies the legitimation strategy of analogy as she contrasts and compares herself with other women of Swat. She encourages the hierarchy of modesty and modernity to represent other Muslim girls as ignorant and backward because they used to observe purdah, whereas she was modern and a confident girl because she wore more fashionable clothes and did not cover her face. Furthermore, to associate purdah with ignorance and backwardness, Malala portrays herself as a girl who loves to learn and seek education. Her devotion to knowledge is linked with her act of not veiling and observing purdah while veiled girls have been depicted as less confident and shy.

While detailing her experience of writing the BBC blog in 2009 under the pseudonym 'Gul Mekai,' she shares the encouragement that Abdul Hai Kakar, a BBC radio correspondent, gave her to write a diary. Initially, she was shy and reluctant to see her words on the website, but with time, she came to know "what he wanted me to talk about and became more confident" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 130). She says that she wrote about her school life under Taliban rule. At the same time quite, she mentions (pointlessly) that "I also wrote about the burqa" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 131). The reference to the burqa at this point serves no other purpose than to negate the religious code of modesty. Criticism of burqa as an exploitative practice is developed when she comments that "when you're very young, you love the burqa because it's great for dressing up. But when you are made to wear it, that's a different matter. Also it makes walking difficult" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 131). Malala applies personal authority to give her subjective views regarding the burqa by generalizing the experience of wearing the burqa by anyone. In the tradition of Western liberalism, however, she proclaims that she "did not have to wear one" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 55). This announcement hints at her disapproval of the veil. She uses the phrase 'very young' to add emphasis to her notion that burqa is liked at very young age when the body is not conscious of freedom that gets curtailed by wearing it. Afterward, Malala's argument ran counter to this childhood fascination as when 'you are made' to wear it. To Malala, burqa can't be the choice of a grown up female since burqa makes it difficult for a woman to walk or move. Hence, Malala has reinforced the stereotypes against veiled women by relating veil with shyness, backwardness, and ignorance. She has implied that those who cover their faces are backward and shy, and cannot progress in education for their purdah hinders them from doing so. She has conveyed the message that veiled women are unable to speak even to their teachers, and the reason is their purdah that hinders them from forging towards education and advancement. Malala has deliberately misrepresented and exploited visual identifiers of Muslim women so as to humiliate and degrade them morally. As an instance, Malala recalls an incident that had happened when she went to Cheena Bazar with her mother. A shopkeeper "laughed and told us he got scared thinking we might be suicide bombers as many suicide bombers wore the burqa. At school, people started talking about the diary" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 131).

On another occasion, Malala says that her father told her that "mullahs were forcing women to wear burqas. Wearing a burqa is like walking inside a big fabric shuttlecock with only a grille to see through, and on hot days it's like an oven. At least I did not have to wear one" (Yousafzai & Lamb, 2013, p. 55). Malala applies the authority of expert opinion and conformity to give an essentialized picture of the burqa by

associating it with suicide bombers. She says that 'many suicide bombers wore the burqa', which exploits burqa and represents burqa wearers as suicide bombers. Furthermore, to validate her stance, Malala applies role model authority as she refers to her father's views. The metaphors of grille and the simile of oven have been used to highlight the unease caused by burqa.

Similarly, Ziauddin Yousafzai also discusses the phase of puberty and the practice of Islamic veiling in detail in his memoir, *Let her Fly* (2018). He represents his childhood female playmates as free to play with boys on their rooftops. They were "carefree and careless, not yet considered old enough to invite shame or challenge honor" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23). He describes their game of mimicry that they felt happy to wrap their shawls around them to copy their mothers, who were their role models. This joy of innocent childhood is then contrasted with the stark years of their adult lives when they will turn to the age of puberty and "the shawls would become theirs to wear all the time" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23). The result, according to Yousafzai, would be that in order to protect their honor, they would be "pulled down off their rooftop playgrounds" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23) and will "live in purdah, within four muddy walls" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23). His reaction creates emotional dilemmas by suggesting that sexual segregation denies woman's equal right to pleasure. He recalls his sisters, who were his playmates too, and after entering adolescence, they would hear the thumping feet of other children on their roofs, and it will be "a reminder of their past freedom" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23). Furthermore, he says that he has seen many girls falling from the roof like "bright stars falling from the sky" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 23). Ziauddin applies personal authority tradition to represent his childhood playmates as the girls who have been confined by purdah and puberty. An analogy has been drawn between imprisonment and freedom to depict purdah as a tool of confinement and suppression of Muslim women. Ziauddin gives a general statement to portray puberty as a phase of imprisonment and depicts Muslim women with their shawls wrapped around their bodies all the time while it is not the reality. Islam only requires Muslim women to observe veil whenever they are out of their houses or in front of male members who are not their close relatives. He portrays Muslim women as being "pulled down from rooftops" which presents purdah as a major source of captivity for them. He portrays Muslim women as being captivated in 'four muddy walls' for four walls can be perceived as a representation of prison whereby the houses are constructed in the shape of prison. Ziauddin discusses the same relevance of puberty and purdah when he refers to his wife's adolescent stage of life. He recalls, "as a child, Toor Pekai, had valued her independence. She was a strong character who had loved running around Karshat, the neighboring village to mine, but adolescence and purdah had meant that her movements became restricted, and her face was veiled. (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 94) Ziauddin applies personal authority strategy to draw the precise picture of a Muslim community by portraying Muslim adult girls or women as restricted due to their adolescence and in turn purdah. An analogy has been drawn between liberation and subordination to link purdah with women's suppression and subservience while projecting Toor Pekai as a free and independent girl as long as she did not observe purdah. This representation corresponds to Western ideals of modernity. Ziauddin states that Toor Pekai was 'a strong character,' which reveals his implicit intention to contrast his wife with other Muslim women and to express that purdah is meant for those who may get the inclination towards loose moral lifestyle. Moreover, he says that 'her face was veiled,' the use of passive voice reveals the author's intention to represent veil and purdah as impositions and not as an active choice of the woman.

Ziauddin (2018) appreciates the efforts of his wife, who encouraged Malala to get an education because she herself was not educated. He praises his wife for her advocacy of girl education but criticizes her backing of female veiling practices. His description of the burqa-clad women is laden with the undertones of his disapproval as "many women walked around our bazaars in burqas, triangles of thick cloth that fitted their heads tightly like caps" (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 130). Ziauddin comments on burqa by applying the authority of conformity that 'many women' wearing (uniform) burqas walked in the bazaars of his hometown hints at the lack of their freedom to choose the shape or texture of their garment. Furthermore,

a simile between burqa and cap has been drawn by him to convey that it tightly fits the heads of women so as to control their thinking and rationality. Ziauddin's approach towards the representation of women becomes biased as he applies personal authority to present a burqa of just a triangular shape, whereas, in reality, there is a variety of the shapes of veils worn (or not worn) by Pakistani Muslim females. He asserts that "it takes skill to wear a garment like this because walking requires managing the burka flapping around your feet. But once mastered, the burka provides a window through which its wearer can view the world without being seen by eyes other than those of her husband. (Yousafzai & Carpenter, 2018, p. 130) Ziauddin has applied personal authority tradition to validate his stance about burqa as he presents it as an uncomfortable dress that needs the skill to wear it. Then the metaphor of 'window' has been used to further misrepresent burqa by associating it with the confinement of the vision/space of Muslim women. Such an idea result from seeing women as 'other' than themselves and as passive subjects.

## Conclusion

The selected texts reveal an imprecise and an inaccurate image of religion by exploiting its rituals and practices and by strengthening stereotypes against it. The manner in which religion has been portrayed in these selected texts reveals the 'othering' of religion. The selected authors have represented religion with reference to the beliefs, ideas, and practices of 'others' to detach themselves from religion and its practices. The subjects of the selected narratives have been classified into the category of 'Us vs. 'Them', which is an act of presenting narrators as 'Us' due to their rational modernist ideals, whereas all the practicing Muslims are considered as 'Them' due to their blind adherence of religious faith and practices. This binary dichotomy of 'Us' and 'Them' has led to a distinctive line between the selected authors and the other Muslims. These authors attempted to represent their 'other' as a 'subaltern native' who fits in a socially inferior category. The negative representations of Islam run counter to the real teachings of Islam and their implementation. Religion has been marked as heretical and oppressive, and this distorted portrayal misleads the readers about Islam and its teachings. In connection to this, the parallel representation of the body as problematic for a Muslim woman in the selected narratives is striking. Reaching the age of puberty for the Muslim girls is perceived as 'colliding in oppression': for them, this change brings new restrictions, eviction from childhood is accompanied by the challenge to be a good Muslim. The outside world is imagined as a man's world, and this creates an impression that the religion wants to keep it that way. Female puberty is strategically presented as an age that controls and restricts women's freedom. The religious code of moderation in female movement outside the house is shown as disturbing the female subjects in the selected narratives. These texts represent Muslim women as ignorant and backward due to the effect of religion in their lives, and thus as a consequence, reinforce Western stereotypes of Muslim females as backward, underdeveloped, violent, aggressors, and oppressed. The race, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, religion, and political situation of individuals influence their experiences, but in the selected life narratives *I Am Malala* (2013) and *Let Her Fly* (2018), the life experiences of individuals have been represented as being effected only by the religion whereas other factors have been ignored which played a major role in shaping and effecting their experiences.

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