Redefining Muslim Female Identities through Subversive Images

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ABSTRACT

Within the politics of global integration, debates on media representation of Islam have famously centred on Muslim homogenous identity and its uneven alignment to integration. Muslim women are deemed to be a symbol of isolation, oppression, alienation, and disintegration. This paper explores aspects of visual representation of Muslim women discovered in Muslim media in the United Kingdom. It offers a glimpse of how Muslim women are mediated and the distinctive ways in which their diversity is represented and identified. This paper will discuss a central question to answer: What do the images tell us about the culture, identity and practices of British Muslim women? In what ways, do the image producers inform us of their identities and those they represent? Taking this as a point of departure and moving forward, I embarked on a research that is shaped by the theories of Islamic art and gender visualisation. By adopting a mainly interpretive paradigm, the research used the technique of visual analysis of two British Muslim magazines. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that through photographs and graphic artistic representations, the study provides evidence that the magazines under investigation apply a subversive approach to visualising gender. Moreover, the magazines delineated a nuanced convention of visual representations. They do not always operate within a conventional depiction of popular culture that associate beauty and looks to sell products and ideas about women. I argue that the representation in Muslim media could impeach homogeneity of normalised images of Muslims in mainstream media that has formed a strong cultural imagination of the binary of Islam and the West. The distinctive visual representation by the image producers and the counter-depictions of Muslim women in various roles provides a redefinition of Muslim female identities in the British public sphere, thereby invites us to consider the heterogenous identities of the women which is compatible with the notion of diversity within a global society. Although printed magazines might have been replaced by online media nowadays in instilling ideas and selling products, the subversive images offer a renewed image construction of Muslim women in contemporary Europe.

Keywords: Islamic Art; Muslim Media; Gender Representation; Muslim Integration; Visual Culture

INTRODUCTION

In the postmodern period, the world is saturated with images – photography, advertisements, TV programmes, movies, newspaper pictures, magazine images, snapshots, selfies, paintings – in the forms of 2D, 3D and 4D. In contemporary cultures, sociologists observe that people progressively count on visual means to define and inform their identities and social worlds (Konecki, 2011). In Muslim culture, visual is peripheral, a concept which has fascinated me and has become central in this investigation on Muslim identity in Britain.

This paper will discuss the empirical data found in British Muslim magazines in the United Kingdom, therefore, it is worthy to begin with a brief explanation on Muslim media. 'Muslim media' is a term used for those outlets that are produced by and predominantly targeted at Muslims (Poole, 2012). The operation and role of Muslim media organisations are still under-researched yet potentially constitute an integral part of accommodating the minority population within the wider society by providing more Muslim voices and alternative sources. In the flux of global immigrations from countries of origin to the new host country, minority media organisations exist in between international media networks and mainstream channels of communication for certain communities. They operate in a way that adheres with prevailing media regulations on one hand and fulfils the needs and self-interest of their own groups on the other.

Moreover, Muslim media could challenge the dominant narratives of Muslims in the mainstream media and provide alternatives for media consumers. Concerning this, Holohan & Poole (2014, pp. 3-4) propose that"Muslim media in the United Kingdom has potentially a significant role to play in the negotiation of identities for their producers and audiences and the wider public in articulating what it means to be a British Muslim". Since media have always been influential in shaping public opinion of cultural and gender issues, especially in the midst of national crisis (Georgiou, 2012), it is argued that Muslim media could provide a counter-balance for Muslim narratives and offer different perspectives on the issues at hand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical studies show that people mainly get their knowledge of Islam from media (Allen, 2012; Rane, 2008). Edward Said's critique (Said, 2003) on Orientalism provides an important reading for understanding the representation of Muslims in the media. It often involves seeing Arab culture as exotic, backward, inferior, uncivilized and at times, dangerous. In the context of Muslims living in the West, global media has generally characterized Islam as a monolithic entity, synonymous with terrorism and religious hysteria (Said, 1997). Such characterization has led to the formation of a stereotyped image of Islam that resulted in the development of negative attitudes and behaviour against Muslims worldwide (Elgamri, 2010). Several attestations to this claim can be found in the recent literature of media representation of Muslims and Islam. Terrorism, Muslim extremism and cultural issues made up the top three dominant topics in the British media (Baker, Gabrielatos, & McEnery, 2013; Lewis, Mason, & Moore, 2011; Poole, 2011). Other studies on the British press (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010; Sian, Law and Sayyid, 2012; Khiabany and Williamson, 2015; Poole, 2016) found Islam being depicted as a threat to national values, secularism, freedom of expression, women's rights and the security of the West.

In terms of the visual aspect, Rose (2007) argues that visual representation is constructed in multiple ways depending on the producer's motivation and their cultural demography. Any image carries a potential for dual meaning: the content and the form or style of representation (Müller, Özcan, & Seizov, 2009). Two controversial events that were originated from visual illustration by media producers in two majority White countries are useful here in introducing Muslim visual culture and placing the explanation within the context of Muslim identity and integration. First, the publication of 12 Danish cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad in 2006 sparked Muslim anger and criticism in Europe. Second, in 2015, the continuous illustrations of the prophet and association of Muslims with barbarian values by a French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* led to the horrific murder of its staff. To Muslims, depicting a negative image of the prophet and Muslim values was insulting. It was created purposefully to demonize their religious leader and to further marginalise communities already suffering from economic and social deprivation. The depiction was simultaneously offensive

to many Muslims because depicting God and all prophets in any form is blasphemous due to the belief that God and prophets are beyond any mediated imagination.

It appears that both publications were provocative, repeating what Salman Rushdie did almost 30 years ago, but this time in the form of visuals. Due to the anticipated Muslim response towards the images, the media instantly framed these two cases in the discourse of free speech and press freedom, which put Muslims as the antagonist of western liberal values. The media pursued the insider-outsider dyad, that the Muslims did not uphold freedom of expression, thus different from 'Us'. In Wagner *et al.* (2012, p.1) words: "…religious minorities are forced into constructing their cultural identity in ways that exaggerate their group belonging and difference from broader society."

Due to mainstream media representation, the ethnic media has started to arise in the media culture (Georgiou, 2002; Metykova, 2010). Specifically the Muslim media, Holohan and Poole (2014, pp.3-4) argue: "Muslim media in the United Kingdom has potentially a significant role to play in the negotiation of identities for their producers, audiences and the wider public in articulating what it means to be a British Muslim". At times of crisis, Georgiou (2012) observes that: "Mediated representations of gender, ethnicity and migration play an increasingly important role in the way these categories are understood in the public sphere and the private realm" (p.798). In a study of female-oriented soap opera and its consumption by the Arab female viewers in London, Georgiou found that gender identity has become heterogenous and more visible in a culturally diverse society. Indeed, Muslim media creates room for debates and allows opportunities for individual Muslims and communities to be seen and heard.

However, there is still little scientific understanding of Islamic visual representation that would locate them within the discussion on British Muslim identity. Literature on media representation of Muslims remains faithful to the conception of Muslims being Othered in the mainstream media by repeating the old history of Orientalism to deconstruct the narrative. Even this is one of the weaknesses in Said's critique on Orientalism, who dismissed the Orientalist account but did not propose who is the Orient and what is true about it, despite critically investigating the binary of the powerful and the powerless. By mostly applying Said's approach in analysing the textual discourse of Orientalised representation, the overwhelming research on media representation of Muslims emphasized the deconstruction of images of Muslim and ceased at that point. The expansive similar findings seem to allow and reinforce the homogenisation of Muslims, prolonging this within the discourse of Muslim presence in the West, hence, validating the difference between the West and the East, and continuing western hegemony. Although the mediation of self-representation allows for the articulation of identity, what is further missing is a conceptualisation of the discursive diversity among Muslims, particularly women, in order to consider particular identities and values they hold, whether they are incongruent with the dominant liberal order, and if not, what norms and arguments are influential for explanation.

It appears that there is still much to be investigated concerning the representation of Muslim women in mass media. Images remain particularly understudied in the literature on women in Muslim media. Utilizing qualitative content and thematic analysis methodology, the research addresses this gap by:

1) Combining insights from the theories of Islamic arts and gender display to examine Islamic visual representation and the visualisation of gender.

2) Discussing the visual representation of women in Muslim media in the context of British integration.

METHODOLOGY

By mainly adopting an interpretive paradigm, this study used the technique of visual analysis. Two British Muslim magazines were chosen as opportunistic sampling to enlighten our understanding of Muslim visual cultures in representing women. The discussion took place in the context of the British integration agenda and mainstream representation of Muslims. The visual representations of female imagery were examined by drawing insights from the theory of Islamic arts and Judith Butler's Performativity Theory to see how image producers negotiate Muslim identity in various depictions.

Islamic Art

The following paragraphs outline the brief history of Islamic arts which is considered an important guide in identifying the particular character and identity of a Muslim population. It is significant to be discussed within the British context and media representation where Muslim values and practices are deemed foreign and homogenised as not compatible with the wider society. Islamic visual representation will enlighten our understanding on the heterogeneity of Muslim ethnicity.

Previous studies show that in order to understand Muslim societies, it is helpful to study Islamic arts. Accordingly, Du Ry (1970) affirms that to understand the image in Islam is to look at the history of arts through different eyes. Religion, politics and culture are dynamically co-extensive, inseparable and sometimes overlap in the creation of Islamic arts (James, 1974). In another study, Madden (1975) suggests that not every symbol in Islamic arts gives a religious definition. It could be interpreted in terms of social, political and economic meanings of a community.

To illustrate the distinctive mechanisms of representation in Islamic history, Tabbaa (2015) observes that the forms of arts were the manifestations of political identity between two Muslim sects, Sunni and Shia. Due to the growing popularity of Sunni teachings, the Abassid dynasty (750-1258) influenced the forms of arts in the development of calligraphy to distinguish itself from Shiism. The calligraphy then became the pervasive tool for the Abassid dynasty to spread identical Sunni understandings that prohibited any projection of man and animal. This was connected to the rising prevalence of Shiism during the Buyid regime (932-1055) in southern Iran and the Fatimid rulers of Egypt and Syria (909-1171). On the contrary, the Shiite rulers were more flexible in depicting human and animal figures, but these were limited to daily utility products (like pottery and carpet) and decorative arts. Both empires never depicted human figures in mosques and other sacred places.

Kuhnel (1970), however, argues that Islamic arts does not distinguish the religious from the profane. He claims: "The prohibition on the representation of living creatures has been exaggerated. It does not appear in the Koran, but in the Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet) and for this reason alone was not dogmatically binding on all Muslims" (p.2).

For some, they opt to negotiate the injunction on the prohibition of image. Despite a reluctance to represent any living being in the form of arts, it is permissible for the purpose of merely an allusion which is absent in shadows and perspective. In the present days, several contemporary artists never produce personal images that resemble human figures to avoid temptation to idolise the artistic representation. Alternatively, they use 'non-photorealistic human forms' and 'figurative silhouettes' (Kozak, 2014). Therefore, Islamic arts is experimental and contextual (Alin, 2014), thus implying the community is fluid and diverse.

Performativity Theory

Gender differentiation continues to prevail in the media as extending existing social practice in a society with different motives. In modern days and in line with capitalist ideology, women are predominantly being objectified especially in advertisements where they are most often

associated with domestic chores and decorative function (Skorek, 2009). The image of an ideal woman has been also politicised to support a ruling party agenda in positioning women's roles in society (for example, Lombardo and Meier, 2014; Özcan, 2015). Currently in the flux of social media usage, self-representation of gender identity has become excessively depicted via selfie with a degree of self-empowerment (Barry, Doucette, Loflin, Rivera-Hudson, & Herrington, 2015; Busetta & Coladonato, 2015). These studies develop and renew the dimension of mediated gender in many aspects.

Judith Butler popularised the concept of performativity within recent feminism and gender studies. Butler fashions the concept of performativity from the works of the philosopher J.L. Austin, most notably from his book *How To Do Things with Words* (1962). Butler follows Austin in that spoken language is treated as comprising of speech acts. 'Speech acts' alongside other modes of communication comprise socially performed acts, that are social constructions, acts that form the basis of identity formation and self-presentation.

Butler is one of the prominent feminist thinkers that professes the idea that gender is constructed and reproduced by repetitive acts that eventually assign a person with specific gender identity (Butler, 2006). In her theory of gender performativity, Butler proposes that gender is constructed in the form of behaviour enacted by a person where the deeds are acceptable norms in the society where the act takes place. Gender is not determined by the biological sex, rather it emerges and constitutes within the cultural practices in the scene of relations with other people. It is the normalised practice within a society that determine the person as man and woman by referring to established norms. Therefore, sexual identity does not precede the behaviour, but it is the behaviour that informs the sexual role and identity.

Data Collection

Two magazines were located as data sources, namely *Emel* and *Sisters*, each demonstrating distinct approaches in visualising images. These two monthly magazines offer rich imagery with different orientations that will trigger fascinating discussions and findings from the perspective of a culturally diverse religion.

It is important for me to outline the process of data collection and to state the reasons why I chose *Emel* and *Sisters* magazines as my data sources. While developing my research proposal, I selected *Emel* due to its uplifting contents on Muslim lifestyle, focusing almost entirely on British Muslims. It launched its first issue in September 2003 following the 9/11 attack, when Muslims were becoming increasingly stigmatised with stereotypes and negativity. It was released to counter the misrepresentation of Muslim communities in the UK and beyond. Through its multiple sections such as current affairs, outstanding personalities, finance, health, converts, fashion, arts, and food, *Emel* promotes positive aspects of Islam and its values. On its website, it is stated that: "The magazine has had an outstanding reception, by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, and has extensive media interest with features in Time Magazine, The Times, the Sunday Times, the Wall Street Journal, The London Evening Standard, and Turkish, Malaysian, Dutch, Swiss, Iranian and Japanese newspapers. In addition, programmes have been broadcast about *Emel* by the BBC, CNN and other international media" (http://www.emel.com, 5ᵗʰ Jul. 2013). Sarah Joseph, the editor was the recipient of an OBE award from the Queen in 2004 for her outstanding contribution to interfaith activities.

The editor, when celebrating 100 editions of *Emel* in its special issue, once mentioned that the magazine offers narrative space about people in the same way the Quran tells the story about many kinds of people and communities: "Islam does not exist in abstract however. It is lived and expressed through people" (Sarah Joseph, 2013, p.11). By highlighting Muslim personalities, *Emel* sought to visualise the identity of British Muslims and exert their inclusiveness within the wider society.

As for *Sisters*, it was a surprise to see that the images were depicted in an unconventional way where the women were headless and faceless. Neither do they represent personalities which I considered innovative and had not seen in my own country (Malaysia). The editor, the writers, section editors and the graphic artist are scattered around the world in London, New York, Johannesburg, Khartoum and Cairo. They utilize online technology to facilitate their working network. The London-based graphic artist is responsible for creating and reproducing images for a cover page and editorial contents after receiving articles from writers and section editors. All the contents and the magazine's lay out are finalised with the editor's consent.

Sisters' approach to how it represents people through imagery is one of the many things I appreciate about the publication. A conversation with *Sisters'* World and Voices Editor, Brooke Benoit, led to further clarification regarding its choice of images. As a former student of fine art and being an artist for several years, Benoit found the use of human depiction, especially the female form in art, media and advertising is nearly always problematic. *Sisters'* production comfortably and sympathetically follows the traditional Islamic jurisdiction on the rejection of depicting living beings as viewed by Benoit: *"It relieved a lot of the stress I had around abusing and exploiting people with imagery – whether as a subject, a maker or a viewer. It is certainly not popular in contemporary media, and especially difficult in non-Muslim majority environments to maintain this directive but it is not a directive that I would compromise."*

The second issue that they also discussed is hegemony; the intention was to include a variety of people with varying skin tones and body types. Benoit explains, *"Although uncommonly thin white women are one of the smallest demographics in the ummah, they are the most commonly depicted women in most media and media sources, such as those we buy our images from for the magazine."* *Sisters'* designers are diligent to not bring the hegemony explicitly into the magazine, but rather to source diverse images and alter some when possible.

There is a unique practice in the production process of these two British Muslim magazines. The contents are not directly influenced by advertisers. In the case of *Sisters*, all images in the advertisements must abide with the magazine's house style in depicting people. Other media depict people from the front in adverts while in Sisters, the same advertisement appears differently, where people are viewed from a back angle and sometimes with the head cut off. This is not an uncommon practice among Muslim media operations elsewhere where the images are constrained by editorial and managerial regulations. In a similar vein, an Islamic television station in Malaysia, namely *TV Alhijrah* applies the same rule where every woman who appears on screen, whether in a drama production or tv commercial, must wear hijab. Since Islamic contents are in high demand, Muslim media steadily receive a wider reception and gain high profits from advertisement revenue. People seek them for self-transformation as well as social change and they feel Muslim media could help them to educate them in family and professional issues, for examples, and provide alternative views on important issues surrounding their private and public matters.

As for *Emel*, we do not find advertisements on beauty or home products, but mostly on property, Islamic service and Muslim events. They do not evoke an element of traditional femininity as can be found in other women's lifestyle magazines, including *Sisters*. In contrast with *Sisters*, *Emel* strictly emphasises the political identity of Muslims without associating them with the commercialisation of traditional values of femininity for instance, that might attract advertisers as other publications often do. This factor possibly informs why it was hard to find this magazine elsewhere in the market. Its marketability and eventually its closure might be due to financial constraints as they did not operate in a conventional way that relies mostly on advertisement revenue. Several attempts have been made to contact the editor to ask further about this matter but received no response. The editor continues expressing her views on Muslim matters online via her blog.

EMPIRICAL RESULTS

The visual analysis of the two magazines shows that the images challenge the idea that Islam is anti-modern as narrated in mainstream media. This frame will focus on the visibility of Muslim women in the public. I will discuss two themes that emerge from the frame, namely participation and modesty. These two themes are viewed as significant due to their wide narration of the mainstream media on the issue of Muslim women's engagement in society – how the veil has been perceived as different and has become socially disruptive in the British public sphere, thus hindering integration.

Generic Images in Sisters Magazine

In many instances, *Sisters* uses feminine symbols to denote women. The femininity is symbolized with female anatomy and attributes of vanity. For example, a woman is visualized in a profile view with her hair tied into a bun; displaying the outline of her breasts and her long, wavy hair; holding a set of makeup brushes; having jewellery such as earrings and necklace; and wearing attractive outfits such as a dress and clutching a bag. By illustrating the female anatomy and those physical attributes, *Sisters* gives the viewer clear indicators of femininity. What is conspicuous is the absence of facial features in the images. Without faces, the women's bodies and other feminine indicators constitute femininity in general. It provides the viewer with the opportunity to talk about the images in ways which seem appropriate to them, and to apply specific values and discourses to abstract images. Therefore, the magazine opens up room for some negotiation of meaning.

In this frame, femininity is further enhanced by the feminine gestures. According to Goffman (1979), feminine touch symbolizes womanliness through a less firm gesture and merely for the purpose of attraction. In this analysis, it is found that when women are associated with beauty, they display feminine touch. For examples, a graphic image shows a woman using her finger to touch a cream as part of her skincare regime, while another hand holds a bottle by her fingertips instead of holding it firmly. Also, there is a graphic image demonstrates a woman holding four cosmetic brushes in an attractive manner.

A woman is also portrayed in a free, seductive style with her body tilted and seemingly off-centre as illustrated in another graphic illustration. Another picture portrays a lady in a straight posture with open chest to signify confidence. Her clothes, jewellery and accessories are symbolic of style and femininity. These kinds of posture are choreographed to indicate the pleasant feeling of someone engaged in an activity. These results match those observed in a study by Hochschild (2011) on American women's advice books, in which women appear ladylike for parties and display an erect posture as part of their positive sense of being feminine. While none of *Emel's* depictions represent women as being feminine at home, *Sisters* regularly represents Muslim women with feminine values in this way. In the visual construction of Muslim women, *Sisters* constructs this normalised character of feminine gender.

The postfeminist values are articulated considerably in the single depiction. *Sisters* portrays women in a modern approach of self-surveillance and self-discipline, and in the contexts of finance, spirituality, family, and self-development. Femininity is constructed as a physical property within a private context. Gill argues, "The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending), in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness" (2007, p.150). The images are typical of postfeminist representations of women who are empowered by their sexuality and attractiveness but at the same time constrained by it.

The magazine presents a postfeminist representation, that women are empowered by removing the traditional and feminine associations from a wholly commercial motive. Although it is transmitting values relating to traditional ideas of femininity, it is not entirely

commercialised here. The images emancipate women from brand names to enhance their appearance and feelings. It is more to inspire the reader on how to look and feel good, physically and spiritually from a female perspective using a didactic approach. By adopting an impersonalized character, *Sisters* offers the idea of beauty in general rather than selling beauty products or promoting consumer culture. In representing this stylization, *Sisters* impersonalizes Muslim women and decontextualizes them from a particular beauty regime. Images of jewellery, cosmetic equipment, and dress are illustrated generally to disassociate them from commercialisation.

Moreover, *Sisters* represents an idea of womanliness, not specific personalities. The employment of the conventions of Islamic art, save any particular Muslim woman from being objectified by consumer culture or being subjugated to the male view. The images are stylized in nonhuman, doll-like, faceless representations within a cartoon convention. Through the graphic illustration, the images of women have undergone a process of stylization. It has commonly been assumed that Islam prefers stylization. Whenever animal and human figures are depicted, it involves stylization to impersonalize a character and represent a generic personality. It has been reported that stylization was utilized by the early-converted Arab Muslims (Faruqi, 1973) and that the idea of abstraction is a natural preference among Muslims and Arabs (Sadria, 1984). Furthermore, it is a traditional cultural practice as outlined in the previous chapter on Islamic art.

Sisters in a similar vein, seems to adopt this strategy to market the clothes as modest rather than religious. By not showing the models' heads, *Sisters* does not make the viewer feel obliged to wear the clothes with the veil. The dress can be worn either among girls or in a close family event. It might be suitable as well for those who do not wear the veil or even to non-Muslims. Instead of dehumanizing the women, the beheaded images could avoid associating Muslim women with veils. This would also endorse commercial value to the dress to widen its marketability.

Progressive Identities in *Emel* Magazine

As for *Emel*, the magazine never associates women with feminine attributes as in the case of *Sisters*. Under the theme of femininity, no single image of femininity was found in the magazine. It shows that *Emel* represents a more progressive image of women by divorcing them from traditional ideas of femininity and therefore the cycle of commercialism in order to maintain beauty. In fact, the editor had criticised the exploitation of beauty in the March 2010 Issue by highlighting the image of a Muslim Barbie-doll with its head covered on the front page. She condemned the production of the veiled Barbie doll as it enforced the stereotypical association of beauty with being slim, white-skinned and blue-eyed.

Images depicting woman in full-face veils could be the most appealing visual. *Emel* in several instances brings images of a niqabi woman to the readers. A picture of a driving instructor wearing a niqab is visualised brilliantly where she is standing upright to the car with her hands in pockets, looking out at the reader. Her posture signals openness, confidence and engagement. The picture is a counter-representation to the mainstream negativity of niqabi women in Britain. Back in 2006, the veil issue sparked a controversial debate in the British media and has been politicized in the discussion on immigration, integration and multiculturalism (Williamson, 2014). The veil, according to its opponents, makes women invisible and inhibits interaction that leads to isolation and oppression. The picture, however, shows otherwise, where the instructor is looking directly at and denoting her engagement with the reader. She is captured standing in front of the car signalling her empowerment in her job. The picture is related to the BBC2 documentary on a Muslim Driving School in Blackburn and symbolizes the freedom to work, and more generally to act and move.

In the other two images of niqabi woman, *Emel* moves from realistic images to artwork to represent women in other countries, particularly Saudi Arabia. The first image illustrates a cartoon of a Saudi woman, who fights for women's right to drive. It is an artwork by a Brazilian political cartoonist, Carlos Latuff who is well-known for his work on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Arab Spring events. In 2011, a group of Saudi women launched a campaign of #Women2Drive as an attempt to raise awareness of the ban on female drivers and to force change. The campaign received wide international media coverage. The caricature shows the woman gripping a steering wheel and signifying her determination to drive and fight for her rights. The woman is made salient by being portrayed in black and white. Her eyes are sharp looking straight ahead as if confronting an unseen opponent. This face-veiled woman is visualised in a traditionally masculine posture, to symbolize that Saudi women are confronting the rule of banning women from driving which has been sanctioned by the kingdom's clerics.

There is another picture of a Saudi niqabi woman in graphic art depicted in *Emel*. The image shows a female poet from Saudi Arabia who participated in a popular reality programme on Arab television, *Million's Poet*. In her poem 'The Chaos of Fatwas' that received enthusiastic comments from juries, Hissa Hilal criticised some Saudi clerics for their harsh judgements and oppressive rules over those who support gender mixing in the country. The picture shows the poet's image which attracted media attention worldwide. It was stylized from AP Photo. This stylized photo illustrates Hilal on stage from a frontal view, where she is standing straight behind a podium at the centre of attention. It connotes strength and her voice being heard.

What *Emel* represents is in sharp contrast with mainstream media images where niqabi women, inside or outside Britain, have often been depicted as victims and refugees who need rescuing. These two stylized images defy the negativity and evoke an idea of the courage and determination of niqabi women. The stylized photo represents the real women out there who voice their rights and denounce unjust rules. The images show they are not the passive victims, but they are the fighters. *Emel* publishes an uplifting image of conscientious women to counter-depict the passive and vulnerable stereotypes.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the analysis, the construction of social and political identities is rehearsed through the visual representations in *Sisters* and *Emel*. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that through graphic artistic representation, British Muslim magazines delineated nuanced conventions of Muslim visual representations using a visibly different approach. *Emel*, through profile photographs, represented Muslim women from a political outlook and embedded the images with intersected Muslim and British values. While *Sisters*, through graphic art and impersonalized photographs, represented Muslim women from a more communal outlook, whilst also giving autonomy to the women over their bodies and actions. The images contained both Muslim and neo-liberal values through discourses of multiculturalism as well as commercialism.

Among the plausible explanations for these findings is that the visual landscape is a human production (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006) therefore its realities are determined and influenced by the aims of the media producers. As with other publications, *Emel* and *Sisters* have different objectives of publication. *Emel* aimed to show that the Muslim community is not a homogenized population but is composed of variegated ethnics and cultures. Despite their heterogeneity, *Emel* visualised Muslims as part of British society who live, work and socialize within society as a whole. In other words, integration between Muslims and non-Muslims is clearly possible since they share much in common. Social cohesion is the fundamental end of

Emel's publication. The political images function to promote cohesion and to develop healthy intercommunity relations.

Sisters on the contrary, aimed to reach heterogeneous populations as wide as possible. Its publication focuses on a woman's development as an individual who seeks balance between her relationship with the family and the community. Self-transformation is the underlying aim of *Sister's* publication by inserting individual choice within the social boundaries that have been prescribed by Islamic values, yet without contradicting western values. In *Sisters*, women become a symbol of the Muslim community in the West whose performance does not threaten anybody, instead it is a peaceful entity with distinctive and universal values. After all, images in *Emel* and *Sisters* were illustrated as inclusive within the boundaries of the British public sphere.

Having outlined the significant research findings, it is now appropriate to indicate their place and contribution to a broader scholarship. Based on the visual analysis and focus group discussions undertaken in this study, visual representations have been utilized by both magazines under examination to represent Muslim women. The findings have significant implications for the understanding of how the Islamic visual representation, which comprised artistic graphic art, could shape understanding of the identity of Muslim women in Britain. This study shows that the visual is an important medium for communicating identity to the viewer. It takes both a modernist and realist approach to represent Muslim women in the British context, embedding Muslim and western values[1]. While *Emel* magazine politically highlighted diverse profiles of personality in different kinds of pursuit to represent women, both in selectively natural and choreographed settings, *Sisters* magazine has innovatively altered the photographs' presentation by applying the traditional approach of depicting images. Without disclosing a completely real body, heads were cropped, faces were hidden, hands were framed, and silhouettes were used. Interestingly, the revised images give contemporaneous meaning when relating to postmodern issues of media representation and Muslim integration in the West. In an attempt to avoid homogenizing Muslim women with static attributes such as an Asian look and religious apparel, the photographs offer open interpretation and release the viewer from a stereotypical judgement.

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[1] It is worth to mention here that photography is the product of modernity in the late nineteenth century alongside sociology and anthropology (Ball & Smith, 2001). Unlike graphic art, photographs, due to the process of reproduction is political and its meaning is exposed to contestation by the viewers.

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