

# Transparency, Self-Imaging and Reversal of Power in Contemporary Muslim Women Blogging

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## Introduction:

Homi Bhabha's 1985 "Signs Taken for Wonders" introduced his conceptualization of ambivalence and hybridity, since then it has become central to many researchers in understanding how colonialism both worked and unworked (2004, 1165). By allowing one's self to be resented in public is to expose one's identity and reverses colonial power of portrayal. The act of narrating the self brings it into a state of transparency despite the questions of validity that may be raised.

Muslim women imaging is probably one of the clearest examples of inaccurate and unjust examples of human imaging in the last few decades. A stagnant image of Muslim women is repeatedly presented in Western media that stigmatizes her as homogeneous oppressed, ignorant and helpless creature. Apart from these two extremes, this paper brings into focus Muslim women self -imaging during the last decade through personal blogs. It examines how Muslim women utilize the blogosphere to revisualize themselves and shatter the stereotypical mold in which they were confined for long. In addition to writing, blogging allows the reflection of individuality and identity via display of photos and videos. It opens the space for self-identification and communal collusion against the stigmatized picture of the "other".

Blogosphere introduced a new body of literary and cultural genera that belongs to autobiographic writings it shows the blogger in different daily life situations. A review of literature has indicated that very little research has been written on Muslim women and their self-representation as bloggers in particular. This paper fills in this gap as it gives deserved critical attention to the rising new body of Muslim women blogs<sup>2</sup>. The objective of this study is to critically read selected examples

1. The researcher is indebted to Prince Sultan University in Riyadh for supporting the presentation of this paper at the 5<sup>th</sup> World Forum of Humanities.
2. The idea of this paper came originally from my own blog which I started with two fellow bloggers on 2007. Living in US at the time, I found it necessary to have a platform for "us" Muslim women to express our point of view and to express issues of identity and other related matters as well. We chose the title *Muslim Women in America* and continued to blog between 2007-17, It is a *New York Union* blog and concerned with issues of Muslim women in America. Currently, the idea is carried on by my students in two different blogs, one is concerned with cultural issues, I administer the blogs but both are written from the point of view of my female students at PSU.

of Muslim women blogs to examine the image the bloggers chose to present of themselves and to explore how far it deviates from the traditional presentation of Muslim women on Western media. Four Muslim women bloggers are analyzed here; they are selected for their wide readership and the diverse postings. The focus of the study is examining issues related to identity as presented in the selected blogs. The examples considered here respectively are; Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan, Dina Tokio, Nura Afia and Amani Al-Khatahtbeh. I am conducting here a qualitative research within the framework of postcolonial and feminist theories to examine the above bloggers' approaches to self-representation.

### Challenging the Traditional Stereotypical Image: "Write or Be Written"

Representation usually indicate a form of authority and control; it gives the presenter an upper position to project his/her point of view and to demonstrate his own prospective. Homi Bhabha sees it as an ambivalence of colonial power in its "phenomenological projection of Otherness", the ambivalence in the colonial use of power lies in its focus on *difference*, Bhabha emphasized (2004, 1171). The act of writing and possessing the right to control what is being written about one's self and history is the colonialist project of civility, Bhabha explained which entails a one-dimensional version of truth that is told from the colonizer's *positionality* (1172).

### Blogging and the Issue of Representation:

Among numerous online forms of communication blogs remain distinctive due to their dynamics and the personal nature, although they maintain elements of the public discourse and interaction with receivers. The appearance of the internet within the last decades has clearly affected the identity of people. It allowed for a dialogic space that is seen as a counterpublic space and provided an opportunity for parallel literature. Kalyani Chadha emphasized that finding a counterpublic is not a novel idea as it has its roots in history where minorities find alternatives for self-expression. Numerous older examples like the coffee-houses and literary clubs in eighteenth century England can be seen as a form of narrating to the public. More recent counterpublic examples can be seen in the Egyptian literary blogs as they represent a counterpublic sphere to the mainstream literary public sphere (Chadha 2013, 930).

Blogging is simply defined as a space where a person can represent his/her self. The general assumption is that a blog is a diary writing and a form of autobiography, it is considered an emerging genera of literature that aims at presenting segments of real life (Pepe, 2015, 73). While the main preservation against blog as literary genera stems from the fact that they are documentation of daily life incidents in the blogger's life, it can easily be argued here that blogs

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<https://hajbehindthescenes.wordpress.com/about/>

<https://translationtimesblog.wordpress.com/about/>

are similar to journal and diary writings which occupy a considerable amount of literary studies. The only actual difference between the two is that in the case of blogging, they are published on intervals not as a whole as the case of the diaries which is an attribute to their immediacy and development of presentation. In both cases, the writer chooses which part(s) of his personal life and identity s/he wishes to expose.

Despite their earlier beginning, blogs became popular by the first years of the twenty first century. By 2004, blogs were so popular that “blog” was named the word of the year by the Merriam- Webster (Rettberg, 2017, 10). Today’s blogs are not limited to the diarist formats as they include interaction with surrounding communities and international events. However, among different forms of diary writing, blogs remain distinctive because of the quality of interaction. It is also quite representative even with the debate of validity of representation and the questioning regard the virtual persona. How much of what is portrayed in the blog is real and how much is fictitious is another issue that should be considered.

### **Blogs considered in this study:**

#### **Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan**

Suhaimah Manzoor-Khan is a Pakistani-English Muslim woman. Suhaimah is a poet, writer, public speaker, and founder of the brown Hijab<sup>3</sup>. She mostly writes about issues in politics, race, gender, Islamophobia, and decolonizing minds. She is a Roundhouse fellow for 2018. Suhaimah wears hijab and openly expresses her identity through narrating everyday life situations that happened to her. As a poet she relays on poetry in presenting herself. Her blog includes videos of herself presenting slam poetry.

#### **Dina Tokio**

Dina Torkia, who goes by Tokio on her YouTube video blog, is a 29 year old half Egyptian half English woman living in the U.K. Dina started her YouTube channel at the age of 21 because of her frustration with the lack of representation of Muslim women in the beauty and fashion industries. She uses video blogging or “vlogs” to communicate with her readers. She regularly vlogs about fashion but also explores other issues such pregnancy and her battle with an eating disorder, as well as other personal experiences. Her ultimate goal is to show that wearing a hijab doesn’t stop Muslim women from being like everybody else, and breaking the negativity surrounding that (best represented in her #YourAverageMuslim series on her YouTube channel). She now also posts occasionally<sup>4</sup> and was the subject of a BBC3 documentary called Muslim Miss World<sup>5</sup>.

3. [www.thebrownhijabi.com](http://www.thebrownhijabi.com)

4. <http://www.dinatorkia.co.uk/>

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GIeMt38gLfE&list=PL1Z7qli1BQMxskY1fu9Pvf6VCQKVLrZZd>

## Nura Afia

Part Moroccan and part Lebanese, Nura Afia is a 25 year old YouTube vlogger<sup>6</sup>. She rose to sudden fame for being the first hijab-wearing ambassador for Cover Girl cosmetics, making her the very first model to feature in an ad campaign for a cosmetics company in the U.S. She started filming makeup tutorials after giving birth to her first daughter and now has a total of over 300,000 followers across her platforms. Afia was always vocal about Muslim representation in the beauty industry and its importance. She has publicly said that she wants to show people that being a mother, a wife, and a hijabi, which are things usually looked down upon in her western society, are not things that stop her from doing what she wishes to achieve.

## Amani Al-Khatahtbeh<sup>7</sup>

Amani Al-Khatahtbeh is a 26 year old Jordanian author. She is the founder and editor of muslimgirl.com. At 17, Al-Khatahtbeh started the blog in her bedroom with a goal of creating a place for other Muslim women to take control of their identities. The site began to achieve incredible numbers, hitting 100 million views in 2015 alone. Now working with a full staff, Amani's site covers Muslim women's issues, as well as other issues within other minority communities. When she was 23 years old, Amani became the first veiled Muslim woman to land a spot on the Forbes 30 under 30, and was also named one of CNN's 25 most influential Muslim American's two years later. She has since then partnered up with Teen Vogue, NASDAQ, and more. Amani stresses issues of identity in her blog and certainly refuses to use the term Muslim women as "tokenized" by the western media to inclusively describe all Muslim women into a homogeneous group.

## Becoming Part of the Narrative:

Blogs provided an opportunity for the bloggers to outreach for the public and encouraged members of the communities to speak and to have a voice. The blogs became a sort of the platform to debate issues of identity and representation. The fact that the responses can be read by the public is in itself a proactive step that demonstrated the enabling effect that the blogs have on the members of certain group. It will be naïve to assume that all responses conform to the writer's view point; otherwise, we would be recycling the colonial homogeny which the representation via blogging is trying to challenge. The diverse responses of blog readers in itself can be seen as a proof of the heterogenic and multiplicity of Muslim women and furthers the inaccuracy of the term. Readers' responses to the selected blogs vary from full agreement to severe opposition. In

6. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbeXigLhNXyAGy48d9wZutA>

7. <http://muslimgirl.com/author/admin/>

that sense, while women empowerment by possessing the ability to speak may be misunderstood as a call for unifying conformity, it needs to be stated here that the ability to object, argue and disagree is an inseparable part of such empowerment. It invites revision to the colonial dichotomies.

### Conclusion and Recommendation for Further Studies:

The paper deals with the representation of Muslim women as homogeneous entity and it reads the attempts of challenging the colonial divisive discourse that separates human into us versus them. It also explores how Muslim women are becoming more active in breaking the molds of “others” in which they were framed into for quite some time. By allowing one's self to be presented to the public, an act of transparency is taken by choice to reveal identity and open a space for discussion. This act in itself is described by Homi Bhabha as an attempt to reverse the colonial power an authority over the individual and the community (1985). Blogs as literary representation are forms of diary writing that enable writers to project an image of choice to the public readers. Despite the debate about the authenticity of the representation via blogs through creating an online persona, many Muslim women bloggers consider this persona more authentic than the homogeneous portrayal in western media. In that sense, the blogosphere is utilized by Muslim women as a space of representation to unshackle their traditional stereotypical image portrayed in the media. This proactive stride is a move towards practical feminism, which is seen by writers like Sara Ahmed as the more contemporary form of feminism (2003).

Based on the critical reading of the selected blogs, the study concludes that while the representation of Muslim women as helpless oppressed entities, the bloggers chose, instead, to portray themselves as free active women who are open to their communities and to humanity at large. All four bloggers examined above demonstrated a strong sense of identity, as they did not refrain from showing their identity as Muslim women wearing Hijab despite its stereotypical stigma and the homogeny of this representation. Blogs enables the writers here to create a counterpublic where they opened spaces for community dialogues. The study also concludes that blog posts instigate self-reflection and enhanced the sense of communal solidarity as demonstrated in the positive interactions and affirmation. Because of the various issues and topics discussed in Muslim women blogs, this study is only a preliminary examination that should be taken into a deeper level of analysis especially with regards to the debate of identity. Transparency is another issue that needs further thorough investigation and scholarly attention.

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