



# Representation of Muslim Women in the Albanian Media

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**Abstract:** Muslim Woman portrayals has common features and characteristic since we share the same place (Balkan), almost similar historical aspects (from Ottoman Empire to other Balkan war) and also common cultural aspects (such as traditions, customs, mentality etc.). The long-term change in Muslim women's images and their representation in media could contribute on the change of the perceptions and stereotypes Muslim women face in a society. The more islamophobia is increasing its impact on society the more Muslim women are targeted and stereotyped. There are of course some specific aspects according to each country which will be analyzed in this paper and taking as a case study the Representation of Muslim Women in the Albanian Media. Different limited contests are analyzed for the purpose of this paper both written and visual media such as: articles, pictures, videos etc. The main sources used for this research are all the editions of the European Report on Islamophobia (2015-2020) published by SETA and also a quick review of some online articles combined by personal observation and monitoring process from 3 main websites dedicated to islamophobia in Albanian media.<sup>2</sup> The methodology used for this research is Media Analysis Content when analyzing the general overview of the discourse related to islamophobia other approaches will be applied such as: Encoding/Decoding's Hall Approach and Lasswell's Propaganda technique as well.

**Keywords:** Albanian media, gender, islamophobia, women

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## Introduction

This paper is thought to be a modest contribution to the Islamophobia Studies, which according to Hafez (2018) it is a new field of research which focuses on the phenomena of Anti-Muslim racism. There are many definitions and each of them needs a discussion and requires a broad analysis due to the sensitivity of the topic. A long and huge debate has been constructed related to its definition whether the term “Islamophobia” is not appropriate because it is more “hate” against Islam rather than “fear”. Though, Lean (2012) wouldn’t agree. According to him Islamophobia is the fear of Islam and Muslims. It is that fear that then leads to hatred, hostility and discrimination. He also defines Islamophobia as Anti-Muslim hate speech and behind it there is a whole industry which is known as “Islamophobia industry”. But Islamophobia has also been defined as anti-Muslim racism:

“Various forms of racism are present in the modern area; Islamophobia is the preferred one. The usual objection to defining it in this way is that Muslims are not a race. But since all racism is socially and politically constructed rather than reliant on the reality of any biological race, it is perfectly possible for cultural markers associated with Muslimness (form of dress, rituals, etc.) to be turned into racial signifiers.” (Lentin & Tiley, 2011)

And also a very broad definition has been given by Kundani (2011) who mentions the fact that Islamophobia is sometimes seen as a virus of hatred recurring in Western culture since the Crusades. Other view it as a spontaneous reaction to terrorism that will pass away as the effect of 9/11 recede into history. Many believe it does not exist.

“My emphasis in Islamophobia is as a form of structural racism directed at Muslims and the ways in which it is sustained through a symbiotic relationship with the official thinking and practices of the war on terror.

Its significance does not lie in the individual prejudice it generates but in its wider political consequences, its enabling of systematic violation of the rights of Muslims and its demonization of actions taken to remedy those violations.”

Nevertheless, the most important thing which worth mentioning in this research is the fact that he stressed out the common view which defines



Islamophobia as a phenomena that works through homogenization, views Islam as inferior and an enemy, and leads to discrimination.

These characterizations have been collectively asserted by most authors in the vast literature on Islamophobia. (Hafez, 2018.p. 214)

When it comes to gendered islamophobia, which is the focus of this paper, we sometimes face with an distorted portaitization of Muslim women but we also face in some cases, both from Muslim friendly and other media, which in a first sight seems to be a good representation promoting their success stories while increasing the feeling of pride but failing to realize that this is all done in the name of the “otherness” phenomena. To identify which case we are confronted with, we will use the Hall’s approach of Encoding and Decoding. According to this approach, analyzed very clearly by Stevenson (2002), language is a system of signs. Signs are made up of signifiers and a signified – the mental concept referred to. To understand this, we can take the word ‘newspaper’ as an example which when spoken has a certain sound (signifier) and actually refers to something purchased daily, made out of paper, containing photographs and black print (signified). In the production of media messages “Hall makes a basic distinction between encoders and decoders. He identifies a radical break between the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production and technical infrastructure that facilitate the encoding and decoding of meaning structures. The encoding of a media text is dependent upon certain professional norms and procedures..”(Stevenson 2002.p 41).

When it comes to knowledge and its framework, Said (1997) emphasizes that all the knowledge that is about human society is based on bias such as judgment and interpretation. He doesn’t deny the facts and the data, instead he argues that those facts and data may be relevant only due to the interpretation we give them. Thus, interpretation depends on who the interpreter is, what is he addressing, which is his purpose, at what historical event the interpretation is being made. In this context, all the interpretations can be called situational, which means they occur during an event that the interpreter is affiliated to some bias or some agendas. (Said, 1997)

As a result, we can come to the conclusion that any kind of interpretation is free from bias, until we don’t identify some past precedents or we realize that they are not connected to other interpretations.

In this context, when we face Muslim representation in media, especially when it comes to portraying Muslim women, we take into consideration

and ask ourselves some questions such as: what kind of media is it? Is it known as Islamophobic or with Islamophobe agenda? Is it Muslim friendly or not? Does the language (the sign) referring to them being judgmental/discriminatory or not inclusive?

If the media portraying the image of Muslim women are known for their past Islamophobic statement, and their agendas are known to be Islamophobe, most of the time this portraitization is distorted. The question here is: why should a Muslim women, with hijab or not, being targeted as “the Muslim women entrepreneur”, “Muslim women politician” or “Hijabi athlete/artist”? <sup>3456789</sup>

At the same time we fail to understand that by counting this number of success stories we just become part of a discriminatory chain where something that should be common is becoming the exception and the exception is promoted like lack of discrimination. As according to the feminist perspective, while talking about gender representation we don't focus only on what is present but also what is absent.

In this regard, if we would compare the Muslim women representation in Albanian media we can come to the conclusion that they are underrepresented which can implies that “other” women are the cultural standard and Muslim women are unimportant or almost invisible.

The “otherness” concept is also relevant to this discourse, Carr (2021), in his paper about “Islamophobia, Neoliberalism, and the Muslim ‘Other’” argues that this process of making the Muslims the “other”. If one may wonder why media have to do this, the answer goes deep in the roots of media works, their agendas and where the finance and support came from. The media owners based on their policy have agreed to the idea (ology) that Muslims are racialized as un-neoliberal and at the same time they are in need

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3 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V42iFW6\\_ybg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V42iFW6_ybg) “7pa5 - Fatime Stojku, vajza muslimane që ka zgjedhur të bëhet blogere - 4 Nëntor 2020 - Vizion Plus”

4 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkR0tuStVUA> Moda e vajzave të mbuluara / Rrugëtim me Anilen...

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guqkq0upiG0> TV Teuta/Programi i Ramazanit, Suela Dibra Kaca- Femra muslimane bashkekohore perballe idealit islam

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zf2BFGSatN4> Ftesë në 5, Nada Dosti, gazetarja e mbuluar që provokon debat, 5 Shtator 2018, Pjesa 1

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f64emHY0J9g> A1 Report - Këshilltarja me shami e bashkisë për A1 Report: Risi në politikëbërje;

8 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXuEvHtfr-I> Gruaja me mbulesë, kampione në garat me vetura

9 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1zDjJjnfX8> Gruaja me shami, kampione në garat me makina në Kosovë



of neocolonial civilizing help to save them. Such concepts of the Muslims as 'Other' serve to legitimize the neocolonial enterprise, cast as bringing freedom, democracy and civilization. Neoliberal nation-building ensures socioeconomic and political structures reoriented towards the neoliberal *Zeitgeist*. At a societal level, the values of how to be a good neoliberal individual are inculcated throughout the citizenry (Carr, 2021. p.99).

This phenomena did not spare the Muslim women, despite their intersectional complexity of identities. According to him, through the neoliberal lens, the good/bad Muslim dichotomy is an example of how one can or cannot fit into a Western society. In this context, the image of the Muslim woman in particular is critical if measured with these lenses and "project of inculcating neoliberal individuation" (Carr, 2021.p. 95).

The veiled Muslim woman is antithetical to the idealized neoliberal subject citizen, she, to draw from Razack, is a "non-citizen... trapped within group-based identities." Identifiers of Muslimness exemplify a group of collective affiliations that are contrary to the neoliberal goal of making all rational, responsible individuals, "one-man [sic] archipelagos." (p.95)

In this case the Muslim woman finds herself at the center of discourse of how or how she should not be: she is positioned whether as the so-called neocolonial discourses of 'patriarchal' Islam as oppressed by male of her own community, from the same religion (bad Muslim women), or liberated, emancipated, empowered western woman, modern, civilized, and embodying neoliberal ideals (good Muslim women).

On the other hand, when analyzing the Islamophobic narrative, we must take into consideration that a message (language or visual contest) is encoded (made to mean something) by the producers and is then decoded (made to mean something) by the audience (Hall, 1982).

This is nothing else than a sophisticated way to avoid propaganda which is a direct message intended to spread a certain way of thinking or ideology. Taking this into consideration, we can imply that Islamophobic rhetoric uses both propaganda and encoded message to misrepresent the image of Muslim women by giving a distorted portrait of them.

## **General Overview: Islamophobia In Balkan Media**

After analyzing all the chapters from the European Islamophobia Report (EIR) in the Balkan countries where Albanian language is spoken, such as Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia, focusing only in the media section,

they all claim in general that islamophobia is present in their media which is characterized by Albanophobia, Turkophobia, hate speech, otherness, discrimination etc.

In recent years, Muslims in Albania have experienced an intensification of Islamophobia in various spheres of life, especially in politics, media representation, the justice system, etc., with negative opinions and stereotyping, as well as hate speech on mainstream media, social media, and other online platforms. This discrimination against Albanian Muslims has been fueled by many media pundits, journalists, and politicians in Albania as we will see later in this report. The overall impression propagated by the Albanian online media is that of a growing Islamic extremism and radicalism, with the Albanians allegedly playing a part in this. For instance, in the aftermath of the Vienna terrorist attack where one of the attackers was of Albanian origin from North Macedonia, the mainstream media in Albania were eager to discuss the topic and try to analyze the reasons behind the radicalization of the young attacker, focusing mainly on its religious and ethnic origin. Nevertheless, many reports and seminars organized on the topic of discrimination and hate speech in Albania failed to recognize and address Islamophobia as a crucial part of the hate speech discourse, focusing mainly on discrimination against groups like LGBT and Roma people.

Furthermore, Islamophobia is also fueled by political statements. As an example, a debate on religious grounds has included the proceedings of the plenary session of the Assembly on 7 October 2020 (Faxweb.al 2020) The debate was initiated by Mr. Ralf Gjoni, an Albanian MP and former member of the LSI, a left wing party, who during his speech when talking about depopulation said that the departure of people will bring as a consequence the fact that in Albania only old people like Spartak Braho, children of criminals or hijabi women will remain (Gazeta-shqip.al, 2020). After the speech of Mr Ralf Gjoni, the chairwoman of the plenary session, Vasilika Hysi, intervened and warned him about the insulting language. This claim was also answered by the MP Halit Valteri, who said that Gjoni should wash his mouth when talking about women with headscarves, as “they are hundred times more honored than him”. Then he asked the chairwoman to expel the “people with strong Islamophobic attitudes“ from the Parliament.

When it comes to Muslim women there is a strong focus in the media on women’s oppression/emancipation and the attitude towards their own body and the way they dress. The national reports (EIR) show that most news stories “imported from abroad” related to Muslim women are related to violations of women’s rights (including honor killings, forced marriages and



female genital mutilation). By importing news about Muslim women which does not have anything to do with the local reality (of each country) the purpose is to promote a distorted image of them and relate it to extremism and terrorism and in the “luckiest” of the cases to backwardness.

The aspect which characterizes the media in the Balkan countries is related to three main occasions which are both “a good moment” to attack Muslims and to open a new debate about Islam:

1. After every terrorist attack, which thought to be carried out by Muslim groups.
2. Holidays celebrations (for both Muslims and non-Muslims).
3. News from international media (usually from the Middle East especially controversial topics such as riding a car in Saudi Arabia, forced veil in Iran, fighters from Balkan in Syria etc.)

## **Portraitzation of Muslim Women In Media**

From a quick search on Google, we can notice that a very high percentage of the viewed pictures portraits Muslim women all cloaked in black, with burqa or chador, but the actual percentage of Muslim women that wear this kind of clothing are minor. Those images are not generated randomly but are there as a consequence of deeply rooted stereotypes about the Muslim women. Although, the hard working attempts (especially from the so called Muslim fashionista, bloggers and influencers) both online and offline, to break down those stereotypes, the situation didn't change a lot. Even though we don't have any date, but from a personal observation, I came to the conclusion that in recent years, especially from 2019-2021 there is an increment of Muslim women presence in Albanian media, especially in Albania. In spite of this increment, the narrative still didn't change much, actually I would say the opposite: Muslim women who attend to TV programs and interviews are fostering this anti-Muslim narrative more. How does this happen?

It happens in many ways, due to:

- lack of awareness about media strategie which feed islamophobia;
- genuine / naive desire to promote themselves to become a role model and inspiration

in a sincere attempt to explain themselves they foster “the otherness” by using specific words such as “we; you; them” which divides more the two worlds (the Muslim and non-Muslim; or hijabi - non-hijabi). They also fail into

the trap of talking about and exclusively about Islam or Islamic perspective about any given topic. By doing so, Muslim women are exclusively reduced to their identity as Muslim. This process is also accompanied by targeting expressions such as "To marry with hijab"; "To make fashion with hijab"; "Muslim woman in Ramadan" "Hijabi Muslim journalist"; "Muslim women and their wardrobe"...etc.

As Sahar Khamis emphasis "Any serious to counter islamophobia must take into account and illustrate the Muslim women's shifting identities, complex realities, multiple agencies and varied resistances." (Khamis, 2021.p.58). Unfortunately, this fails to happen when it comes to Albanian media.

If we would compare the three Albanian speaking countries (Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia), I can assume, from a personal observation though a monitoring and reporting process would be very appreciated and useful, that in the Albanian media (Albania) there is grater presence of Muslim women in TV shows, TV programs, interviews etc. The common characteristic is that in all these countries Muslim women have a voice, they have visibility and access to media, but only as "guest speakers" not as television host, or leading program voice or news presentator.

## **The Gender Perspective**

When we talk about gender issue, as a matter of fact, we also agree for an intersectional discrimination based on different grounds, especially when it comes to Muslim women, such as: gender, religion and ethnicity. When it comes to hijab, it is an open declaration of both gender identity and religious identity, in the case of the Republic of North Macedonia, it can also be an ethnic identity (Albanian; Bosniak; Turkish etc.)

But what is identity and why is it relevant when talking about gender issues?

Every individual carries multiple identities: family, clan, region, ethnicity, nationality, religion, gender, language, class, income, profession, advocacy. These various identities intertwine, come and go, operate during different phases of our daily life...gender identity in the presence of the opposite sex and for females when facing discrimination (Fuller, 2010, pp 294)



To the same opinion is also Maalouf, when claiming that according to him identities are a whole of belongings. (Maalouf, 1996). However, he believes that besides this large amount of belongings and affiliations, identity can also be singular and something that we experience as a complete whole.

“A person’s identity is not an assemblage of separate affiliations, nor a kind of loose patchwork; it is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound. People often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their allegiance is most under attack. And sometimes, when a person doesn’t have the strength to defend that allegiance, he hides it.” (Maalouf, 1996. pp.26)

From the other side, according to Zilka Spahic Siljak, identities are not solid and separate, mostly they are related to each other and are fluid. (Spahic-Siljak, 2016)

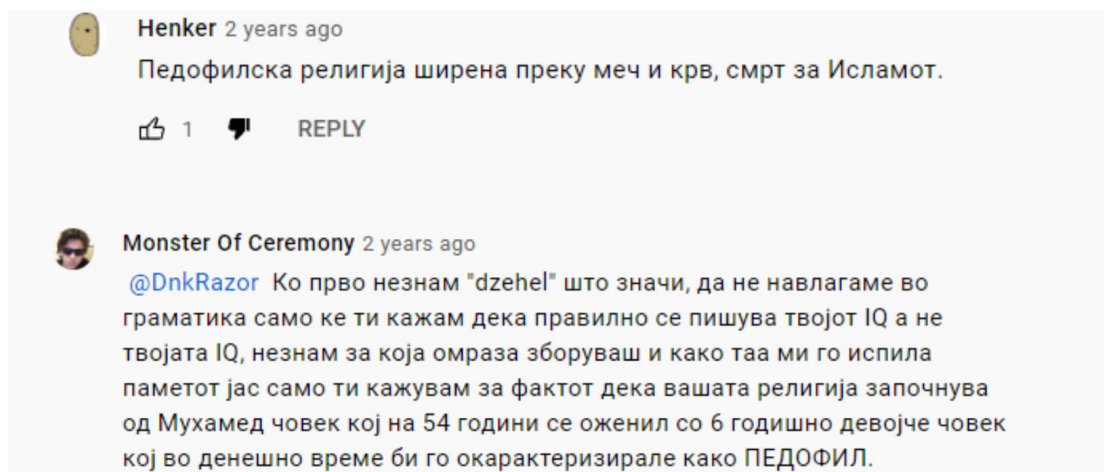
In this context, while we focus on the reality in the Albanian speaking countries we have to dig deep on how this complexity of the gender identity and Muslim identity are (not) taken into consideration when referring to hijab or Muslim women.

As the author of this paper has reported (Dosti. 2020) “the journalist Arbana Xharra, posted on her social media account (Figure1) claiming about hijab, after a long debate related to the beginning of the new academic year in Kosovo. The focus of the debate, which involved very important political actors and policy makers, was on a decision to be taken whether to allow hijab in the public schools of Kosovo. In this post she says that in the Qur’an is not mentioned that a Muslim woman should be covered, instead it is just is the legacy left by Sultan Abdulhamid. She calls the hijab a “misogyny and sexist act”. According to her, someone made it an agenda and that what worries her the most is “the primitiveness of some who want to sell the handcuffing of a woman as freedom of expression.”



**Figure 1:** The journalist Arbana Xharra’s post on her facebook account about hijab

As mentioned in the National Report about Islamophobia in North Macedonia (SETA, 2015) Islamophobia and Albanophobia are intermingled with one another: specific labels are used against Muslims such as ‘seçen’ (circumcised) or ‘zabulena’ (wearing hijab or burka), being used to refer to mostly to Albanians/Muslims but also to other Muslims from other nationalities.



**Figure 2:** Comments on the Youtube video of Sumeja Ademi on the Macedonian Helsinki Committee<sup>10</sup>

On February 2017, a Muslim woman with hijab was physically attacked in Skopje<sup>11</sup>. Two boys and a girl not only offended her with Islamophobic comments but also with ultra-nationalist ones, assuming that she was Albanian. Sumeja was later attacked by the girl who tried to take off her veil, and all three of them shouted insults at her asking her to leave the country. In the video, Sumeja notes that the case was reported to the police, however, no action was taken due to lack of evidence.

Several videos were produced as part of the campaign against hate speech and hate crimes “Hate hurts, don’t tolerate it! Report it!” organized by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights. One of the videos features Sumeja Ademi, but under her video comments of hate are shown as in **Figure 2**.

Again, in the North Macedonian media, as the activist Mersiha Smailovic reports<sup>12</sup>, on September 12, the Facebook campaign “AWAKENING, NO TO MIGRANTS SETTLING IN BITOLA!” started.<sup>13</sup> This Facebook profile ironically shows a Muslim woman in a burqa and all in black, on the milk product “Bitolsko” (Figure 3)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boKzJwDi-28> Омразата боли, не ја толерирај! Пријави! - Сумеја Адеми

<sup>11</sup> <https://muslimania.al/muslimanes-shqiptare-i-shqyhet-shamia-ne-mes-te-shkupit-nga-maqe-donasit/> Muslimanes shqiptare tentohet t'i shqyhet shamia nga maqedonasit në mes të Shkupit

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.islamophobiaeurope.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Macedonia.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Будење Битола, [https://www.facebook.com/budenjebitola/?ref=br\\_](https://www.facebook.com/budenjebitola/?ref=br_)



**Figure 3:** “So there won’t be any camps as there wasn’t any law for a bilingual Macedonia? Caution, people from Bitola Let’s prevent the ‘Bitola girl 2027’.” Published on the Facebook page Bitolcani/Bitolcanki – NEW, on August 8, 2017 and retrieved on December 23, 2017.

## Conclusion

As has been argued above, the the images of Muslim women and their representation in the media contributes on the perceptions and stereotypes that Muslim women face in a society. The targeting of Muslim women and their being stereotyped is related to a proportional increment of the impact of Islamophobia, especially in the media, thus media are one of the most powerful tools. When we talk about gendered islamophobia, which was the main focus of this paper, we take into consideration a distorted portrait of Muslim women, even when we also face in some cases at first sight a good representation promoting Muslim women success stories, we must into consideration that this is all done in the name of the “otherness”.

Taking into consideration this, and many other factors, when we face Muslim representation in media, especially when it comes to the



representation of Muslim women, we must question it and rise questions such as: what kind of media is portraying them and if it is known as Islamophobic media or media with Islamophobic agenda. This is important because if the media portraying the Muslim women are known for their Islamophobic agendas then we can realize that this portraying is intentionally distorted.

In this regard, if we would compare the Muslim women representation in Albanian media in Albania, in relation to other Albanian media in Albanian speaking countries (Kosovo and North Macedonia), we can come to the conclusion that they are underrepresented which can imply that Muslim women are most of the time invisible.

On the other hand, when analyzing the Islamophobic narrative, we must take into consideration that a message (language or visual context) is encoded (made to mean something) by the producers and is then decoded (made to mean something) by the audience (Hall, 1982).

In this paper we tried to argue that Islamophobic rhetoric uses both propaganda and encoded message to misrepresent the image of Muslim women by giving a distorted portrait of them.

Two are the cases when Muslim women are present in the media, especially in TV programs or Radio broadcasting, and in both cases they are invited as guests and not as TV hosts.

The first case is when they intentionally are put into sensitive topics, intentionally provoking their reaction and then later blamed for their "close mindedness" or their being harsh. In the second case they are invited to be promoted as role models or success stories. In this case,

Muslim women are exclusively reduced to their identity as Muslim. This process is also accompanied by targeting, by using exclusion expressions which fosters more the phenomena of "otherness" which we argued above in this paper.

Though, this is an attempt to give a modest contribution to the Islamophobia Studies in Albanian speaking countries as part of the Balkan reality, there is an enormous need for more data; data collection facilities; questionnaires; interviews; media monitoring; reports on the case of how Muslim women are portrayed in the media, and especially its impact and effect on the society, and societies mentality and worldview.



As a recommendation, Muslim NGOs and other civil society organizations, especially those working on women issues or feminism, should cooperate more closely to address the issue of gendered Islamophobia.

Muslim NGOs, in particular, should cooperate more closely and come up with a common action plan to address the issue of gendered Islamophobia in various fields. Media should avoid the use of anti-Muslim women stereotypes to the maximum extent possible. They should also avoid reporting unverified news on Muslims women and should correct any fake news in this regard.

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