

Symbolization of Unity in The Algerian Newspaper's Discourse

Case Study Muslim Women Converts

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Abstract:

The present present study examines the representation of Muslim women converts in the Algerian newspapers discourse. Discourse in the Algerian newspapers focuses more on the Western world that refuses and denies Muslim women converts because of Islam without mentioning the obstacles they face within the Muslim community itself. In addition, it perpetuates gender ideologies that misrepresent these women. this study aims first at verifying the credibility of this discursive portrayal. Second, it aims at deconstructing Symbolisation of Unity as provided by Thompson J, B. (1990) and sheds light on the difficulties that Muslim women converts face after their conversion to Islam. In order to meet these objectives an online questionnaire is distributed to 52 Muslim women converts around the world using a specialized website on June 7th, 2019 world <https://form.myjotform.com /91444027782560>

Keywords: Algerian newspapers' discourse, Symbolization of unity, Muslim women converts.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between media discourse, ideology and Muslim women converts represents a fertile ground of investigation. Cases of women and specifically Muslim women converts are critical when it comes to the dominant ideologies that strengthen divisions, difference and conflicts even among members of the same community. Falsified views and deviant beliefs circulate via newspapers' headlines and undermine the role of women converting to Islam. These same misrepresentations make Muslim women converts question continually their place among the Muslim community. Most often, Ideologies perpetuated by media sustain division and create a split to form "the Us" and "the Other" Van Djik¹(2004) influencing attitudes and behaviours of members of societies. In this respect Cole and Daniel declare that "media convey messages that potentially inform and influence attitudes and behaviours"²(2005, p.XII). Barriers created by the Algerian newspapers' discourse between Muslim women converts and born Muslims are reflected in the difficulties they face because of the attitudes of born Muslims in Algeria. It is a discourse that focuses on representing "the Us" group as the dominant group which is to be emulated and taken as a reference, whereas "the Other" refers to the group that is negatively represented through fake image and false views. Hence, the exclusion of "the Other" from societies and communities is a powerful means to fortify the asymmetrical power relations and realize inequality between the two groups Van Djik (2004). The ideological basis on which media constructs its discourse conveys discriminatory and powerful one-sided views most of the time responsible for manipulating readers' minds. As media discourse has the power to insert partial and inadequate portrayals to maintain the split among groups as stated by Nada Ghannam journalism is the most accused of being controlling and manipulating language³(2011) the Algerian newspapers' discourse manipulates the representation of Muslim women converts to fortify downgraded and subordinate ideas shaping offensive and derogatory attitudes concerning Muslim women converts, it provides a distorted version of reality that violates both the readers' and Muslim women converts' right to access to the truth

and manipulating their perception of a genuine journey a Muslim woman convert passes through. Moreover; newspapers' discourse has the tendency to insist on transmitting reality and offer the truth as it is; however, media ideologies control the reader's minds and shape content so as to meet certain agendas. Fairclough states, "the representations of discourse in news media can be seen as an ideological process of considerable social importance" ⁴(1995, p, 65) Besides to the power of discourse in the construction of social structures and relations among members of societies, these ideologies reproduced in the Algerian newspapers' discourse appear to affect the behaviour and the relationships between Muslim women converts and born Muslims in Algeria "...discourse is shaped by and helps to shape social structures and relations" Fairclough (1995, p.65). Media coverage includes misrepresentation, gender stereotypes and the circulation of framed ideologies about women, among several other representations. Seen from this perspective, the present study offers first an opportunity to unveil the different ideologies that guide the Algerian newspapers' discourse and second it strives to raise the awareness of academia about the suffering and abuse that Muslim women converts are living.

1. 1. Gender Ideology

Gender ideologies distribute power relations between men and women in society, they are in service of power to determine who is dominating and who is the dominated, as defined by Thomson ideology as the "meaning in the service of power" Thompson ⁵(1990, p, 7). Ideologies regarding gender concentrate on differences between men and women and reinforce males' dominance within societies. Dominance is seen as shared beliefs that are deviated from reality; they serve to describe women as inferior and not as competent as men, women are less intelligent, passive and subordinate to men, they ought to take care about their families and be reserved for the domestic sphere. For people who believe in traditional gender role ideology, women should be occupied with family responsibilities Gutek, Searl & Klepa ⁶(1991) what makes them meet "*gender stereotypes*". Gender ideologies strengthen asymmetrical power relations among men and women. Men are socially more powerful

than women are especially in cases of ruling or effective roles in societies or at work place. Gender ideologies affect attitudes towards women as stated by Moya , Navas and Gomez-Berrocal ⁷(1991) these roles are distributed on the basis of sex, furthermore; they support gender discrimination because of their prescriptive aspect in which they decide what is appropriate for both women and for men separately Van Dijk argues that “they are fundamentally about gender, being a woman or a man, as feminist or sexist ideologies show, or about race and ethnicity, as it is the case for racist and antiracist ideologies”⁸ (2003, p, 12). Moreover; Algerian newspapers discourse generalizes gender stereotypes and ideologies about Muslim women converts and enforces the traditional image of “women” in patriarchal societies Zerrifi, M. and Abdelhay, B.⁹ (2017). It tries to preserve the same passive role of women without mentioning the effective one they play in society, mainly Muslim women converts who may be considered as a bridge between the Muslim community and the non-Muslim World.

2. Symbolization of Unity as an Ideology

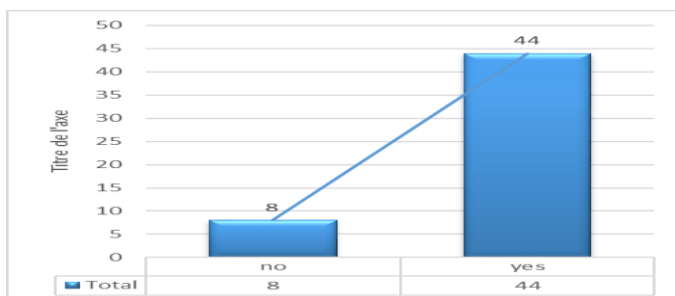
Symbolization of Unity is one of the key strategies used to circulate ideology through discourse even through newspapers' discourse and mentioning details like the flag or anthems Thompson (1990) it is the use of a collection of shared symbols to create a “collective identity “John B. Thompson states that Symbolization of Unity is “collective identity and identification, which are diffused throughout a group or plurality of groups” (1990, p, 64). This strategy is discursively used in order to give the impression that the “Other” is part of the group regardless of the difference or the differences between members of a community or a group and the social actor who is considered as an outsider as ideologically identified as the “Other”. It is a strategy that does not reflect reality as perpetuated since it represents only what is designed to be seen as the truth like harmony, equity and acceptance among the members of the group, it denies abuse, difficulties, stigmatizations and rejection because of difference among the same members. Algerian newspapers discourse uses the strategy of **Symbolization of Unity** to depict Muslim women converts and born Muslims as one unity,

neglecting that their conversion is not convincing to certain born Muslims or not accepted at all. This kind of discourse that speaks about the absolute acceptance of the conversion of western or non-Muslim women is hiding the difficulties that convert women are facing from born Muslims. It ignores violence, abuse, refusal and doubt that these women challenge after their Islam.

2. 3. Data collection and discussion of results

The questionnaire designed for this research aims at covering the different elements focused on in the different articles published in the Algerian newspapers, it is a tool used to verify the strength of the arguments and the assumptions made by type of media discourse. It is published in Jun 7th, 2019 online “<https://form.myjotform.com/91444027782560>” under the title of Questionnaire for Muslim Revert/Convert Women. It is divided into two parts the first one is personal where respondents are asked to provide their personal information (Nationality, Age, Profession and Religion before Islam) knowing that these elements are talked about in the analysed media discourse analysed in the study between our hands. The second part is devoted to main questions meant to help the researcher to reach answers for the initial research questions. The statistics shaping the results of the questionnaire are planned with the help of the electronic program “Excel” in order to provide representations that are more accurate. The following diagrams are the embodiment of results gained from the questionnaire.

Fig.1. Difficulties that faced Muslim Women Convert



The figure previously mentioned interprets results about the possibility of facing difficulties as being Muslim women convert.

Among the entire population (52 women convert) 8 responded “no” i.e. they did not face any difficulty because of being a woman who convert to Islam and it is a neglected category in the Algerian newspapers discourse, it overgeneralizes the idea that all Muslim women converts had problems after their conversion mainly from their non-Muslim entourage. A great number of these convert women faced problems as they moved to another religion that is Islam. Among the difficulties mentioned by the Algerian newspapers' discourse rejection from their families and that meets some results showed by the graph “Mum rejected me for a year after I took shahada”, one was rejected because her family thought she was a victim of propaganda, another one described the rejection of her family as a lack of understanding her choice “My family are all Catherine pics and don't understand my choice of Islam”.

The second category of difficulties that faced Muslim women converts was the rejection and doubt from born Muslims, the Algerian newspapers' discourse does not mention that these women suffer from denial and refusal from born Muslims themselves, its focus is more on the rejection of Muslim women converts' families and not that of born Muslims in order to symbolize the absolute acceptance of these women in the Muslim community and to make the audience believe that Muslim women converts live comfortably and integrate easily in the Muslim community and that demonstrates how media manipulates truth and violate the readers' right in knowing the complete version of truth. A number of women converts confirmed that they were subject to criticism, refusal and denial from the Muslim community as they used the following words to insure it “Access to mosques and lack of openness and inclusivity in the Islamic community in the UK”, “Not really being excepted by born Muslims”, some of them when further saying that they didn't get any help from born Muslims “Yes not having any Muslim sisters for guidance”, others said that their conversion was superficial for born Muslims, they explain this the way born Muslims ask them only if they are veiled or not and that they believe that Islam is more than a piece cloth used to cover their heads, they had been asked if they pray or fast Ramadan by born Muslims “After moving to a Muslim

country I have been continually assessed by strangers to see if I am “Muslim” enough. One of the respondents speaks about her conversion and the problems she had mainly from born Muslims:

“When I first converted to Islam some Muslims tried to dissuade me from converting. After I became Muslim I lost many friends and family, born Muslims didn’t bother with me that much. I married a brother who took advantage of me and actually was extremely abusive. I turned to the Muslim community for help and support and found no one. Being a Muslim has been extremely lonely for me, sometimes I contemplated leaving Islam because of the loneliness I have been a Muslim 15 years and it hasn’t gotten any easier, if not worse. During my struggles I got sick of born Muslims with families and lots of friends telling me to be patient - easy for them they have lots of people around them for support, I didn’t. So I found it very frustrating and upsetting. I’m still a Muslim only for sake of Allah”

Muslim women converts add that in addition to rejection from family and friends, they faced an obstacle to know their religious duties and the nuances of the new religion because of the Arabic language that they do not know:

“I have lost connection with my family and have no support from them. In fact, I am experiencing parental alienation from my son at the hands of my mother. Some of my friends have drifted away. Often I am questioned by born Arabic speaking Muslims why I do not know Arabic, and I often have difficulty finding assistance in learning the nuances

*of my deen. This is a journey I am mostly
taking on my own”*

Besides the cultural clash was a difficulty for Muslim women reverts too “The language barrier everything in Arabic and also my in laws being Pakistani I have that language barrier as well culture from a Pakistani side.” another convert spoke about the difficulty to differentiate between what is actual information and what is Islam itself. The ideological and the mythical aspect in the Algerian newspapers’ discourse appears in hiding the suffering of Muslim women converts from physical assault and harassment by born Muslims as well, it is the non-said by Algerian newspapers no discursive traces of problems of domestic violence or abuse that these women live because of born Muslims mainly their Muslims husbands that represents the protected patriarch and the dominant power in patriarchal societies, it is the reproduction of naturalizing submissiveness and abuse on women respondent one said “Physically assaulted, falsely accused and verbally abused. Lost job due to false accusations that my family made”, “Racism as I'm not Indian, SA it is as if Islam is owed by the Indian Muslims and Muslim who are not Indian are made to feel beneath or not worthy”

Fig.2. Women’s Inspiration Behind Their Conversion to Islam

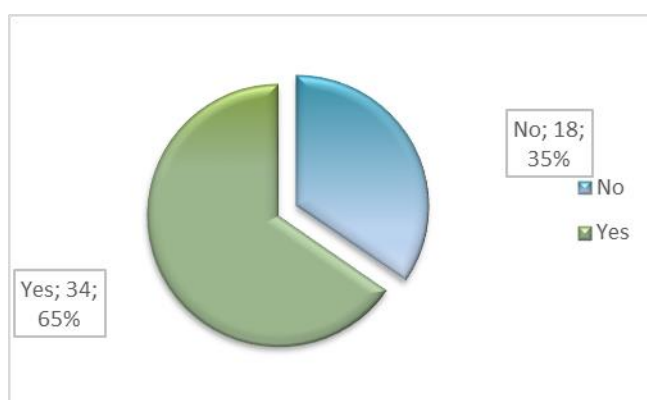


Results in this question partially meet the representation provided in the Algerian media discourse. A Muslim man is almost all the time represented as the inspiration of Western women to convert to Islam

yet it is not the case for all Western women and this graph is a better example of that, again the Algerian newspapers' discourse provides overgeneralized ideas that misleads the readers and may affect their behaviours and attitudes towards them. Muslim women converts claim that people who make "*daa'wa*" calling others to understand this religion are included as references to inspire others to convert as one confirmed that she was inspired by Dr Zakir Naik what lead to studying Islam for 18 months, Muslim friends and work colleagues play a role in the inspiration to their conversion also.

A convert women answering the same question added that her family were speaking in a negative way about Islam and even media did what pushed her to investigate and learn about it since she did not want to make judgements. Travelling and knowing Muslim people participated in inspiring women to convert as well, one of the respondents agreed on this saying that there was no particular person, but she visited Syria in 1998 and she liked their way of being connected to god and remembering Allah many times a day as she put it.

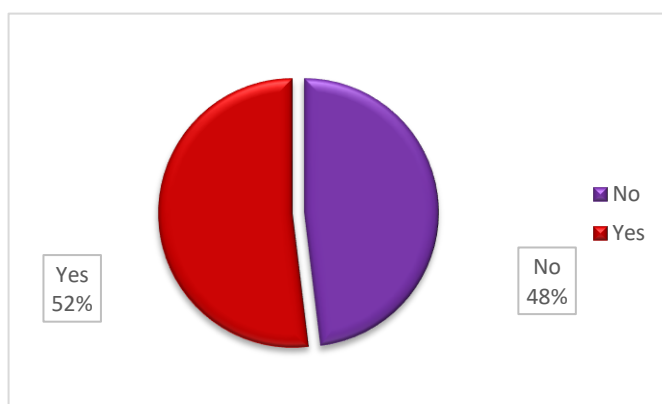
Fig.3. Muslim Women Convert and Marrying Born Muslim Men



Among the principles of patriarchal societies is that women are born to stay at home, caring mothers or wives. The Algerian newspapers' discourse attempts to preserve the same traditional patriarchal image on Muslim women converts when it

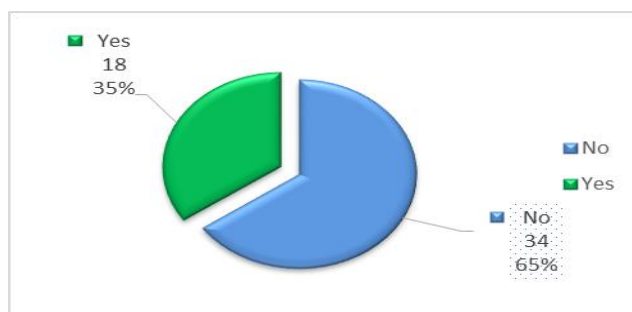
relates conversion of these women to Islam because of a Muslim man and because of getting married to a Muslim man mainly. This portrayal represents half of the truth and neglects the category of Muslim women converts that convert to Islam without any relation with marriage and personal relations.

Fig.4. Muslim women Convert and the veil



Algerian newspapers' discourse focus on the veil or hijab as being a main characteristic or physical aspect determining Muslim women converts whereas the obtained results show that not all Muslim women converts wear the after their conversion to Islam and deny the generalizations made by newspapers' discourse in Algeria.

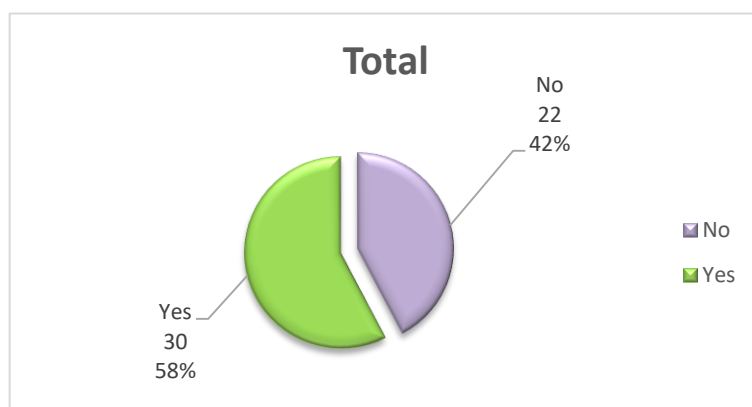
Fig.5. Opinion of Convert Women about Born Muslim Appreciation of their conversion



The majority of Muslim women converts confirm that not all born Muslims appreciate their conversion to Islam; a great number of converts women claim that their conversion is not welcomed by all born Muslims, whereas; a number of them see that their act of

converting to Islam is treasured by other born Muslims, yet; this view is still representing the minority in comparison to the majority. The idea of the absolute acceptance of conversion of Western women is recurrent in the Algerian newspapers' discourse where it speaks about help and appreciation given by born Muslims to these women is spoken about repetitively however; this idea is overgeneralized and it does not reflect reality.

Fig.6. Guidance and Help Concerning Islamic Duties



Results obtained in this question meet the information given by the Algerian newspapers' discourse concerning the accomplishment of Islamic duties and the help provided by born Muslims to Muslim women converts, the majority of these women depend on born Muslim mentors to do their Islamic duties.

CONCLUSION

The representation of Muslim women converts in the Algerian newspapers' discourse partially meets reality, it is based on overgeneralizations; presumptions and misleading beliefs. There are great numbers of exceptions that should be taken into consideration by newspapers' discourse in the Algerian context in order for their portrayals to be credible and to be a reference for the Algerian reader.

1- Stereotypes, overgeneralizations, and prejudgements circulating in the Algerian newspapers' discourse are falsified by responses written by these women themselves.

2- The Algerian newspapers' discourse presents a deviant picture about Muslim women converts and tries to preserve the traditional image of submissive women and ineffective social actors; it ignores their professional active roles and relate their conversion to Islam directly with marriage.

3- This type of discourse denies the obstacles and difficulties that these women face within the Muslim community and perpetuates the Ideology of Symbolization of Unity without paying attention to the boundaries and the suffering of these women inside the Muslim community.

4- Muslim women converts suffer from violence, ignorance, loneliness, rejection from born Muslims and a number of them have been used from born Muslim men to get certain benefits like visa, they were victims of domestic violence as well.

5- Muslim women suffering is ignored, marginalized and denied in the Algerian newspapers' discourse the fact that reflects the status-quo and the marginalization of women in patriarchal societies since this discourse is part of these societies in an attempt to foster unjust standards and beliefs concerning women.

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¹ Tun A. Van Dijk. Politics, Ideology and Discourse, In R. Wodak, & M. Mayer (Eds.), Encyclopaedia of Language and Linguistics: Second Language and Politics (2 nd version).(2004) ,

² Cole, E., & Daniel, J. H, Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media. Washington, Dc: American Psychological Association.(2005) ,

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