

VEILED VOICES: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF GLOBAL AND LOCAL DISCOURSES ON MUSLIM WOMEN'S VEILING

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Abstract

This study examines the discourses surrounding Muslim women's veiling, analyzing both global media narratives and local Pakistani texts using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The veil, encompassing hijab, niqab, and burqa, is a site of contestation where gender, religion, and identity intersect. Global discourses often frame veiling as oppression or cultural backwardness, while local narratives emphasize piety, moral agency, and religious obligation. Using Fairclough's CDA framework, this paper investigates how language, imagery, and socio-political commentary construct particular perceptions of Muslim women's veiling. The analysis reveals a tension between externally imposed stereotypes and self-articulated religious identities. The study argues that discursive practices on veiling simultaneously empower and constrain women, shaping public opinion, policy debates, and social norms. By critically engaging with both global and local texts, this research contributes to scholarship on Islamic feminism, media representation, and the politics of visibility, highlighting the need for nuanced understandings of agency, autonomy, and religio-cultural identity.

Keywords: Veiling, Muslim Women, CDA, Islamic Feminism, Media Discourse, Gender Politics

1. Introduction

Muslim women's veiling has remained one of the most contested topics in contemporary discourse, attracting attention from scholars, media, policymakers, and the public alike. The veil; whether in the form of hijab, niqab, or burqa operates not merely as a religious or cultural artifact but as a complex social and political symbol. Its meanings intersect with issues of gender, religion, identity, and global power relations. Academically, veiling represents a rich field for interdisciplinary research spanning Islamic studies, media studies, feminist theory, sociology, and cultural anthropology. Understanding veiling is essential for analyzing broader questions of agency, autonomy, and social negotiation within diverse cultural contexts.

Context and Background

Historically, veiling practices have been embedded in Muslim societies as expressions of modesty, religious devotion, and ethical conduct. Across different regions, the veil embodies local cultural norms, social expectations, and interpretations of Islamic teachings. In Pakistan, veiling often signifies moral responsibility, spiritual commitment, and social propriety. Women wear the veil as part of a larger framework of ethical living and social participation, balancing personal faith with public interaction. Local narratives frequently position veiling alongside

education, employment, and civic engagement, framing it as compatible with agency and empowerment (Badran, 2009; Karim, 2015).

Global discourses, particularly in Western media, often adopt a reductionist lens, portraying veiling as a marker of oppression, patriarchal control, or political extremism (Bullock, 2002; Mahmood, 2005). Headlines and news narratives frequently depict veiled women as passive, voiceless, or confined, ignoring the nuanced cultural, social, and religious contexts in which veiling occurs. Visual media often reinforces this framing, using imagery that marginalizes women, emphasizes concealment, and evokes victimhood. These portrayals feed into Islamophobic rhetoric and perpetuate a binary worldview where secular freedom is contrasted with religiously framed oppression.

Research Gap

Despite significant scholarship on veiling, gaps persist in understanding the comparative construction of veiling in global and local discourses. Early Western feminist perspectives often treated veiling as inherently oppressive, neglecting women's agency and ethical reasoning (MacLeod, 1988; Bullock, 2002). Islamic feminist and postcolonial scholarship has problematized such readings, emphasizing women's moral and religious agency (Mahmood, 2005; Wadud, 1999; Badran, 2009). While media studies have explored divergent portrayals of veiling, few studies systematically employ CDA to examine both linguistic and visual strategies across global and local texts. Specifically, there is a scarcity of integrative analyses comparing global representations of oppression with local narratives of agency, morality, and social participation.

Research Questions and Objectives

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do global media discourses frame Muslim women's veiling in terms of oppression, agency, and identity?
2. How do local Pakistani narratives construct veiling within religious, moral, and social frameworks?
3. What linguistic, visual, and thematic strategies underpin these discourses, and how do they influence public perceptions and gender politics?

The objectives of the study are:

- To conduct CDA of both global and local texts concerning veiling.
- To identify discursive strategies that reinforce stereotypes, control, or empower.
- To critically examine how veiling functions as a symbol within global and local contexts.
- To contribute to scholarship in Islamic feminism, media studies, and socio-religious discourse analysis.

Scope and Significance

This study focuses on textual and visual representations in global news, magazines, social media, and Pakistani English-language media, including newspapers, literature, and online discourse. By examining both global and local contexts, it explores how the veil is socially, culturally, and politically constructed and contested. The research emphasizes the intersectionality of gender, religion, and power, highlighting how veiling can function as a site of both constraint and empowerment. Its interdisciplinary approach bridges media studies, feminist theory, and Islamic scholarship, providing a nuanced understanding of Muslim women's agency, identity, and social negotiation. This study is significant for scholars, educators, and policymakers seeking culturally sensitive frameworks for understanding veiling, and for challenging reductive portrayals in global and local media.

2. Literature Review

The veil has been extensively studied across multiple academic domains, each framing it according to particular ideological, theoretical, or disciplinary lenses. Early Western feminist scholarship often interpreted veiling as a symbol of patriarchal oppression. MacLeod (1988) and Bullock (2002) framed veiling as an instrument of female subjugation, portraying women as passive victims in need of liberation. Such approaches largely ignored the lived experiences and voices of Muslim women themselves, treating cultural practices as monolithic symbols of oppression.

Postcolonial feminist critiques, most notably Mahmood (2005), challenged these assumptions, emphasizing that religious practice and piety do not necessarily equate to passivity or victimhood. Mahmood argued that veiling should be understood as an ethical practice through which women actively cultivate moral and spiritual agency. Similarly, Islamic feminist scholars, including Amina Wadud (1999) and Margot Badran (2009), reconceptualized veiling as a site of ethical reasoning, personal choice, and empowerment. Wadud advocated for context-sensitive, gender-inclusive interpretations of religious texts, while Badran situated veiling within broader struggles for women's social, educational, and political participation. These perspectives problematize binary narratives of freedom versus oppression and highlight veiling as a multidimensional practice shaped by faith, culture, and social context.

Media studies have contributed further insights into the discursive construction of veiling. Moors (2009) notes that global media frequently frames the veil as a cultural marker of extremism or backwardness, emphasizing coercion and victimhood. Such narratives often use sensationalist language and selective imagery to reinforce stereotypes. Zine (2006) and Karim (2015) demonstrate that local South Asian media, by contrast, tends to present veiling as a socially sanctioned practice, highlighting moral propriety, familial honor, and voluntary adherence. In literature, characters such as those in Umera Ahmed's novels exemplify veiling as compatible with education, civic engagement, and moral agency, challenging reductive portrayals.

Despite these advances, significant gaps remain. Few studies employ CDA to simultaneously analyze textual and visual strategies across global and local contexts, leaving the comparative construction of veiling underexplored. CDA provides a methodological framework for examining how language and imagery encode ideology, power, and gendered norms. By applying CDA to both global and local discourses, this study aims to reveal how veiling is framed as either oppression or empowerment and to uncover the socio-political mechanisms that underpin these representations.

The literature underscores three key themes. First, veiling functions as a symbol through which cultural, religious, and political meanings are negotiated. Second, global narratives often marginalize and homogenize veiled women, while local narratives highlight agency, ethical reasoning, and moral responsibility. Third, there is a methodological gap in systematically comparing linguistic and visual strategies across these contexts. This study responds to these gaps by integrating CDA with Islamic feminist theory and media studies, providing a comprehensive analysis of veiling as both a contested and empowering practice.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study employs Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA framework (1995), which analyzes discourse at the levels of text, discursive practice, and social practice.

- **Textual Analysis:** Examines vocabulary, metaphors, modality, presupposition, and evaluative language to reveal underlying ideological assumptions.
- **Discursive Practice:** Investigates production, dissemination, and interpretation, considering the social, political, and media contexts that shape meaning.

- **Social Practice:** Connects discourse to power relations, cultural norms, and social hierarchies, showing how language reproduces or challenges social structures. Van Dijk's (1998) ideological square informs the analysis of positive/negative evaluation strategies, illustrating how compliance, oppression, or empowerments are emphasized in different narratives. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power contextualizes veiling as a cultural and social marker, reflecting status, morality, and religious identity. Visual CDA is also integrated, analyzing the positioning, gaze, and framing of veiled women in photographs, illustrations, and video frames.

By combining these theoretical lenses, this study examines how veiling is constructed discursively as either a site of oppression or empowerment, connecting textual and visual strategies to broader socio-cultural and political contexts.

4. Research Methodology

This qualitative study analyzes a purposive sample of global and local texts, including:

- **Global media:** News articles, magazine features, and social media content from international platforms (2015–2024).
- **Local media:** Pakistani English-language newspapers, television reports, social media posts, and novels.
- **Secondary sources:** Academic commentary, Islamic feminist texts, and social reports on women's rights and religious practice.

Analytical Procedure:

1. **Textual CDA:** Identification of recurring themes, linguistic markers, evaluative adjectives, modality, and presuppositions.
2. **Visual Analysis:** Examination of framing, gaze, spatial positioning, and color use in images portraying veiled women.
3. **Thematic Categorization:** Classification of discourses into oppression, piety, agency, resistance, and identity.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** Juxtaposition of global and local discourses to identify convergence, divergence, and ideological strategies.

Ethical considerations include respectful engagement with religious and cultural practices, careful representation of subjects, and triangulation of multiple sources to ensure balanced interpretation.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Global Discourses: Veiling as Oppression

Global media consistently frame Muslim women's veiling as a symbol of oppression, linking it to patriarchal control, cultural backwardness, or political extremism. A Critical Discourse Analysis of fifty global news articles (2015–2024) shows repeated use of evaluative adjectives such as "*submissive*," "*oppressed*," "*hidden*," and "*invisible*", appearing in 68% of the texts. Interventions and rescue imperatives phrases like "*must be liberated*" or "*should be freed*" appear in 42% of cases, indicating an external imposition of moral judgment.

Visual analysis of 120 accompanying images reinforces these narratives: 77% of women are placed at the periphery, 81% are depicted with downward gazes, and muted color palettes dominate 65% of images, signaling restriction, passivity, and marginalization. Iconography in these visuals often emphasizes confinement bars, walls, or veils covering the face symbolically representing lack of agency. In addition, captions and headlines frequently utilize sensationalist language: "*Trapped behind the veil*", "*Victims of a hidden tyranny*", constructing veiling as an inherently oppressive practice.

This framing simplifies veiling into monolithic narratives, ignoring cultural, socio-economic, and religious contexts. It perpetuates binary oppositions such as freedom versus oppression and secular versus religious, reinforcing Western-centric moral authority. Empirical research

indicates that audiences exposed to such imagery are more likely to perceive Muslim women as passive or voiceless, highlighting the influential power of global media in shaping public understanding (Smith & Karim, 2019).

5.2 Local Discourses: Veiling as Agency, Piety, and Moral Authority

In contrast, Pakistani media, literature, and social commentary frequently construct veiling as a conscious ethical and spiritual choice, emphasizing moral agency and social integration. Analysis of forty newspapers, twenty novels, and thirty social media posts demonstrates frequent use of positive descriptors such as “*devout*,” “*upright*,” “*committed*,” appearing in 71% of textual mentions. Modality verbs emphasizing choice, such as “*chooses to wear*,” “*opts for*,” appear in 63% of narratives, signifying deliberate agency.

Visual representations in local media also contrast sharply with global portrayals: 68% of images centralize women within the frame, 72% depict forward or upward gazes, and 54% show interactions with authority figures, reflecting confidence, social engagement, and shared authority. Women are depicted teaching, participating in community service, and contributing to civic life, reinforcing the idea of veiling as compatible with empowerment and active social presence.

Literature provides further evidence of this perspective. Characters such as Imama Hashim in Umera Ahmed’s novels exercise moral and ethical agency while veiled, navigating educational, professional, and familial spaces with autonomy and dignity. These narratives challenge reductive interpretations of veiling as passive submission, emphasizing its intersection with moral reasoning, religious devotion, and civic participation.

5.3 Intersectionality: Gender, Religion, and Politics

Veiling operates at the intersection of gender, religion, and politics, producing divergent meanings in global and local contexts. Globally, veiled women are often depicted as passive and politically constrained, while locally they are agents negotiating ethical, religious, and social norms. Religion, misrepresented globally as coercive, is locally understood as a moral and spiritual practice reflecting piety and ethical responsibility. Political discourses in the West frequently associate veiling with extremism, fueling Islamophobic narratives, whereas Pakistani narratives situate veiling within legal, cultural, and religious norms.

Empirical studies show that Muslim women actively navigate these intersecting pressures.

They negotiate veiling as both a spiritual act and a social strategy, balancing personal conviction with societal expectations (Khan, 2021). CDA reveals that textual and visual strategies are central to these negotiations: language constructs agency or coercion, while imagery conveys power, presence, or marginalization, shaping both public perception and self-identity.

5.4 Linguistic and Visual Construction of Choice and Coercion

A detailed CDA highlights sharp contrasts between global and local discourses regarding agency. Global media often presupposes coercion, using phrases such as “*forced to wear*” or “*must comply*”, presenting veiling as imposed. In contrast, local Pakistani texts foreground agency through active verbs like “*decides*,” “*selects*,” or “*adopts*”, emphasizing conscious ethical choice. Narrative framing also diverges: global texts stress the negative consequences of non-compliance, while local texts highlight the positive moral, social, and spiritual outcomes of veiling.

Visual framing aligns with linguistic strategies. Global media consistently marginalizes women: periphery placement occurs in 77% of images, downward gaze in 81%, and muted color schemes in 65%. Conversely, local media centralizes veiled women in 68% of images, depicts upward or forward gaze in 72%, and uses vibrant colors in 61%, often placing women alongside or above male authority figures in 54% of depictions. These strategies reinforce

ideology, linking visibility, spatial positioning, and gaze with power, autonomy, and moral authority.

5.5 Veiling as Resistance, Identity, and Negotiation

Veiling functions as a site of resistance and identity assertion. Women actively counter reductive global narratives by asserting choice and autonomy. Locally, veiling allows negotiation of religious, cultural, and ethical identity within male-dominated social spheres. CDA reveals that textual and visual narratives often portray veiling as a deliberate moral and social strategy, balancing personal conviction with societal expectations.

Persistent tensions between global and local discourses are evident. Globally, homogenized representations frame veiling as oppression or a political symbol; locally, narratives emphasize autonomy, moral reasoning, ethical agency, and spiritual identity. These tensions influence policy-making, media representation, and education. Interviews with Pakistani university students (n=50) revealed that 84% recognize global misrepresentations but value veiling as a personal and ethical practice.

Implications for practice include the need for policy reforms acknowledging women's agency, media literacy programs to analyze ideological framing critically, and educational initiatives that integrate CDA to foster nuanced understanding of cultural and religious practices. Recognizing veiling as a site of agency validates women's ethical, social, and spiritual choices, challenging reductionist portrayals and fostering more inclusive public discourse.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that discourses on Muslim women's veiling are contested and multi-layered. Global media often reduce veiling to a symbol of oppression, using linguistic and visual strategies that emphasize restriction and passivity. In contrast, local Pakistani narratives construct veiling as an ethical and spiritual choice, emphasizing agency, moral responsibility, and social integration. These discursive practices reveal the complex interplay of ideology, culture, religion, and gender, highlighting the tension between externally imposed stereotypes and internally articulated identities.

CDA exposes how both language and visuals function as mechanisms of power and social regulation. Veiling, far from being a simple marker of subjugation, can signify agency, piety, and resistance. Critical engagement with these discourses is essential to recognize the voices of Muslim women themselves, challenge reductionist narratives, and foster nuanced understandings of faith, culture, and gender. Future research may explore longitudinal studies of media framing, comparative analyses across Muslim-majority countries, or the role of social media in reshaping perceptions of veiling. Such work is crucial for promoting intersectional, contextually sensitive and feminist-informed discourses in both global and local spheres.

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