

COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

DOUBLE MARGINALIZATION: THE INVISIBILITY OF SYRIAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES IN MAINSTREAM ONLINE ACTIVISM AND GLOBAL MEDIA

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After the “Arab Spring” uprisings, an optimistic strand in the field of media and social change emerged which presents the role of social networking websites as key tools for Muslim and Arab women to change the dominant representations about themselves in the media and literature as oppressed and sexually objectified by their men (Nahed Eltantawy 2013). While I acknowledge the role of online social media spaces as resources for social change, this paper incorporates feminist scholarship on gender, postcolonialism, and representation (Abu-Lughod 2002; Chandra Mohanty 2003; Aihwa Ong 1999) to critically evaluate social networking websites as spaces that actually promote stereotypical and/or hegemonic understandings of Syrian refugee women’s issues. As an example of what Ong (1999) calls “self-orientalization,” I analyze the discourses of the Facebook campaign “Refugees Not Captives” (RNC) and argue that this campaign’s messages transfer to and interact with mainstream global media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis. My main goal is to show how what may appear to be a local authentic online campaign aiming to encourage feminist actions to end the suffering of Syrian refugee women is, in fact, disconnected from the offline realities of these women and the activist groups who work with them on the ground. My concern is to critique a form of feminist online campaign that claims to represent the voices of women who generally do not have the economic and educational privileges to access the online spaces to speak for themselves. Methodologically, this article is part of a broader study based on my fieldwork during the summer of 2013 in Jordan, where I conducted ethnographic research as well as thirty-three in-depth interviews with Syrian refugee women and activists, including the representative of the RNC campaign. My paper discusses how the discourses of both this online campaign and the Western media reinforce hegemonic orientalist representations of Syrian women, as well as marginalizing both refugee women’s voices and the voices of activists that do not fit dominant representations of Muslim women.

Orientalist and Self-Orientalizing Representations

The well-known work of Edward Said (1978) introduces the term “orientalism” to define the cultural and ideological representations of the Orient in the Western/colonial literature, in which the relationship between the West and the East is constructed according to a binary relationship that places the West in a superior position to the East. As a result, the first is depicted in terms such as “masculine,” “rational,” and “modern.” In contrast, the second is described in language such as “feminine,” “irrational,” and “backward.” One of the main critiques of Said’s work is his lack of recognition of the agency of people in the East. Addressing this theoretical gap, Ong (1999) uses the term “self-orientalization” to describe the process of global Western hegemony interacting with and infiltrating Asian local cultural discourses and also to recognize the agency of the Asian subjects who themselves use self-orientalizing representations to manipulate meanings for different purposes and gains.

While orientalist representations of Middle Eastern women in mainstream media are well studied, I suggest that self-orientalization can be used in feminist media studies to tackle the problematic of not only self-orientalizing representations but also questions of online privilege and invisibility. In order to examine this problematic, I employ self-orientalization to describe the process of interaction between RNC as an Arabic Facebook campaign and the global media coverage of Syrian refugee women’s issues. In particular, I analyze the gendered aspects of the Facebook campaign’s self-orientalizing representations and the orientalist representations of mainstream global media. I choose this campaign based on both personal communication with Syrian feminists inside Syria and later my interviews with fifteen Syrian activists in Jordan, with most of these experts noting that RNC is the most famous campaign regarding Syrian refugee women’s issues. They also reported that this campaign influences Syrian refugee women’s representations in the Arabic media and beyond. Such influence can be attributed to when the campaign emerged, which coincided with the first visible phases of the refugee crisis.

The Local Social and Global Media Representations

In September 2012, using Facebook, YouTube, and other communication technologies, a group of young Syrian activists launched a campaign called *Refugees Not Captives (RNC)*, which introduces itself as a “campaign to protect Syrian women” (Lajiaat Lasabaya 2012, para. 1). According to the RNC official Facebook page, their three main goals are: first, to raise awareness among the girls’ families about the risks of forced marriage in exchange for money; second, to communicate with those Arab youth who may have good intentions and can be mobilized to legally criminalize and socially shame such marriages; third, to communicate with women’s and human rights organizations in Arab countries, with international intellectual elites, and also with corporate professionals and leaders to encourage them to carry out humanitarian and ethical roles by establishing funds to support marriages only between Syrian men and women (Lajiaat Lasabaya 2012, para. 7–9).

The activists who launched the RNC campaign emphasize their secular depoliticized identity and that their cause is to speak up against forced marriages in exchange for money between Syrian women in Jordan’s refugee camps and Arab men from Jordan and Arabian Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia. Yet, in pursuing this cause, the campaign explicitly others the people of the Arabian Gulf by describing them as “sexist sick teenagers who are

obsessed with sex” (Lajiaat Lasabaya 2012, para. 5). Furthermore, the campaign accuses Arab men in general of racism because they use cultural and religious discourses to encourage marriage of Syrian women (who are Caucasian by race) as a solution to help refugee Syrian families affected by war.

The language in the RNC campaign mirrors elements of Western hegemonic discourses that essentialize Eastern culture to represent Syrian women and Arab men, thus ending up relying on processes of self-orientalization. Similar to the RNC, the global media representations focus on the individual level of actions and on blaming the Muslim culture for forced marriages. In a Google search of the words “Syrian refugee women,” most results are about forced marriages and how Syrian people sell their daughters off for money (May 10, 2013, BBC; May 15, 2013, CBS; May 22, 2013, ABC). The results of the Google search include articles ranging from Western to local Arabic media. In these articles Syrian refugees are portrayed as a homogeneous group of powerless, victimized women and oppressive men who sell their daughters as commodities for rich Arabian men. In this sense, the suffering of Syrian refugee women is minimized to involuntary marriage in exchange for money, and the causes of this suffering are blamed on both the backward greedy men in the women’s families and on the Arabian men who are sexually obsessed with buying young girls.

Disconnection between Online Representations and Offline Realities

According to results from my interviews with refugee women and activists, the disconnection between online representations and offline realities in relation to Syrian refugee women’s issues in Jordan is significant. The dominant social and global media representations generalize and differentiate Syrians and Arabs from other societies, and ignore the broader context of the power relations that rule refugee women and activists’ lives in both their home and host countries. Most of my interviewees report that, for example, forced marriage in exchange for money between Syrian women in Jordan and Arabian men is limited to a few cases. In contrast, most refugee families are becoming more protective of their daughters after arriving in Jordan.

Criticizing the dominant online representations about forced marriage, Sarah (thirty-two, a Syrian female activist resident in Amman) comments:

Our problems and concerns as people who were forced to be displaced in and out of their country have been reduced to forced marriage for money in the Za’atari refugee camp! We had in some communities in Syria few cases of forced and early marriages before the Syrian Uprising. We were working with these communities to end these marriages and support girls’ education as an alternative choice.

Similar to Sarah’s critique, Rula (thirty-three, a Syrian female activist resident in Amman) clarifies:

When Refugees not Captives was launched, it was unfair to the respect for Syrian women, men, and families. The problem is with generalizations. If a family marries their daughter off for money, that does not mean that all refugee families do that. I worked with activist groups to follow and document similar cases. We documented around ten cases in Za’atari camp and we started to communicate with the families to help them solve their economic hardship. Now there are almost no forced marriage cases in exchange for money.

4 COMMENTARY AND CRITICISM

The Jordanian government also helped us and put many legal restrictions on Syrian women's marriage in order to legalize the process as much as possible.

Parallel in importance to Sarah and Rula's comments about the inaccuracy of dominant online representations are the invisible refugee women's offline experiences.

An example of the invisibility of Syrian women's perspectives is Rim (twenty-six) who is herself a young female refugee and activist who escaped Syria to Al-Bashabsha Camp (before Za'atari Camp was established) and reflects on her lived experience:

There were no campaigns that adequately tackled Syrian refugee women's issues. I do not like to talk about the Refugees not Captives campaign because it's meaningless, and it had received a lot of attention by people criticizing it. There were no other campaigns! The Syrian women did not receive the actual media attention that they deserve; there is no coverage or attention on what women want and how they should deal with their children who are traumatized by war! As a young Syrian woman who went through a lot of things—my work in the revolution, my escape from the security forces after a demonstration, my defending of my male friend while he was being arrested—when I arrived in Jordan's camp, I was psychologically devastated and I did not find the support that I was in need of. And now this is what other Syrian women go through!

While Rim's comment emphasizes the disconnection between online representations and offline realities of Syrian refugee women in Jordan, the following story highlights further the invisible suffering and resistance of refugee women from underprivileged economic and educational backgrounds. Karima (forty) is a Syrian woman from Homs City, married at age fifteen according to the traditions in her poor neighborhood. Two years ago, Karima and her children, a girl Lama (fifteen) and two boys Raheem (eleven) and Kamal (five), became refugees in Jordan's Za'atari Camp after months of internal displacement inside Syria. Karima lost her eldest son and husband when a Syrian Army mission invaded their home in March 2012 and killed them in addition to most men in their neighborhood. Karima bore the hardship of her life, and she did not think even once about marrying her fifteen-year-old daughter off for money. Instead she fought to survive, and with the help of a Syrian activist group in Jordan, she left Za'atari Camp and began a new life in Amman. Her daughter Lama, who is now in school, aims to enter medical school after she finishes her high school education. Many similar stories are invisible. Instead the dominant media representations regarding refugee families focus on how Syrian families force their daughters to marry Arab men in exchange for money. The offline realities of Sarah, Rula, Rim, and Karima highlight the double marginalization in online spaces regarding Syrian refugee women. Such marginalization is caused by the hierarchical power relations that rule Syrian mainstream online feminist activism making some voices heard and others marginalized. In the case of Syrian refugee women's issues, the voices that are heard belong to those who have economic and educational privileges and who reflect the language of Western hegemony in understanding the Arab and Muslim world through self-orientalizing discourse.

Conclusion

This article examines a case study of social media online privilege, representation, and exclusion regarding Syrian refugee women's issues. The online depiction of Syrian refugee

women in the media is constructed through a complex process of orientalist and self-orientalizing representations. The RNC campaign members are active participants in producing a self-orientalizing discourse that mirrors the same elements of the Western hegemony essentializing discourse about Arab culture. The dominant representations marginalize voices of underprivileged refugee women such as Karima and activists such as Rim who emphasize the complexity and diversity of refugee women's experiences. Further research should more broadly examine the role of social networking websites in promoting Western hegemonic discourse regarding women in developing countries and ways that these representations can be challenged.

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