

Beyond Stereotypes: Muslim Women's Representation and Resistance across Media and Movements in India

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Muslim women in Indian popular media and contrasts it with their lived realities. Bollywood films, OTT platforms, and news narratives often confine Muslim women to reductive tropes—as hypersexualized villains, voiceless victims, or passive subjects—thereby reinforcing stereotypes and erasing agency. In contrast, movements such as the Shaheen Bagh protests and the Hijab resistance foreground Muslim women as powerful agents of democratic participation and collective resistance. The paper also considers the role of social media, where Muslim women increasingly construct counter-narratives through hashtags, campaigns, and digital activism, challenging misrepresentations and asserting visibility. By juxtaposing mainstream media texts, online practices, and grassroots initiatives, the study argues that Muslim women's activism unsettles dominant frames and demands a reimagining of gender, visibility, and citizenship in contemporary India. It further highlights the work of Muslim women's organisations across the country that focus on empowerment, education, and rights, demonstrating how lived experiences consistently resist and redefine constructed stereotypes.

Keywords: Muslim women, postcolonial feminism, stereotypes, lived realities, voice.

The figure of the Muslim woman in India has long been a site of cultural imagination, political contestation, and social anxiety. Popular culture and political discourse frequently deploy her image to symbolise both backwardness and hypersexualised danger, oscillating between the silent bearer of patriarchal traditions and the transgressive temptress. Bollywood films, OTT platforms, and mainstream news media reproduce these stereotypes, often reducing Muslim women to spectacles of veiling, oppression, or exotic otherness.

Simultaneously, public debates around citizenship, secularism, and women's rights have made the Muslim woman a focal point in struggles over belonging and visibility in the Indian nation-state. These contestations intensified in the wake of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protests and the recent Hijab controversy, where Muslim women emerged not only as political symbols but also as vocal actors in their own right. The tension between how Muslim women are represented and how they live and resist is thus central to understanding gender politics in contemporary India.

It is crucial to distinguish between the stereotypes and the lived realities of Muslim women in India. Far from being a homogeneous category, Muslim women constitute a diverse collective shaped by the intersections of caste, class, region, and socio-political experience. Scholars such as Zoya Hasan (2004) and Nida Kirmani (2013) argue that public debates and media narratives often present Muslim women as

a monolithic group, primarily defined by religion and personal law, while ignoring the structural inequalities that arise from poverty, limited access to education, and systemic marginalisation. This homogenisation obscures the diversity of their experiences—from urban middle-class professionals to working-class women in informal economies—and erases the grassroots forms of resistance that many enact in their everyday lives. By acknowledging this multiplicity, we can begin to move beyond reductive representations and instead centre Muslim women as active political subjects whose agency is articulated differently across geographies, movements, and media spaces.

Intersectionality, first articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a vital lens for understanding the multiple, overlapping forms of oppression that shape Muslim women's experiences in India. This framework recognises that gender cannot be examined in isolation from other axes of identity such as religion, caste, class, and socio-economic status. Muslim women often navigate patriarchal structures within their communities while simultaneously confronting systemic discrimination in the wider social and political landscape. Media representations, legal marginalisation, and social exclusion compound these intersecting vulnerabilities, making simplistic readings of oppression inadequate. Intersectionality allows for an analysis that accounts for how these layered identities inform both the stereotyping of Muslim women in media and their strategies of resistance in grassroots and digital spaces. By foregrounding these intersecting positions, the paper highlights the nuanced ways in which Muslim women negotiate visibility, agency, and citizenship.

On the other hand, Postcolonial feminist theory critiques the tendency of Western feminist discourse to universalise the experiences of “Third World women” as inherently passive, oppressed, or in need of rescue (Mohanty 1988; Ahmed 1992). In the Indian context, Bollywood films, news narratives, and even popular literature often reproduce these tropes, portraying Muslim women as exotic, oppressed, or hypersexualised figures. Postcolonial feminism problematises such homogenising narratives, emphasising the importance of context-specific, locally grounded understandings of gender and power. By applying this lens, the paper interrogates how mainstream media representation simplifies Muslim women's complex realities and silences their agency, while also providing a theoretical rationale for centring their voices in analyses of activism and resistance.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) question, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, remains highly relevant for understanding Muslim women's position in Indian society. Often, these women are spoken for—by the state, by patriarchal community structures, or by mainstream media—leaving their lived experiences and political aspirations marginalised. Grassroots movements, such as the Shaheen Bagh protests and the Hijab resistance, illustrate instances where Muslim women actively reclaim voice and agency, challenging both structural and representational silences. Subaltern studies thus provide a lens to examine not only oppression but also the ways in which marginalised actors negotiate visibility and exert influence within power-laden contexts.

Nancy Fraser's (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics offers a useful framework for analysing Muslim women's digital activism. Counterpublics are alternative discursive spaces where marginalised groups can construct and circulate their own narratives, often in response to exclusion from dominant public spheres. Social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube serve as sites of such counterpublics, allowing Muslim women to articulate perspectives that challenge mainstream stereotypes, circulate political critiques, and build solidarities. These digital interventions provide visibility on their own terms, contesting the limited and often distorted portrayals offered by traditional media. The lens of

counterpublics enables an understanding of how digital activism complements on-the-ground resistance and organisational work, expanding the terrain of political and cultural engagement.

Digital feminism, as theorised by Zeynep Tufekci (2017) and Banaji (2017), highlights the ways in which social media enables feminist organising and activism. For Muslim women in India, hashtags like #ShaheenBagh, #HijabIsOurRight, and #MuslimWomenSpeak serve as vehicles for collective mobilization, visibility, and discourse formation. Online platforms facilitate networked activism that can connect local struggles to national and global feminist solidarities. These digital platforms become a place where women unite to share experiences and voice their opinions. However, digital spaces are not without risk: trolling, online harassment, and state surveillance are persistent challenges. Digital feminism thus provides a dual lens, acknowledging both the emancipatory potential of networked activism and the structural constraints that shape these online engagements.

This paper synthesises the above theoretical perspectives to analyse Muslim women across multiple sites of visibility and resistance: screens, streets, and social media. Intersectionality foregrounds the structural and identity-based dimensions of oppression, while postcolonial feminism critiques reductive media representations. Subaltern studies illuminate strategies of voice and agency, and the concepts of counterpublics and digital feminism highlight spaces where Muslim women challenge dominant narratives and mobilise support. Together, these frameworks enable a holistic understanding of how Muslim women negotiate visibility, contest stereotypes, and assert agency across mainstream media, grassroots activism, and digital platforms. This integrated theoretical approach is essential for capturing the layered realities of Muslim women's lives in contemporary India, providing the analytical scaffolding for the subsequent case studies and discussion.

Popular Media Representations (Screens)

Bollywood has historically constructed Muslim women through reductive tropes that reinforce stereotypes while erasing agency. The most enduring of these is the figure of the *tawaif* or courtesan, exemplified in *Pakeezah* (1972) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981; 2006). These films aestheticise Muslim women as embodiments of beauty and desire but confine them to tragic narratives of abandonment, thereby exoticising culture while silencing resistance (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004).

Another prominent trope positions Muslim women as custodians of family and community honor. In *Veer-Zaara* (2004), the heroine's identity is tied to sacrifice and filial duty, while *My Name Is Khan* (2010) situates women largely within domestic roles. As Hasan (2004) notes, this reflects a wider social tendency to define Muslim women primarily through personal law and honor, sidelining concerns of education, employment, and political participation.

Bollywood also casts Muslim women as victims of terrorism, patriarchy, and communal violence. Films such as *Fiza* (2000) and *Mission Kashmir* (2000) showcase women as grieving mothers, sisters, or lovers—figures whose suffering amplifies male protagonists' narratives rather than highlighting their own political agency. Furthermore, Muslim identity is often visually signified by the burqa, reducing women to cultural markers without individuality (Kirmani, 2013).

Recent films and OTT series have begun to offer counter-narratives. *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) foregrounded Muslim women's desires and ambitions, while *Sacred Games* (2018–2019) and *Made in Heaven* (2019) depict more layered characters, though still mediated through an outsider's lens. These remain exceptions rather than mainstream shifts.

The cinematic silencing of Muslim women contrasts sharply with their lived realities as visible agents of resistance in movements such as Shaheen Bagh or the Karnataka Hijab protests. On social media, Muslim women actively mobilise hashtags and campaigns, challenging stereotypes and asserting alternative narratives. This gap between screen and street underscores the need to reimagine representation in ways that reflect Muslim women's heterogeneity and political agency.

News media similarly perpetuates stereotypes, particularly in coverage of debates around the hijab, triple talaq, or personal law reforms. Headlines frequently depict Muslim women as symbols of oppression rather than autonomous actors, framing debates around their clothing, marital status, or religious practices. Such representations reduce complex lived realities to simplistic narratives, reinforcing Islamophobic and patriarchal discourses while marginalizing Muslim women's voices in public debates.

Applying postcolonial feminist theory, these portrayals can be seen as continuations of colonial tropes, where the Muslim woman is depicted as the "Other" in need of rescue or regulation. Intersectionality further reveals how these media narratives compound marginalisation by foregrounding gendered and religious identities, often neglecting class, region, and age, which significantly influence lived experiences. Subaltern studies underscore the consequences of such representations: by speaking for Muslim women rather than allowing them to articulate their own experiences, mainstream media silences their agency, reinforcing hierarchies of visibility and authority.

Grassroots Movements (Streets)

Muslim women's participation in grassroots movements challenges both the silencing of their voices in media and societal perceptions of passivity. The Shaheen Bagh protests (2019–20) offer a seminal example of women-led activism that gained national and international attention. Elderly women, often referred to as the "dadis of Shaheen Bagh," occupied public space for months in a peaceful sit-in against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), asserting their right to citizenship and democratic participation. Their presence disrupted dominant stereotypes of Muslim women as submissive or voiceless, demonstrating resilience, political awareness, and strategic collective action.

Similarly, the Hijab protests in Karnataka (2022) exemplify how young Muslim women contest institutional discrimination and assert autonomy over religious and educational choices. By publicly resisting restrictions on the hijab in educational institutions, these women claimed visibility and challenged both state regulation and media narratives that reduce the veil to a symbol of oppression. These movements foreground the ways Muslim women negotiate multiple power structures simultaneously—patriarchal community norms, majoritarian state pressures, and media misrepresentation.

From a theoretical perspective, intersectionality illuminates the layered dimensions of this activism: women are negotiating their positions as gendered, religious, and often classed subjects within multiple hierarchies of power. Subaltern studies further underscore the significance of these movements as spaces where Muslim women speak for themselves, reclaiming voice in a society that frequently marginalizes them. The protests also reveal how agency is not only individual but deeply collective, enacted through shared practices, dialogue, and the occupation of public spaces that were previously denied to them.

These grassroots mobilisations extend beyond moments of protest, inspiring broader networks of civic engagement and social solidarity. They serve as a reminder that Muslim women's activism is not confined to symbolic visibility in media; rather, it is embedded in sustained, on-the-ground efforts to contest oppression and demand rights. By foregrounding their agency in streets as well as on screens and social

media, this paper situates grassroots movements as crucial sites of resistance that complicate simplistic portrayals of Muslim women.

Beyond protests and digital interventions, Muslim women's organisations across India play a crucial role in fostering empowerment, education, and legal awareness. The Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA), for instance, has been instrumental in advocating for legal reforms related to triple talaq, inheritance rights, and women's participation in religious decision-making. By combining grassroots activism with legal literacy programs, BMMA addresses structural inequities while challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law, demonstrating how institutional engagement complements on-the-ground resistance.

Similarly, Awaaz-e-Niswaan (AeN), based in Mumbai, provides legal aid, counselling, and vocational training to Muslim women, facilitating their ability to navigate social, economic, and legal challenges. Regional initiatives such as STEP (Kerala) and STEPS (Tamil Nadu) focus on education, skills development, and community mobilisation, enabling women to claim agency in spheres often dominated by men. These organisations exemplify everyday forms of resistance, where empowerment is enacted not only through public protest but through sustained, structured efforts that build autonomy, knowledge, and solidarity over time.

Another important organisation that deserves attention is the **Muslim Women's Study Circle (MWSC)**, which combines grassroots activism with intellectual engagement. One of its most innovative initiatives is the *Masjid Project*, designed to reimagine mosques as inclusive spaces for women. Traditionally, mosques in India have either restricted women's access or relegated them to peripheral roles, reinforcing gendered exclusion within religious life. The Masjid Project challenges this by documenting women's perspectives on mosques, advocating for inclusive practices, and raising critical questions about spiritual citizenship.

The significance of this initiative lies in how it disrupts the stereotype of Muslim women as passive recipients of religious authority. Instead, it situates them as active participants negotiating faith, space, and rights. This also broadens the conversation on Muslim women's activism: rather than being confined to "secular" struggles (e.g., protests, rights campaigns), they are also reclaiming religious and spiritual spaces, which are equally central to everyday life. Through study circles, discussions, and documentation, MWSC creates a platform where women articulate their lived experiences and contest the structural barriers of both patriarchy and Islamophobia.

In highlighting the Masjid Project, we see how Muslim women's grassroots activism is not only about resisting state policies or media stereotypes, but also about reshaping community practices from within. It reflects a form of faith-based feminism, which insists that religious identity and gender justice are not mutually exclusive but can co-exist and empower one another.

From a theoretical perspective, intersectionality underscores the importance of these organisations in addressing layered oppressions—gender, religion, class, and regional marginalisation simultaneously shape the challenges women face. These initiatives create spaces where Muslim women can collectively negotiate power, assert rights, and reshape social norms, effectively countering the stereotypes perpetuated by mainstream media and societal discourse. In this sense, organisational work functions as both a site and strategy of resistance, bridging the gap between public visibility in protests and private empowerment through sustained programmes.

By foregrounding structured organisational efforts alongside grassroots activism and digital counter-narratives, this paper demonstrates the multi-dimensional strategies through which Muslim women contest

oppression. These organisations not only provide material and social resources but also cultivate a political consciousness that equips women to engage critically with societal, cultural, and legal frameworks, ensuring that resistance is both collective and sustainable.

Social Media Counter-Narratives (Digital)

Social media has emerged as a critical site for Muslim women to challenge dominant narratives and assert visibility. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube enable women to craft counter-narratives that contest the reductive stereotypes propagated by mainstream media. Hashtags like #ShaheenBagh, #HijabIsOurRight, and #MuslimWomenSpeak have circulated widely, amplifying voices that are often silenced in public discourse. These digital interventions allow women to document protests, share personal stories, and mobilize support for causes ranging from educational rights to legal reforms, thereby creating alternative spaces for engagement and solidarity. They can represent themselves directly, pushing back against the “voiceless victim” trope. For example: Muslim women journalists, scholars, and activists (e.g., Rana Ayyub, Arfa Khanum Sherwani) use Twitter to assert political agency and counter Islamophobic narratives.

Nancy Fraser’s (1990) concept of subaltern counterpublics provides a useful lens to understand these digital spaces. Counterpublics are discursive arenas where marginalised groups articulate perspectives excluded from dominant publics. Social media, in this sense, functions as a virtual extension of the street, allowing Muslim women to speak back to misrepresentation and build communities of recognition across geographic and social boundaries. These platforms facilitate both visibility and agency, enabling women to challenge Islamophobic narratives while connecting with broader feminist and human rights movements. Social media allows Muslim women to reclaim the hijab not as a marker of oppression but as a conscious choice, identity, or political statement. Visual platforms like Instagram, TikTok show hijabi influencers in fashion, education, and activism—expanding representations beyond Bollywood’s reductive frames. Social media creates a space where Muslim women contest stereotypes from Bollywood and mainstream journalism, articulate diverse lived realities, and mobilise political resistance.

Digital feminism and networked activism further illuminate the strategies employed by Muslim women online. Scholars such as Tufekci (2017) and Banaji (2017) emphasize the capacity of social media to generate networked mobilisation and amplify grassroots voices. Muslim women use these tools to engage in advocacy, organise online campaigns, and highlight issues that receive limited mainstream attention. At the same time, online spaces are not without risk: trolling, Islamophobic abuse, and gendered harassment remain persistent challenges, reflecting the ways in which digital platforms reproduce offline power hierarchies. The “Bulli Bai” and “Sulli Deals” incidents (2021–22), where Muslim women were virtually auctioned online, highlight how digital spaces replicate patriarchal and communal violence.

Despite these challenges, digital activism has expanded the terrain of resistance, allowing Muslim women to assert control over their narratives and construct spaces of empowerment. When analysed alongside media representation and grassroots activism, social media emerges as a complementary site where Muslim women negotiate visibility, challenge stereotypes, and participate in democratic discourse. The interplay between screens, streets, and digital spaces underscores the multi-sited nature of their agency and the layered strategies they employ to contest oppression.

By foregrounding structured organisational efforts alongside grassroots activism and digital counter-narratives, this paper demonstrates the multi-dimensional strategies through which Muslim women contest oppression. These organisations not only provide material and social resources but also cultivate a political

consciousness that equips women to engage critically with societal, cultural, and legal frameworks, ensuring that resistance is both collective and sustainable.

The analysis of Muslim women's experiences across screens, streets, digital platforms, and organisations reveals a complex interplay between representation, resistance, and agency. Mainstream media—Bollywood films, OTT content, and news narratives—frequently constrains Muslim women within reductive tropes, framing them as either oppressed victims, hypersexualized villains, or passive participants in social life. These portrayals, rooted in historical Orientalist and patriarchal logics, marginalise Muslim women by obscuring their voices and simplifying their lived realities. Postcolonial feminist theory helps illuminate how such depictions echo colonial-era constructions of the “Other,” while intersectionality underscores the compounded impact of gendered, religious, and socio-economic marginalisation.

In contrast, grassroots movements such as the Shaheen Bagh protests and Hijab resistance exemplify how Muslim women actively reclaim agency and public space. These movements disrupt the narrative of passivity, demonstrating that resistance can be both highly visible and deeply collective. By occupying streets, articulating demands, and engaging in sustained protest, women contest both structural oppression and media misrepresentation. Subaltern studies provide a critical lens here, revealing how these women speak for themselves and create new sites of authority and visibility in contexts where they are often spoken for.

Digital platforms further expand the arenas of resistance. Hashtags, social media campaigns, and online storytelling enable Muslim women to construct counterpublics, challenging dominant discourses while forging communities of solidarity and recognition. While these digital spaces are not free from harassment or structural constraints, they allow for rapid mobilisation, knowledge dissemination, and alternative visibility that mainstream media rarely affords. Digital feminism highlights how such networked activism complements physical protests and organisational initiatives, linking local struggles to broader feminist and social justice movements.

Muslim women's organisations such as BMMA, AeN, and regional collectives play an equally vital role in sustaining long-term empowerment. Their work bridges the gap between public activism and everyday practices, offering legal literacy, education, vocational training, and advocacy that address layered oppressions. Intersectionality provides a framework for understanding how these organisations simultaneously confront gendered, religious, and socio-economic marginalisation, equipping women with both material resources and political consciousness.

Synthesising these findings, it becomes evident that Muslim women's agency in contemporary India is multi-sited. It is exercised on screens through attempts to challenge representation, on streets through protest, online through digital activism, and within organisations through structured empowerment initiatives. Each site of engagement reinforces the others: digital activism amplifies grassroots mobilisations, organisational work sustains civic participation, and media visibility shapes public discourse. Together, they unsettle dominant frames, demonstrating that Muslim women are neither passive victims nor mere symbols; they are active agents shaping narratives, asserting rights, and redefining citizenship.

This multi-dimensional perspective also challenges the binary of visibility versus invisibility. While mainstream media often renders Muslim women hyper-visible in distorted ways, grassroots activism, organisational work, and digital counter-narratives reclaim visibility on their own terms. These findings suggest that understanding Muslim women's lived realities requires attention to both representation and

action, recognising that empowerment is constructed through diverse strategies that negotiate cultural, social, and political terrains.

In conclusion, the discussion highlights the importance of adopting an integrated, interdisciplinary approach to analyse Muslim women's experiences. By juxtaposing media representation, grassroots activism, digital engagement, and organisational work, the study provides a nuanced understanding of how Muslim women navigate oppression, assert agency, and contribute to democratic discourse. This approach not only foregrounds previously marginalised voices but also offers insights into broader debates on gender, visibility, and citizenship in contemporary India.

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