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Representing Muslim Women Converts in Algerian Newspaper's discourse

Abstract.

Women representation in media has been a hot debate for many years. More specifically the debate about Muslim women converts. Their cases represent a fertile ground to be investigated as belonging to a community that has been discussed for a long time in academia; mainly, after the phenomenon of Islamophobia and the struggle to improve the status of Muslim women in their societies. Moreover; studies concerning Muslim women converts were almost based on narratives and stories[2] (Mansoureh Chavoshpour 1998,[3] Caroline Neumueller 2012, Sabina Catlin Wahl 2014[4]). The current study aims at examining critically the portrayal of Muslim converts through Algerian media mainly newspaper articles. It is intended to unveil the ideological representation of women who converted to Islam under media coverage and to disclose the extent of credibility of this depiction. This study based on CDA investigates the discursive portrayal of female Muslim converts in Algerian media discourse. In order to meet the objectives of this research, following the framework provided by Van Leeuwen (1996–2008), articles collected from Algerian newspapers are analyzed with a specific focus on stereotypes perpetuated about Muslim women converts.

Keywords: Muslim women converts, media discourse, Critical discourse analysis, ideologies, stereotypes.

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[2] CHAVOSHPOUR, Mansoureh: «Conversion to Islam and veiling among American Muslim women in Kansas.» *Wichita State University* 2012.

[3] NEUMUELLER, Caroline. «The 21st-century new Muslim generation converts in Britain and Germany» *the University of Exeter October,*2012.

[4] WAHL, Sabina Catlin. «Conversion to Islam: Personal Narratives of Muslim Women in Durban» *Wesleyan University The Honors College* 2014.

1. Introduction

The debate about Muslim women has always captured interest and has raised continuing debates in media discourse, which made the discursive representation of Muslim women in general and Muslim women converts, in particular, a fertile area of research; in the last few years issues related to Muslim women converts sound interesting and need to be investigated taking into consideration the whole process of conversion with all its aspects, obstacles and challenges that face these women and certain characteristics of media discourse for instance the power of spreading ideologies and shape opinions about *"the Other"* as argued by Cole and Daniel[5] *"media convey messages that potentially inform and influence attitudes and behaviors"* (2005, p. XII). The portrayal of women converting to Islam in media is debatable in which it should be negotiated and carefully investigated because of the stereotypical and the ideological nature of media itself in which it represents women according to certain goals what leads to present a distorted version of reality, Norman Fairclough argued[6] *"discourse is able to exercise a pervasive and powerful influence in social reproduction because of the very scale of the modern mass media and the extremely high level of exposure of whole populations to a relatively homogeneous output"* (1989, p. 54). According to Amu and Kalpana (2006)[7] most often women issues capture the interest of media once they are *sensationalized, trivialized or distorted*, more precisely news discourse contributes in shaping social subjects and asserts that newspapers are transparently presented, however; it is not. N. Fairclough declares that:

> *"Newspapers tend to offer sometimes contending (though often harmonizing) versions of the truth, each of which is based upon the implicit and indefensible claim that events can be transparently and categorically represented, and perspective can be universalized. This myth underpins the ideological work of the media: offering images of and categories for reality, positioning and shaping social subjects, and contributing for the most part to social control and reproduction." (1992, p. 161)*

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[5] E.COLE and J.H. DANIEL. «Featuring Females: Feminist analysis of media.» *Washington, DC: American Psychological Association*, 2005, XII.

[6] FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge Policy Press, 1992, 54–161.

[7] AMU, J. and KALPANA S. (eds). «Whose News? The Media and Women's Issues.» *London: Sage*, 2006.

Media coverage includes misrepresentation, underrepresentation and falsified information about women which is the case of many representations of Muslim women converts, who have been almost discussed only in relation to western media since it serves clearly to perpetuate certain ideas and beliefs about Muslim women in general (brainwashed, rejected, more radicalized than Muslims themselves, marrying a Muslim husband is the only reason of conversion, oppressed and victims of an essentialist religion that encourages terrorism, fundamentalists, reporting stories of famous women converting to Islam or simply women who absorbed the idea of *"jihad"*)[8] (Elkoubaiti Naoual 2010),[9] (M.A . Kevin Brice 2010).

2. Background to stereotypes

Regarding the etymology of the word, it was first used in the domain of printing in the late Eighteenth in France; it is a duplicate impression of a typographical element by which newspapers are printed. Then, in 1850 the concept "stereotype" acquired a new meaning when it was introduced in dictionaries as *"an image perpetuated without change"*[10] (Form Psych Wiki – A Collaborative Psychology Wiki). Later,[11] Walter Lippman in his book *Public Opinion (1922)* is the first to coin the term *"stereotype"* studying social relationships, he considers it as opinions and beliefs that people raise about another group and they are founded on personal emotions and judgments rather than truth W. Lippman(1922), he employs the word stereotype additionally to refer to the schemas or images we have in our minds with reference to a given group *"the pictures inside the heads"* although, these images are far from being actual and valid. According to Judd et Park (1993), a stereotype is the collection of beliefs that individual associates with a group of people as cited in an article by[12] George Shadron (2009).

One of the subtypes of stereotyping is *"Gender stereotyping"*, because gender is always have been for a long time perceived as two different and opposite categories, separated from each other which is one of the main characteristics of stereotypes, in this case they

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[8] Natural, Elkoubaiti. «women conversion to Islam: the American women experience .» *Oriental women organization*, 2010.

[9] BRICE, M.A. Kevin. «A Minority within a Minority: a report on converts to Islam in the United Kingdom.» *Faith Matters*, 2010.

[10] http://Stereotype,Wikipedia.html. Accessed 16/03/2016.

[11] LIPMAN, Walter «Public Opininion» New York: Macmillan, 1922.

[12] SCHADRON, G. «Un stéréotype un Genre, Performance et Choix de Carrière.» *Laboratoire de Psychologie Cognitive et Social* 2009, 2.

create a split between men and women *"the strategy of splitting"*, when stereotypes become more dangerous since they serve as ideologies which are defined by Van Dijk as[13] *"an ideology is a self-serving schema for the representation of Us and Them as social groups"*; i.e. members of the same society or group are separated and divided into *"normal"* people and *"abnormal"* or *"unacceptable"* ones following an ideological approach setting the *"US"* for the so-called *"normal"* and *"the Other"* for *"abnormal"* people[14] *"reduces essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference' … facilitates the 'bending' or 'bonding' together of all of us who are 'normal' into 'imagined community'; and it sends into symbols exile all of them"* S. Hall (1997, p. 258), their behaviors are stereotyped and expected to be different. Gender stereotypes are about males and females, but people tend to stereotype females more clearly and precisely than they do with males; because the usual stereotypes related to men are that men are (active, assertive, clever, they look for success, self-reliant, strong and tough) and all that is associated with positive and important roles[15] (Basow 1992, p. 6). Whereas; women are stereotyped as (emotional, less intelligent, limited capacities in mathematics and sports). Women are stereotyped the same way in different discourses and contexts cartoons, newspapers, situations comedies, where women are subjects to humor even in horror scenes; in the sense that men discuss it intelligently looking for explanations and suggestions for the situation, however; women discuss it expressing their own fear emotionally without any content as seen by[16]Herbert (1976, p. 110).Gender stereotypes emphasize the idea that a woman is prepared from her early childhood to the role of an active housewife, an obedient wife, and a caring mother. According to Davis[17] *"marriage and raising a family is the goal for which girls are prepared almost since birth"* (2001, p. 36.).

Concerning stereotypes about Muslim women are related both to gender and religion as agreed by Eero Janson Veronica Mohamed-Salih.[18] *"In regard to Muslim women, most of the stereotypes concern the cultural racist criterion, followed by gender, religious criteria."* Veronica Mohamed-Salih (2015, p. 103).

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[13] DIJK, Teun A. Van. «Ideology A Multidisciplinary Approach» S AGE Publications London ♦ Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1998,01.

[14] HALL, Stuart «The spectacle of the "Other"». In Stuart Hall (ed.) 1997, 258.

[15] BASOW, S .A. «Gender. Stereotypes and roles »(3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole. 1992, 06.

[16] HERBERT, James: *Lair.* London: New English Library. 1976, 110.

[17] DAVIS, Arthur. «Moroccan female power negotiation»I "MEDIA, 2001, 36.

[18] Veronica MOHAMED-SALIH. «Stereotypes regarding Muslim men and Muslim women on the Romanian Internet: a qualitative comparative analysis for 2004−2009 and 2010−2015» 2015, 103.

These stereotypes are basically belonging to patriarchal Islamic society; Muslim women are a personification of oppression and abuse.[19] *"A veiled Muslim woman has long been used as the epitome of the oppression and patriarchy of the Islamic world. This image has run through the media and politics as well as arts and literature"*.Eero Janson (2011, p. 183).

Stereotypes about Muslim women in the west are circulated largely and passed through media and the reader is unaware of these intentionally perpetuated beliefs. Women are depicted as passive and victimized by the Islamic dress "the veil" without any consideration of these women's opinions or choice.

> *"Muslim women are mostly portrayed in the Western mainstream media in three particular ways: as passive, as victims and/or as veiled. These stereotypes are reinforced by the fact that in news about the Muslim community or especiallyabout Muslim women they themselves are hardly ever given the chance to express their opinions"*[20]*Eero Janson (2011,p, 188)*

3.Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The data selected for this study are originally cited in Algerian newspapers, they are selected because of belonging to the Algerian context and dealing with women converts as well. They are written in Arabic and translated into English. All fragments were extracted and analyzed through Critical Discourse Analysis "Van Leeuwen 2008".

3.2. Critical discourse analysis

This study is based on Critical discourse analysis. First, it is an appropriate approach to unveil stereotypes perpetuated through media discourse about Muslim women converts considering the different inventories and systematic methods of analysis of discourse that offer clear analysis. Second, it is a multidisciplinary approach by which the researcher may bring together different aspects and variables (race, gender, ethnicity, etc) in one study and reach successful analysis which is the case in this research in which it gathers gender, media studies, and Islam.

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[19] JANSON, Ero. «Stereotypes That Define "Us": The Case Of Muslim Women.» The University Of Tartu, Estonia 2011, 183.

[20] JANSON, Ero. «Stereotypes That Define "Us": The Case of Muslim Women.» The University of Tartu, Estonia 2011, 188.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, hegemony, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context CDA explores the connections between the use of language and the social and political contexts in which it occurs. It explores issues such as gender, ethnicity, cultural differences, ideology and identity and how these are both constructed and reflected in texts:

> *"The objective of this discipline is to uncover the ideological beliefs that areconcealed in the words of our texts or oral speech, so as to resist and prevail over the diverse forms of power (control) or to obtain an appreciation of the power control we are performing without a proper realization."*[21] N. Fairclough (1989)

Critical Discourse Analysis and Gender Studies share the same awareness of disclosing ideologies and misrepresentations concerning women. [22]Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer argue that [23] *"CDA is therefore not interested in investigating a linguistic unit per se; but in studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach"* (2008, p. 2), i.e CDA is not only dedicated to analyze linguistic entities and study linguistic phenomena in isolation, but it gathers social phenomena and linguistic ones using a multidisciplinary approach as well, so it can be considered as an effective approach to deal with social and linguistic phenomena altogether. Lakoff (1973)[24] stated that the reflection of society can be seen in language with all its values and assumptions.

3.3. The Theory of Representation Van Leeuwen 2008

It is an approach developed by Van Leeuwen in 2008 used by critical discourse analysts to reveal the way social actors are represented in discourses, using a socio-semantic inventory including a set of different elements to analyze social actors' representation. It is crucial to this investigation about Muslim women converts since it is an efficient and methodical way of analyzing discourse; it is a revealing inventory to disclose the way Muslim women converts are represented as well. The following elements are selected from Van Leeuwen's approach 2008 and to be used to realize the analysis of 09 articles from Algerian newspapers:

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[21] FAIRCLOUGH, Norman. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge Policy Press, 1992.

[22] WODAK, Ruth. «Critical Discourse Analysis: History, Agenda Theory, and Methodology.» 2008, 02.

[23] Theo van LEEUWEN.« Discourse and practice: new tools for critical discourse analysis», Oxford University Press, 28–54.

[24] LAKOFF, Robin. *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975.

Exclusion: Representation of social actors according to Van Leeuwen may exclude social actors to serve certain objectives related to the addressed reader. In some cases, the exclusion may be *"innocent"* because details suppressed are known or just irrelevant for readers. Yet, other facts are neglected intentionally for propaganda strategies. Within exclusion social actors can be totally invisible since it leaves traces neither about social actors nor about their activities; it is used to compare different representations of the same social practice. However; once the action is included but some or all actors are concealed it is considered as an exclusion that leaves a trace. Exclusion may be realized by suppression (no indication of the social actors anywhere in the text at all). Or by Backgrounding (deemphasizing social actors, readers may infer social actors identity because they are not entirely excluded) (2008, p. 29).

Inclusion: it is the fact of mentioning social actors in different ways:

Role Allocation: social actors can be represented using either active or passive roles, *Activation* by means of representing them as active and *dynamic* in a certain discourse or by *Passivation* mentioning them as objects or beneficiaries in positive or a negative way.

Genericization occurs when social actors are represented as classes or as specifically identifiable individuals.
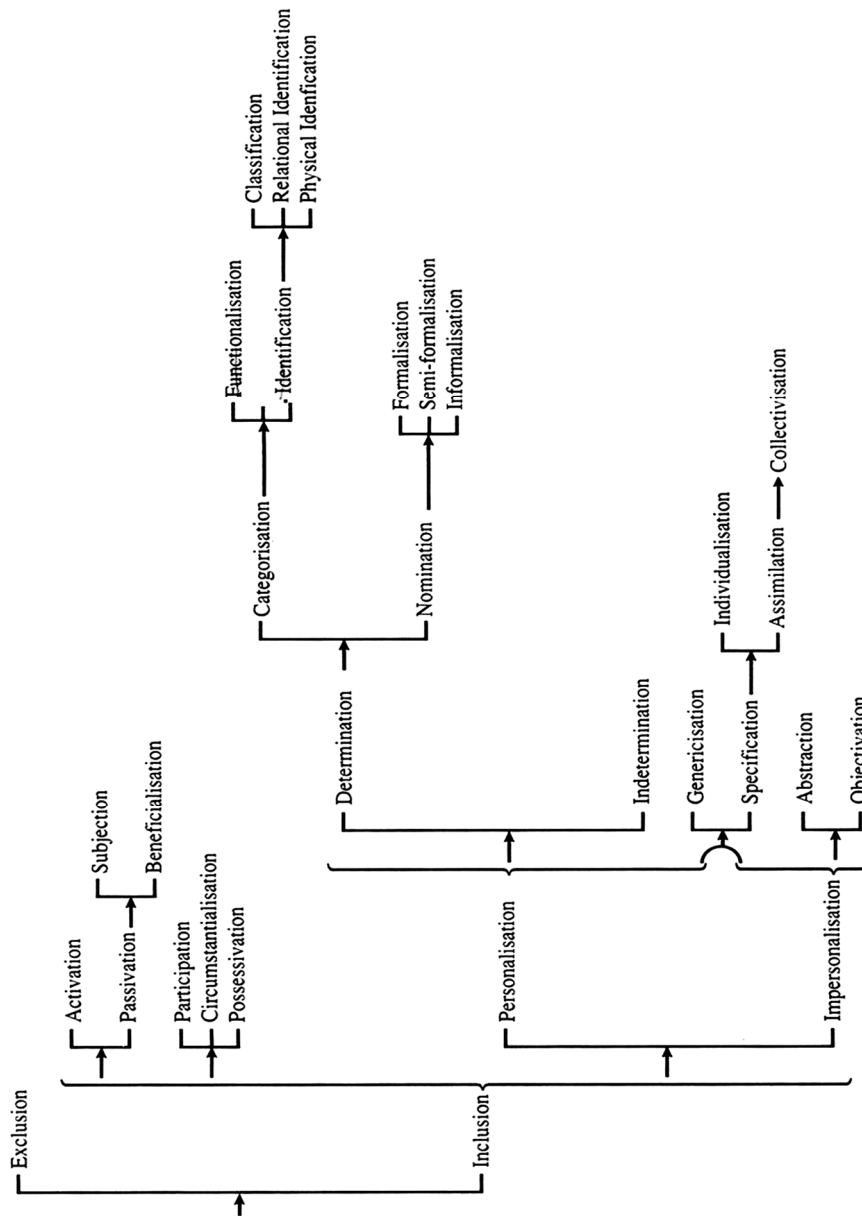
[25]**Figure 1:** Approach of Selected Element of the Study.

[25] Theo van LEEUWEN. «Discourse and practice: new tools for critical discourse analysis», Oxford University Press, 2008, 28–54.

Differentiation: it is achieved by differentiating a social actor or group from a similar one, and creating a split that reinforces boundaries between the "Us" and the "Other".

Nomination: is when social actors are referred to by proper noun, which can be *Formalized* using a surname with or without honorifics, *Semi-formalized* using a given name and a surname or *Informalized* giving only a name; while, **Categorization** is to bring social actors into one category or different ones.

Functionalization: referring to social actors by what they do, or *Identification* representing them by what they are; including (gender, age, provenance, class, wealth, ethnicity, etc). *Relational Identification* through which social actors are represented using their personal kinship or work relations. The selected elements are systematically provided with the whole inventory Van Leeuwen (2008).

4. Discussion

Exclusion: Muslim women converts are depicted and grouped in the Algerian media discourse under various forms. Exclusion from the professional sphere is dominant over Algerian newspapers, none of them spoke about the professional life of women converts or mentioned their status unless it meets domestic roles of women; media discourse, in this case, neglected the professional aspect of women converts since it belongs to a patriarchal society, a society that does not avow the role of women as effective members in societies, it sheds the light only on domestic roles and the relationship between women and their patriarchs in general. This act of marginalization of this part from a women's life reinforces the Algerian's perception of womanhood, basically; it meets their assumptions about women and their limited roles in societies. Suppression of effective, manipulative or professional roles concerning Muslim women converts in general is used to realize a complete exclusion in the Algerian media discourse about women who chose Islam as a religion, and no traces are left to infer functional roles. The intentionally concealed information regarding Muslim women converts are considered as irrelevant what is exactly conventional in androcentric societies like the Algerian one.

Inclusion

Role Allocation: Roles associated with Muslim women converts are related to the domestic sphere and personal life. Professional life and manipulative roles are completely neglected and marginalized within media discourse dealing with Muslim women converts. It is quite logical to ignore professional life or achievements concerning women in

a society like the Algerian one; Algerian media discourse is a mirror that reflects the Algerian perception of women converts. The image of Muslim women converts does not differ too much from that of women in general; *passive* and *recipient* social actors, who; are not *functionalized*, their roles are limited to cooking as it is mentioned in one of the articles, making families or not taken into account at all. Traditional roles connected to women converts and mentioned by the Algerian newspapers strengthen the prototype of *"a housewife"* and *"a devoted"* women, this role has been circulated and naturalized to preserve the patriarchal principles and beliefs about women.

Genericization: Muslim women converts are represented in many lines as specifically identifiable individuals, indeed they are Muslim women, but there were various forms to emphasize the difference between women converts and women who belong to Muslim families; mentioning nationality and religion before embracing Islam are important and clear strategies to create a split between the two groups, reject them and construct boundaries that highlight differences among them despite the fact of sharing the same religion.

> – *An American female convert to Islam*
> – *Because she was an Atheist*
> – *A Russian girl embraces Islam*
> – *She was living in an Atheist family*

Differentation: Muslim women converts and Muslim women, who; come from Muslim families share the same aspects of being a woman and being a Muslim too. Yet, following these articles belonging to the Algerian media they are two different groups, they are categorized and divided discursively, using words like *"this girl"*, *"they"*, *"this German"*, *"an Irish girl"* in addition to emphasizing women converts' nationalities and religions before Islam. Boundaries are fortified between Muslim women through discourse.

> – *An Irish girl converts to Islam*
> – *A German lady*
> – *The girl from Poland*

Categorization and Nomination: Van Leeuwen stresses the importance of nomination in representing social actors; readers notice that names of women converts are provided. Nominating can give a degree a visibility to women in this context, nevertheless ; joining nationality with converts disclose another strategy to make social actors "women converts" *categorized* and separated from the whole community "Muslims in this context", foregrounding

converts' names seems to be a trial of freeing women converts from the darkness of patriarchal societies in one hand, in another hand; stressing nationality, origins or the system of belief before Islam implies a perpetuation of division and *Categorization* for both converts and originally Muslim women, this sort of *nomination* breaks the limits between *Categorization and Nomination*, in this case, it contributes in differentiating women converts from Muslim women who were born Muslims.

> – *Her name is Elizabeth Didam and she is 53 years old*
> – *The girl from Poland Monika Kuslak*
> – *The girl called Polina KushinaPetrova is 21 years old*
> – *Manuella chose the name of "Aicha"*

Identification and classification: Algerian media discourse *classifies* women converts, first; by determining their age and second by considering them as a new Muslim community that is different from Muslims coming from originally Muslim families is a recurrent feature concerning the Algeria press. Representing Muslim women converts by means of *Identification* are frequently seen using Relational Identification relating women to their patriarch (father, husband, brother or son) referring to them using *possessive pronouns*; so, they appear *possessivated* to their patriarchs. The emphasis of relating women to their patriarchs more than one time embodies the power and the authority practiced over women in the Algerian society as a patriarchal one, the system of hierarchy allows authority to be exercised to keep women between men's abusive hands, being it by their father, brother, husband or son and sometimes other males from the family (ankles for instance). Another representation is via *Physical Identification* mentioning their physical appearance and focusing on eyes' color, and age for the reader to shed light on women converts' physical appearance, that may be a sign of difference between the converts and Muslims that are born in a Muslim family since they do not share the same physical appearance like "color of eyes and skin"; which is again a strategy to build borders among Muslims being them converts or not and an absolute form of indicating *"Otherness"* and *classifying* them as being out from the social norms .

> – *Ines Saba who is 19 years old came to marry Fares*
> – *She knew a man from Skikda via social media and wants to marry*
> – *The Italian girl with blue eyes, she is in her twenties*
> – *An Italian parliament's daughter embraced Islam*
> – *A daughter of a well-known politician in Italy converted to Islam*
> – *She is the daughter of Franco Barbato the ex-parliament in the city of Napoli*

5. Stereotyping Muslim women converts in Algerian media discourse

Media discourse in Algerian newspapers presents a traditional portrayal for Muslim women converts and reinforces stereotypes that are derogative and easy to be circulated in the Algerian society as being a patriarchal and conservative one. Women who embrace Islam are seen in media eyes as *passive* members of society, devoted, obedient wives and caring mothers and daughters, their professional life is totally ignored in order to maintain the conventional model of womanhood in androcentric societies *"the stay at home women"*. Stereotypically; women embracing Islam are categorized with a special emphasis on their beauty, color of eyes and age, still the stereotype of connecting women with age and beauty exists even in serious contexts like choosing a religion or portraying a convert. Regardless of their achievements or success; women converting to Islam are dealt with from a limited point of view and ideologically presented to the reader, media discourse, in this case, focuses on shaping the image of these women to conform the perception of a women and beliefs and norms in the Algerian context. Moreover; the male surveillance and guiding is repeated as well; the relation between the patriarch and Muslim women converts is persistent in media discourse in Algeria, despite the fact of belonging to less conservative societies, but; discursively women converts are repetitively spoken about in relation to one of the patriarchs more precisely the father or the husband. Another stereotype concerning women converts is reasons behind conversion, which are various, yet; Algerian written press tries to perpetuate the same stereotype of converting to Islam because of marrying a Muslim man, which may be relative in some cases, and can be seen as an overgeneralization, that is one of the main characteristics of stereotyping. Being a caring women ;who; pay attention to others' feelings, emotional, dreaming of getting married and cooking, being rejected by the original society, more radicalized than Muslims themselves, putting the veil just after conversion are other stereotypes found circulated through discourse of portraying western women as cited in an article by one of the newspapers:

> *"her conversion to Islam shocked her father", "he is having difficult moments because of his daughter's conversion to Islam", "she left with her Indian husband, … she has got two boys", "despite being veiled, she still provides support to her father".*

6. Conclusion

Because of the analysis of the articles selected from Algerian newspapers, Muslim women converts are represented in a variety of ways. They are excluded using suppression from the public and the professional sphere the reader cannot find any information about women converts' occupations, this exclusion reinforces the limited role of women in patriarchal societies, the fact that conform the Algerian beliefs about women. Whereas; they are included in restricted tasks and offensively reduced to submissive and passive recipients social actors, the way that mirrors beliefs, opinions, and attitudes towards women. Media represents women who embraced Islam discursively in a manner that is not different from Muslim women, yet; it groups them by categorizing them to make them seem different and creating limits and boundaries among women in general and Muslims in particular; aiming at naturalizing and reproducing ideologically this difference that is one of the main characteristics of newspapers' discourse. The ideological categorization and classification of women and their misrepresentation in media discourse maintain *androcentric* principles. The emphasis on differences and origins is an ideological attitude towards Muslim women converts in which there is an implied objective enlarging the gap among Muslims themselves. The patriarch is an omnipresent feature in the discursive portrayal of women converting to Islam; it is a clear sign of the limited space allowed to women in the Algerian society, dependence on men, male surveillance and the importance of having a male member in a women's life are recurrent ideas and beliefs in Algerian news paper's discourse. Discourse of media in the Algerian context reproduces the same stereotypes perpetuated about women and applies them to Muslim women converts to reinforce the traditional roles and generalize patriarchal beliefs about women in general, considering all the previously mentioned portrayals provided about women embracing Islam the trial to maintain misrepresentation and discursive abuse is obviously seen through Algerian media discourse.