

A Critique of Representation of Islam and Muslims through Western Print Media Discourse(s)

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Abstract

The present research critically decodes discourses of articles regarding the representations of Islam and Muslims. The present data has been taken from “*The TIMES* (daily)” from June 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016. A check list of keywords was prepared by the researchers about Islam and Muslims and data was collected focusing on the keywords. The articles carrying the words were selected. Out of 67 articles which appeared during the mentioned time period, one article titled *Bloodstained Religion* was randomly selected for analysis. For this purpose, the study employs an amended research model to analyse data. Dijk’s analytical model has been made operational. The analytical categories of the modified model include actor description, implicature, number game, victimization, history as a lesson, othering, lexicalization, comparison, authority, and use of disclaimer. These categories of the said model were found repeatedly in the data and hence, data was analysed accordingly. The study concludes that western print media discourses target Islam and Muslims to propagate Islam as a violent religion and so are its followers. The sole purpose of associating Violence and extremism with Islam and Muslims is to shape the mind set of western readers that whatever Muslims claim about the peaceful nature of Islam is mere a myth. The insidious weapon of loaded language is used to make things common sense. Muslims are represented as dangerous others who are suffering from the cancer of jihad. This is how highly politicized terms like Islamophobia, and fundamentalism are linked with Islam, Jihad and Muslims. Hence, print media discourses are used to propagate a desired version of reality about Islam.

Keywords: Representation, Implication. Print Media, Discourse, Ideology, Hegemony, CDA, Islam and Muslims

Introduction:

1. Representations and Reality:

Hall opines that there is no absolute reality rather everything is socially constructed. Every print media group constructs and represents its own version of reality. It is believed that what we perceive as reality, it not reality rather “recapitulation of reality”.¹ Everyone sees reality through his/her own cultural prism. At present a war of words is going on between Muslims and non-Muslim west to represent each other negatively. Representation of Islam and Muslims in western print media is an important issue to be explored. It is crying need of time to bridge the existing gulf between Islam and Christianity and to establish inter- faith harmony. Continuous effort are required from both sides to explore a common culture from where religions spring. ‘Representations heavily rely on what an individual belonging to a particular cultural setting perceives and wishes his/her perceptions be generalized. These are social constructs and cannot be generalized’ says Hartley.²

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¹ Hall, S. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1997), 223-227.

² Hartley, J(2004). *The New Economy, Creativity and Consumption*, International Journal of Cultural Studies. Vol. 7(1): 5–7.

1.2 Islam and the West:

Representation of Islam and Muslims post 9/11, London bombing (7-7-05) and Bali bombing 2002, is not problem free. The West believes that Islam poses a threat to its way of life and therefore, Islam and Muslims have been put under spotlight. The terms which are highly politicized and carry negative connotation such as *Islamophobia*, *fundamentalism*, puritanism, terrorism, radicalism, extremism and militancy are used to describe the Muslims and Islam. In this regard, to reproduce negative stereotyping fear-based discourses are used to represent Islam and the Muslims. Similarly, the west is represented likewise through the media of Islamic countries.

1.3 Constructing the Muslims “Other”

We are in a world where war of words is going on for positive self and negative others representation. Said argues that according to western perception the world is divided in two poles and he names them as good vs evil or Us vs Them. According to him everything that is standard belongs to West and vice versa. He believes that the concept of representor (west) and the represented (east) is getting wider. The people of the Orient because of their backwardness are unable to represent themselves.³ Similarly, Richardson asserts that the occidentals believe that the orient are irrational, emotional and scripturists.⁴ They can only be tamed by using force says Dunn.⁵ The essentialist depiction of the Muslims and Islam is that Muslims are violent, immature, out-group and must be managed by using force. He claims that derogatory language is used to describe Muslims as fanatics. It is important to note that exceptions are always there. Richardson asserts that extremist views of some cannot be generalized but it is often observed that because of certain groups' misdeeds all Muslims are represented negatively. This practice goes a long way in positioning Muslims as outcasts.⁶

2. Media Discourse:

Printed media discourses are never free from ideology and most often they embody ideological stance of a group and are devised keeping in mind the target readership said by Reath.⁷ Fowler opines that print media discourses are not authentic since they are coined by the holders of dominant ideology.⁸ Every individual wants that his/her views should be published and she reads with interest the news related to his/her area and interest proposed by Hodge & Kress.⁹ Dijk argued that powerful people elites are capable of shaping language according to their interests and exploited the people accordingly.¹⁰

3. Research Design:

The present study is an ideological analysis of the language used in western print media discourses; therefore, it is qualitative in nature. The in-depth analysis of the discourse of the selected articles has been done to lay bare certain ideologies at work. In this regard the dominant emerging

³ Said, E. *Orientalism*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 60.

⁴ Richardson, E. *(Mis) Representing Islam: The Racism and Rhetoric of British Broadsheet Newspapers*. (USA: John Benjamins Pub Co, 2005), Vol 1, 537–542.

⁵ Dunn, K. M. Representations of Islam in the Politics of Mosque Development in Sydney *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie*; 2001, 92 (3): 291-308.

⁶ Richardson, J.E. *Analyzing newspapers: An approach from critical discourse analysis*, (London: Palgrave, 2007), 178.

⁷ Reath, D. *The language of newspapers*, (USA: Routledge, 1998), 50.

⁸ Fowler, R. *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*. (London: Routledge; 1996), 11.

⁹ Hodge, R., and G. Kress. *Language as ideology*, (London: Routledge, 1979), 44.

¹⁰ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Structure and Process*, (London: Sage Publication, 1998), 23.

themes have been listed together in the following section. It has also been mentioned that how frequent a certain theme is. Therefore, mixed method research has been adopted to support qualitative findings. It means that ways of words are supported with number game as well to make results more valid. The dominant emerging themes have been enlisted after the critical reading of the articles which appeared in the mentioned newspaper during the time span. The following table represents them.

Table 1

Dominant Emerging Theme	
Ideological clash	Saudi Arabia as a major funder of terrorism..
Violent face of Islam	Islamists backlash against homosexuals
Islamization of the western countries	Islamism and Nazism
Radicalization of the youngsters	women's oppression in Islam
Sectarian conflict	Global threat by Jihadists

3.1 Sampling Technique:

The articles from the selected newspapers were shortlisted on the basis of the following keywords.

Table 2

Keywords	
Islam..	Terror/Terrorism..
Paradise..	Oppressed women..
Muslim...	Jihadists/Jihad...
Islamism..	Radicalization
Suicide Bomb(ing)(er)...	Fundamental (ist) (ism).. Fundamental (ist) (ism).. Extreme (ist) (ism).. Hardliner (s).. Mosque.. Taliban...
Terror/Terrorism..	
Oppressed women..	
Jihadists/Jihad...	
Radicalization	
ISIS..	
Iran..	Al-Qaida...
Saudi Arabia..	Hezbollah..
Hamas..	Holy Quran..

Articles containing mentioned keywords were then thoroughly studied and finally one of them was randomly selected for detailed analysis at word, sentence and discourse levels. The text of the article is provided in appendix.

3.2 Research question:

The following research question has provided framework for the present research.

- 1- How Islam and Muslims represented discursively through the articles' discourse of the TIMES (daily)?

3.3 Van Dijk's Socio-cognitive Approach (SCA):

The present research employs Van Dijk's model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) which works at social, cognitive and discourse analysis levels. This model focuses on two aspects in media studies such as interpretive level and social critique. These levels deal with the production and reception of the text. However, the significant feature of the model is cognitive analysis. He argues that media discourses establish a link between groups of society. For him discourse analysis is a form of ideological analysis. Texts are designed deliberately for (Mis) representation of *US* or *THEM*. He believes that in order to lay bare different explicit and implicit ideologies one needs to

analyse the text from multiple dimensions including and meta-linguistic features. The analytical categories included in his model used in the present study with their operational definitions are as follows:¹¹

Actor Description: It means the way actors in texts are described.

Authority: here, authority figures or powerful figures are mentioned in order to support the proposition and to build credibility.

Categorization: It is a process of dividing the people in different categories to assign them positive or negative identities through language.

Distancing: It means either to show solidarity or distance from in/out group.

Evidentiality: It is a process of proving ones' claim by citing references authority figures from history.

Generalization: different claims are made broader by generalizing the concrete events or examples in the discourses. Different quantifiers or expressions of time and frequency like (most, always, constantly etc.) are used for the purpose of generalization.

History as a lesson: It is an attempt to establish a link between present and past to lay stress on something very important.

Implication: Information in the discourses is left implicit because it may be inconsistent with aim of positive self-representation.

Lexicalization: The deliberate use of highly loaded vocabulary to convey intended meanings.

Metaphor: Metaphors are the persuasive semantic-rhetoric figures which are used to make the complex and unfamiliar meanings more concrete and recognizable.

Number Game: Objectivity in the discourses is obtained through the use of statistics and numbers. This technique is used to make thing more factual against mere point of views and perspectives.

Presupposition: It is a process of conveying certain information indirectly. Certain truths are taken for granted in this process.

Victimization: It is a process of representing the people belonging to US and THEM categories positively and negatively.

Amended model:

The present research employs the amended model which has been devised after going through the text of the article carefully. These analytical categories of Dijk's model which include vagueness, repetition, presupposition, polarization and proposition have been excluded because they are missing in the text of the article selected for analysis in this research.¹²

4. Analysis of the Articles:

The following section presents in-depth analysis of an article randomly selected from the mentioned newspaper about the representation of Islam and Muslim from western perspective by employing the modified research model. The prominent analytical categories which emerged from the text have been discussed critically that how Islam and Muslims usually find representation through western print media discourses. The first category discussed in the section that proceeds is *Actor Description*. Van Dijk defines the term actor description as a process of discussing the actors positively or negatively who are doing some actions in a discourse. Their description is never ideology free. They can be represented as members belonging to in-group or out-groups with respective traits. The controlling ideological group through the description of certain actors convey desired ideology to the target audience.¹³ Similarly, the article under analysis from the selected newspaper contains the following examples:

¹¹ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 23.

¹² Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 23.

¹³ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 27.

- 1- A young man unknown...
- 2- Lone wolf terrorist.
- 3- Terrorist Muslims.
- 4- David Cameron...
- 5- Western allies
- 6- Radical young Muslims
- 7- Caliphate (so-called
- 8- Islamist terrorists

The textual references mentioned above illustrate that out of eight (08) examples there are six concerning Islam and Muslims. Every example of actor description alludes some sort of negativity to the Muslims. In many cases, the Muslims and especially the young Muslims have been assigned Animalistic attributes such as wolf, blood shedder, barbarous etc. Whereas this category has been used with the western representatives as fighters against terrorists, civilized people, and allies against terrorism. Hence, the text under analysis represents Muslims as an embodiment of negative attribute such as terrorism, barbarism, radicalism and animalism. On contrary, their counterpart west as representative of peace and civilization. This is how, the discourse of the article has been tactfully used to mis-represent Islam and Muslims.

Another analytical category used frequently in the text of the article being analysed is lexicalization, which according to Dijk means the use of selected words to convey the desired ideology implicitly to the audience.¹⁴ The use of loaded words is not accidental rather deliberate. Similarly, it can be seen in the text that words like bloodstained, purge, bombers, decapitate, sectarianism, cancer of Jihad, bigotry, fascism etc. are frequently used.

Wodak argues that discourses are deeply rooted into history. Here, the use of adjective bloodstained with the noun religion implies that there are many other religions which impart the message of peace, but the religion being mentioned is not included in that category of religions. Rather, this particular religion deals only with blood shed and violence. This is how, the deliberate use of the adjective excludes Islam among peaceful religions. The use of other lexical items connotes that Muslims are violent, prone to killing, bombing, rigid and unwilling to cope with the civilized western world because of the violent ideology of their religion. Therefore, Islam and Muslims have been alleged as followers of Fascism and they must be controlled by using force against them. Similarly, the comparison of Islam with Cancer as is highlighted by the phrase *cancer of Jihad* implies that Islam and its followers are no less than an evil and they following destructive practices which have gone beyond western control and therefore, violent ideology of Islam is consuming the west from all sides.¹⁵

Dijk argues that the use of Number Game technique means to convey fact-based information rather than making tall claims. This technique is used to represent ones' claim-based facts rather than mere assumptions.¹⁶ In this regard, the article under analysis also presents certain examples of this technique to position Muslims as the followers of out-dated religion and self-righteous. They are in every part of the World as has been illustrated by giving the examples of Kuwait, France, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, G7, murders dozens of people etc. The places mentioned here can be taken as place *as a state metaphor*. It implies that Muslims because of their violent ideology are doing harm to everywhere. Similarly, the reference of 2000 miles to the East and

¹⁴ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 23.

¹⁵ Wodak, R., and M. Meyer. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. (Great Britain: SAGE Publications, 2001), 03.

¹⁶ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 23.

killing of 25 worshippers in the mosque are meant to support the claim on the basis of facts mentioned in the form of number game that not only the civilized west rather the Muslim world is also suffering because of violence done by some self-righteous and barbarous muslims.

1- Dijk asserts that people are socially and politically distanced/ othered through media discourses. Those, who do not belong to in-group are represented as dangerous others. This dichotomy of US vs THEM has always been there, but especially post 9/11 it has become more frequent between Islam and non-Muslim West. Linguistically, more often, it is observed through the discourses of western media that third person pronoun “*They*” is used for the Muslims to distance them at social and linguistic levels. Similarly, the article under analysis carries the following examples regarding US vs THEM dichotomy.¹⁷

2-

US vs THEM			
WEST		EAST	
1.	Innocent and civilized western people	1.	Butchers of Islamic state
2.	When civilized (western) people are reeling from it	2.	They can strike every where
3.	Lucrative western interests	3.	They happen to belong to religious sect
4.	Followers of true religion	4.	-prevail, they will, on one critical condition
5.	Power less before terrorists	5.	Bloody history of Islam
6.	West has been caught in war	6.	Islam for bigotry and proto fascism
7.	MUSLIMS/ Islam	7.	They must lead fight against it

The textual references cited above illustrate that West has been represented as civilized, well informed, humane, ever ready to negotiate the matters with Muslims, but Muslims are rigid and prefer sticking to their religious fundamentals. This is resulting in widening the existing gulf between Islam and non-Muslim west. The western world wants to free religion from violence. Therefore, the civilized west reels violent religious ideology. They claim that Islam is a parody of true religion. It implies that Christianity is free from violence and hence, is a true religion never inclined towards violence. The west claims that hard liner Muslims are doing harm to them and they are least aware of what terrorist activities are. They (the west) are fighting the war which has been imposed on them by the Muslims. On the other hand, Islam and Muslims have been represented as dangerous others having nothing to do with the peaceful western ideology. The lexical items connoting negative attributes are used for Islam and Muslims such as butchers, attackers, divided into sects, fascists and are capable of creating critical conditions to disturb peace. The west argues that the present war in the world has been stated by the Muslims in the name of religion and it can only be stopped if the Muslims desire to restore peace in the world. In this way, through the use of ideologically loaded language and competing discourses, the concept of *Othering* has been plaid up.

Wodak argues that history as a lesson is an argumentative move to establish link between the present and the past. It could be either positive or negative in nature. Such comparisons are drawn to extra degree of stress on something belonging to present but has its roots in the past as well.

¹⁷ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 23.

Finally, a conclusion is drawn from the comparison. Similarly, the text of the article being analysed is replete with examples which have been reproduced below.¹⁸

- 1- They will continue to kill.
- 2- The truth is they can strike everywhere
- 3- From Palmyra to the Valley of kings
- 4- Destroyed tourism and economy of Syria
- 5- The abiding lesson of long and blood history
- 6- Bigotry and proto- fascism
- 7- Shia Sunni Islamic history of violence and bloodshed
- 8- The plague of Muslim terrorism besmirches their religion
- 9- The system of so- called Caliphate
- 10- Bloodstained history of Islam

These examples illustrate that it has been a common feature in Islamic history to kill the non-believers. It is a constructed reality as is implied by the text of the article that the Muslims can go to any extent to materialize their desires, irrespective of harm they can bring to the innocent humanity. It is evident from the historical example as are there in the text that the Muslims damn care of others' sufferings. Another significant feature of the text is that it is a pure myth that Islam is a religion of peace. Instead, the truth is otherwise, as has been highlighted by example 05 that history reveals that Islam is a bloodstained religion according to western perception and representation either in the form of shiah sunni violence or war against the non- Muslims. Similarly, to support his stance, the writer of the article being the representative of the west mocks at the Caliphate system of Islam and alludes it with bloodshed as well. According to him there have been different systems of Caliphate in Islamic history which have been confronting each other. Most often, differences among them resulted in violence and even blood shedding. Same is the case at present among different sects in Islam. The writer argues that besides doing violent activities among themselves, they are creating troubles for the civilized west as well. The Muslim terrorist activities are consuming the west like ever and are dangerous to the west. These historical references have been cited by the writer as representative of the west to strengthen his stance that there is more of violence in Islam as compared to peace as is implied by the title of the article. In this way by using the insidious weapon of media discourse Islam and Muslims have been represented negatively by citing references from history.

Another analytical category which finds expression in the text is *victimization* which is used to represent the members of out-group as threats and dangerous whereas in groups are portrayed as the victims of such threats. Similarly, the text illustrates that Islamist terrorists are threats to the innocent western people, and they can inflict any sort of injuries to peace loving western people. The ingroup belonging to Sousse, France, G7, Western Allies, Germany etc. are and have been suffering from the violence of the people belonging out-group Hence, the use of victimization technique implies that Islam and Muslims everywhere in the world are threat to civilized western world as the examples from the text under analysis illustrates.

¹⁸ Wodak, R., and M. Meyer. *Methods of critical discourse analysis*, (Great Britain: SAGE Publications; 2001), 03.

Van Dijk asserts that the study of study of un-said meanings is implication. Most often it is observed that everything is said against un-said. The whole text of the article implies that Islam is a bloodstained religion, it kills innocents, it must be purged, it is full of butchery, the Muslims are wolves, Fascists, and are self-righteous. The unsaid of all this is that the west is innocent, ever ready to embrace positive change, is fighting a war imposed on them by violent Islamists and west is ever ready to come to good terms with Islam. The west has done ever thing it could do to end the terrorist activities of the Muslims but has come to the conclusion that this war can only be ended by Muslim scholars and leaders because hard liner Muslims are only be controlled by their ideologists. The analysis of the text implies that ideological clash still exists between Islam and non- Muslim west and the western print media being more powerful is more successful in representing Islamic ideology negatively.¹⁹

Conclusion and Summary of findings:

The research attempts to raise awareness among masses how powerful print media discourses can be in constructing and propagating a desired version of reality. Genres of newspapers' articles are significant and most often are used to propagate a desired version of reality. The use of highly loaded lexical items plays a significant role in positioning a group as belonging to in/out group. Here, in the present research lexical items carrying fear-based connotations and systematic derogatory terms about Islam and Muslims have been used to propagate a desired image of Islam and Muslims.

The research concludes that western print media is hostile in representing Islam and Muslims. It is highly influenced by social environment and a range of political and ideological influences.

The findings which have been reached are western biased attitude and phobic representation of Islam and Muslims. Another finding of the research is (mis)representation of Islam and Muslims through the articles of The TIMES has a significant effect on the western readers in providing a glaring picture of Islam and alleged association of violence with it. It is highly ideological attempt on the part of newspaper's ideologist to spotlight Islam and Muslims because people start believing what media discourses provide them. Additionally, the research reveals that all the articles (61) which appeared for the period of one year carry negative representation about Islam and Muslims. Hence, hundred percent ratio (100%) of negative representation was observed. This illustrates that west is hard upon Islam. Such type of representations are not accidental rather deliberate. Therefore, freedom of speech must be curtailed lest it should hurt others.

¹⁹ Van Dijk, T. A. *Discourse as Social Interaction*, (London: Sage Publication, 2004), 11.