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Framing Palestine-Israel (Gaza) Conflict through Western Media Post-titles: A Critical Discourse Analysis- Based Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Media discourses are important sites for ideological investment and shaping public perception about the people belonging to ingroup and out group. Print media post titles are tactfully coined to disseminate maximum of the story through minimum words. The present study critically analyses the discourse of Western media coverage of Gaza – Palestine conflict, by critically decoding the headlines of selected newspapers. The time span for data collection ranges from 2021-2024. The newspapers include BBC News, The Guardian, The New York Times, The Jerusalem Post, The Telegraph and The London Times. The study employs Fairclough's (1995, 2015) research models for doing critical discourse analysis of the selected data. The levels of analysis include textual level (lexis, grammar, agency), the interpretative level (discursive practices and framing) and the explanatory level (connections to broader ideological and geopolitical systems). The study finds that the concept of same event with different representations is a prominent feature of media discourses media representation of Us vs Them is highly polarized. It highlights that there is a definite lexical imbalance in the naming of the social actors with Palestinians being called more often as detainees or militants and Arab protesters and Israelis as hostages, civilians or victims. The sufferings of Palestinians are written in passive and impersonal forms, whereas Israeli actions are characterized in active or euphemistic forms. Besides, the study contends that media discourses mirror social reality prevailing in a particular context as desired by controlling ideological group.

Keywords: Discourse, CDA, Ideology, Western Media, Gaza Representation, Otherization, Political Rhetoric

Introduction

Gaza, Palestine has emerged as a focal point in the modern world politics not only due to the repetitive violence and humanitarian crisis but also due to the highly charged

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discursive tussle as to the naming, framing and moralizing of the Israel-Palestine dispute. Every new escalation of Gaza brings a surge of Western media texts which claim to enlighten the world population on what is going on the ground. Fairclough (1995, 2003) opines that media discourses are never a neutral rather very instrumental in representing the mirror image of reality as desired by controlling ideological group. To this end, the mainstream media images of Gaza spreading in the Western setting are thoroughly crafted using certain linguistic options favoring certain ideological view point and vested interests of the west. The Western news sources are in a strong position in the global circulation of information and tend to serve as a major point of reference to the international population and policy makers. The Western media groups use language as a tool to influence the perception of Gaza, Palestine: as a "war zone", "a terrorist stronghold", "an enclave besieged" or "a humanitarian disaster" across the globe. Even the bombing of a residential area can be framed as an "airstrike", "an attack", "a response", or "a massacre", and such western acts of brutality are represented by manipulating the insidious weapon of language.

Such politicized styles of representations are meant to highlight the dichotomy of Us vs Them. Same act may find different representations for different ideological groups . This study critically decodes the headlines of selected Western newspapers to find out media coverage of Gaza, Palestine conflict. Based on the three-dimensional approach of Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (1992, 1995, 2003), the levels of analysis include textual level (vocabulary, grammar, transitivity and evaluative meanings), discursive practices (production, distribution and consumption of such media texts), and the broader social practices within which they are embedded. The study attempts to find out different patterns of representation and how media discourses act as distorting prism to disseminate a desired version of reality to the target reader ship about Gaza conflict.

Literature Review

This section comprises three parts which introduce work already done section, operational definitions of the key terms and theoretical frame work. This has been done to justify the gap for the present study and to discuss working definitions used in the present study. The section that follows critically evaluates the work already done section. Here, in this section most relevant and recent studies have been examined.

Works already done:

Amer (2017) conducted a Critical Discourse Analysis based study of the Gaza-Israel war of 2008-2009 and data for the said study was collected from the newspapers of the US and UK. The study employed socio-semantic inventory of Van Leeuwen to the news stories which appeared in the selected data (The Guardian, The Times, The New York Times and The Washington Post) to analyze how social actors are represented through war narratives. The findings show how particular linguistic moves are employed to disseminate desired image of ingroup and others. The current study also attempts to analyze the post titles of mentioned newspapers about Gaza conflict through CDA lens.

Eldin's (2019) study provides how different actors are framed through media discourses. It dealt with media representation of Israel and Palestine through the

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headlines of Western and Arab news media from 2008-2009. The corpus assisted approach was also used to support qualitative findings quantitatively. It synthesizes the three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (2003) and the Social Actor Approach by Van Leeuwen (2008) to analyze lexical choices used in headlines for positive and negative representation.

Kareem and Najm (2024) conducted a critical discourse analysis of Western media reporting on the Israeli-Palestinian relationship and the recent print media coverage of Gaza. Based on the concept of the "ideological square" and an "Us/Them dichotomy" by *Van Dijk*, they qualitatively and quantitatively analyze news texts based on YouTube channels like *Now This Impact and Middle East Eye* and demonstrate the ways in which the Western media constructs a pro-Israeli position discursively. The study finds that Palestinians are portrayed negatively and more often negative attributes like combatants, suicide bombers, Islamic militants and terrorists are associated with them. Whereas, Israel's acts are always presented positively. Similarly, the present study focuses how linguistic framing which includes the use of linguistic strategies (lexical choices, transitivity patterns, modality and intertextuality) is employed for othering the others.

Parveen, Ashraf and Khan (2025) explored the construction of humanitarian and legitimization discourses in Western and Arab print media related to the escalation in Gaza. *Van Dijk's (20060) was used to analyze the data.* The data of the mentioned study was collected from news headlines of The New York Times, The Guardian, Al Jazeera Arabic and Asharq Al Aswat. By examining lexical decisions, metaphors, syntax, framing, attributing sources and headline framing, the study finds that Western media tend to represent Palestinians as terrorists. However, Arab newspapers anticipate occupation, injustice, humanitarian disaster and resistance by various means such as under siege, active voice to stress Israeli agency, and frames of anti-colonial struggle and regional solidarity. The review of the relevant studies justifies the gap for the present study which focuses on the ideological analysis of selected data to explore underlying ideology about Us and Them.

Definitions of Key -Terms

Discourse: *Fairclough (1992)* views discourse as language in action in society. He believes that language is a social practice and discourse constitutes and is constituted by social structures of power relations, in which it is practiced.

Critical Discourse Analyses: Critical Discourse Analysis is a conceptualization of a critical approach to language that is proposed by *Fairclough (1995)* to examine the role played by discourse in the production and reproduction of power and ideology. The present study applies CDA as a mode of analysis of how the language is used in the Western media discourses about Gaza to create specific representations and ideological stances about Us and Other.

Media representation: Media representation can be defined as those methods by which media texts are coined , organized and presented, thus creating a specific meaning and image instead of merely representational. Media representations influence the social world and its perception and understanding by the audience

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through language selection, image and narrative organization.

Western media: Western media is usually defined as mainstream news and information organizations that are located in the Western nations, especially in Europe and North America. It is more often referred to as news media that are based on the political, economic and cultural frameworks of the West and the content of which is distributed internationally over television, print and Internet sources. In this study, Western media refers to mainstream news organizations that are located in Western settings (including the US and Europe) whose English-language content is distributed to vast global audiences.

Ideology: Ideology is a set of beliefs, values and assumptions that seem natural or something obvious, yet plays the role of organizing how individuals perceive the world and justifying certain power relations. Ideology in discourse operates by providing repetitive cycles of meaning that reinforce some forms of views at the expense of others.

Headline: A headline is a primary text that is used at the top of a news story and serves to attract attention, give the reader the topic and context of the story. It is normally brief, compressed and stylistically emphasized and it usually draws attention to a single aspect or angle of the event that the article covers.

Power of language / language power: Language power, or power of language, is the ability of linguistic decisions to influence the perceptions, attitudes and understanding of social reality. In this study, it refers to how western media have employed certain words, labels, grammatical patterns and evaluative terms to create certain images of Gaza, to foreground or background specific voices, and to justify or challenge specific actions.

Theoretical Framework

The present study uses *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Three-Dimensional Model* by *Fairclough* to analyze Western print media discourse about Gaza conflict through the headlines of the mentioned newspapers. Fairclough (2003) argued that language is a type of social practice and is directly related to power relations and ideology. Through the model, it is possible to explore the way discourse influences and is influenced by social structures, especially in relation to the media. This model works at the following levels:

Text (Description): This dimension refers to the close linguistic study of the text that deals with vocabulary, grammar, cohesion and textual structures. This aspect uncovers linguistic choices which are used in framing events, entities, or groups in a specific manner through the discourse of selected Western print media headlines.

Discursive Practice (Interpretation): This stage examines the process of text production, distribution and consumption. It concentrates on how media texts are produced and received such as editorial choices, intertextuality, and the negotiation.

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These linguistic moves are used keeping in view the target audience.

Social Practice (Explanation): The last dimension places the discourse in the wider social and cultural background. It focuses on how the discourse and power structures; ideology and social inequalities are located through the analysis of language used. This is how media discourses are used to disseminate desired version of reality. The data in the present study has been analyzed by employing the mentioned model to lay bare underlying ideologies embedded in the discourse of mentioned newspapers 'post titles.

Research Question

The present study attempts to answer the following research question:
How is Palestine-Israel (Gaza) conflict represented discursively through the selected western print media headlines?

Research Methodology

The present research employs qualitative research design by drawing upon Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA. It is interpretive in the nature and attempts to find out how the Western media discourses represent Gaza conflict by using politically crafted language. The selected data in the present study has been analyzed at the level of text, interpretation of text and explanation of text. It takes into account textual and meta textual features that surround the language of western print media.

Analysis and Discussion

"Arab protesters throw bottles at police after Jerusalem barricades removed."

Fairclough (1995) argues that media discourses are never neutral rather highly politicized. The language used in them represents certain group positively and certain other negatively. Similarly, in the above-mentioned headline, by *The Jerusalem Post (2021, April 26),* the protesters are referred to as Arab protesters and not Palestinian protesters, this fact carries significant implications towards identity construction. The generalization of the protesters as the ethnically broad label of Arab is used, and the protesters are no longer identified as a Palestine nation, but rather a broader one. It is possible to view this lexical choice as overgeneralization and homogenization of social actors, in which a heterogeneous population (Palestinians in Jerusalem) is captured by a broader regional or ethnic category. Critically discoursed, this labelling can undermine the Palestinian voices to a unique national identity and instead place them in a more amorphous and unstable category of Arabs which, in the discourse of the masses, is associated with either instability or danger. Furthermore, the act of throwing bottles at the police foregrounds the behavior of the protesters and frames them as disorder makers, with the backgrounding of the context to the earlier clearing of the barricades. This mixture of a general ethic description and emphasis on confrontational behavior form a vision of protesters as a potential violent group of Arabs in general, instead of individual Palestinians with particular political complaints. The concept of othering has been plaid-up through the loaded language of

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http://amresearchreview.com/index.php/Journal/about

headline.

"Evictions in Jerusalem become the focus of Israeli-Palestinian conflict."
Fairclough (1995) opines that there are two types of powers embedded in the media discourses. They include power with in and behind discourses. Both are meant to propagate a desired version of reality to the target audience. Likewise in the above-mentioned headline by *The New York Times* by Kingsley, PK. (2021, May 7), one of the main representative news outlets of the Western world, NYT. Palestinians are helpless without any weapons or army. They are facing forceful expulsion but the use of the term *eviction* by one of the main representative news outlets shows the subjectivity of western media as Palestinians are facing Forceful Expulsion from their own homeland. Thus, the use of lexical term *eviction* mentioned in headline which means "removal of any occupier from occupation". It represents subjectivity of Western media. However, Palestinians are struggling as the struggle is the act of using a lot of effort to achieve something yet Palestinians are rigorously struggling even for their lives so how they would be able to engage in a conflict. It connotes that through media representation is highly ideological and actors are positioned according as desired by powerful ideological group.

"Death Toll rises as Israel kills Second Top Militant."
Fairclough (2003) is of the view that print media discourses are coined persuasively. Different linguistic moves are used to make media discourses persuasive and catchy. The headline mentioned above has been coined persuasively and tactfully. It appeared in BBC *news*, by Yolande Knell in Jerusalem and Elsa Maishman in London (2022 Aug). It is obvious that emotive and passive language has been used to describe the Palestinians. By using the word *militant*, they legitimate the killing of Khalid Mansour. The term *militant* holds a negative connotation, framing the individual as a legitimate target. It avoids using more neutral words like "a leader" or "fighter." There is the use of passive language in the broadcasting of well-known Western media news channels. They use the term "militant" instead of naming the Khalid Mansour. Israel has killed the second top militant of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) group and says that it launched the attacks due to an "immediate threat" from the PIJ. They legitimized the killing of Khalid Mansour, by using the term militant that has negative and security-related connotation, which positions the murder as a form of legitimate self-defense against a threatening agent. The death toll is also presented passively, it illustrates the collateral damage but leaves ambiguity about who the victims are whether militants or civilians. The combining of these two words illustrates that the ongoing tragic events are making condition of Palestine worst. The concept otherization has been plaid-up through the politicized use of language.

"Israel is proving itself as the only democracy in the Middle East."
Dijk (2006) claimed that through media discourses most often in-group is represented positively and vice versa. Even the negative attributes of self are represented in euphemized way. Similarly, the above-mentioned headline which has been taken from *The Telegraph, Simons J.W (2023, March)*, highlights the difference between appearance and reality as far as state policies of Israel are concerned. The headline

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mentioned above "proving *itself"* implies that Israeli activity is testimony to the democratic qualifications, whereas *the only democracy in the Middle East* makes Israel stand out and superior regionally. It can be viewed, though the critical discourse lens, as a good example of evaluative language and ideological framing: the idea of Israel as the embodiment of democratic values is presented, thus implicitly marginalizing or delegitimizing other accounts of occupation, displacement and human rights abuses in Palestinian land. The tensions between such a self-presentation and forced expulsions, settlement expansion and systematic restrictions of Palestinian rights are not positively represented through the language used in the headline. Rather, it naturalizes Israel's perception of being a single democratic light amid a world that is suggested to have been non-democratic. Such discursive representation can be seen to help naturalize asymmetrical power dynamics by making the state of Israel be accorded legitimate according to liberal-democratic terms and making Palestinian processes of dispossession and repression less visible in the headline frame. In this way, it is observed that media discourses play their role in representing the people belonging to in-group positively and vice versa.

"Israelis marked a month since Hamas killed 1,400 people and kidnapped 240, starting a war in which 10,300 Palestinians are said to have died".

Dijk (2006) maintained that the use of number game technique in print media is an important technique to propagate ones' stance more persuasively. This technique is used to impart certainty rather than describing things tentatively. Similarly, the headline mentioned above highlights a contrasting picture of Israeli and Palestinian death rates in the headline. It gives a very eye-opening response to the linguistic aspects of the headline. The sentence, *Hamas killed 1,400 people and kidnapped 240,* employs active verbs and explicitly identifies Hamas as the agent making it clear that they are responsible of Israeli deaths and abductions. In comparison, the statement *10,300 Palestinians are said to dead* uses a passive and distancing structure: there is no actor mentioned, and the hedge are said to have made it even weaker to understand the idea of direct responsibility. Fairclough (2003) argues that asymmetry is an example of the differential encoding of deaths in UK-US media, where Israelis usually die by direct means of Hamas, and Palestinians usually die by indirect means of authorless means. Moreover, the claim that Hamas has initiated a war is a predetermined prediction of the Israeli narrative of the causes of the conflict and hides the historical background of occupation and frequent military operations in Gaza. It is imparted through the headline under analysis that Hamas is victimizer which is ever busy in doing harm to the people of Israel.

"A total of 39 Palestinian detainees have been released from Israeli prisons in exchange for a group of hostages held by Hamas."

This mentioned headline has been taken from western news outlet, *BBC*, George Wright, Lucy Williamson (2023, Nov), presents that lexical opposition between detainees and hostages creates distinctively different images of Palestinians and Israelis. The word detainees is bureaucratic and legalistic, implying that they are people who are being detained through administrative or legal means. Therefore, it may diffuse the sense of injustice that comes with the issue of their being jailed. In

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comparison, the term of hostages is highly affective and implicates a sense of illegality, coercion and victimization, which depicts Israelis captured by Hamas as innocent targets of a crime.

Fairclough (2003) opines that media discourses are polarized and coined keeping view the target audience. The mainstream Western media tend to describe the situation in Israel as the hostages and Palestinians in Israeli custody as detainees, thus creating an impression that the former deserve more pity and should be safeguarded by the law than the latter. A journalist Des Freedman (March 2024), too, points out that "The mainstream media have played a crucial role in facilitating Israel's genocidal attack on the people of Gaza by legitimizing its military campaign". Freedman takes headlines from Western mainstream media and analyses the use of language and how the Western media is using a whole set of different vocabulary items for Palestine and Israel to represent the same events through their own perspective. Freedman also criticized how the Western media is using the term hostages for the people of Israel while using the term detainees for the people of Palestine to represent that Israelis who are released by Hamas are more in need of sympathy than Palestinians released by Israel.

"Starvation is stalking Gaza's children"

Fairclough (2003) illustrates that the media discourses are ideologically loaded and different linguistic moves including the use of metaphor is made to disseminate underlying ideology more subtly. Similarly, the above-mentioned head line from New *York Times*, Megan K. Stack (2024, Feb 29), focuses on the terrible humanitarian crisis in Gaza and uses a metaphor, in which starvation is personified as an active agent that stalks children. Although this framing is expressive and descriptive, it decontextualizes the actual reality of human and political actors who cause the circumstances of extreme food and resource scarcity. By building Starvation as a near-independent phenomenon, the headline will have the effect of formulating the situation as a tragedy but a non-personalized process instead of a culmination of particular policies, in the form of blockades and restrictions of food, water and medical supplies. It is also another instance of how metaphorical agency can be used to help the backgrounding of responsibility. Al Jazeera English is a 24-hour English-language news channel operating under the Al Jazeera media network, which is partially funded by the government of Qatar. Under this news channel, journalist Vidya Krishnan (2024, Feb 02), argues the dehumanization by Western media by using passive language. She says; "In Western news, Israelis die in active voice – Hamas "killed" or "murdered" them while Palestinians die passively. The use of politically groomed language is obvious.

"Israel agrees to pauses in fighting for polio vaccine drive."

Fairclough (20150 demonstrated that media discourses denote and connote the things simultaneously. The concept of said vs un-said in media discourses is very important. Above mentioned headline by *BBC News* presented by journalist Bennett (2024, Aug), the emphasis is made on the fact that Israel agrees to temporary pauses in hostilities and appears to be a cooperative and humanitarian actor. The lexical decision-making of pause in fighting constructs the situation as an equal battle

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between two parties that are fighting, instead of a highly asymmetrical military operation with dire effects on civilians in Gaza. The Israeli government's control over essential resources, including water, electricity, and medical aid, has created conditions where basic human rights are systematically denied to the people of Gaza. Western media appreciates this move of Israel to agree on pauses the fighting with Palestine for Polio vaccination however, they are not highlighting the major issue of brutal killing of children in Gaza. If the children of Gaza are not going to survive, then who will be vaccinated? Secondly, it is not a fight but rather ethnic cleansing, dehumanization, and genocide. As per statistics, it is evident that a major part of the death toll in Palestine consists of children. Those children who miraculously survived are deprived of their legs. The literal mention of a polio vaccine drive further frames the action of Israel as a good one filled with health intent while the larger story of such massive civilian death and devastation, especially on children is pushed to the background. Critically speaking, such a mix of lexical options helps add to the positive image of Israel as being open to the humanitarian values without explicitly presupposing the role of such humanitarian actions in creating conditions under which such humanitarian actions are required. The headline, therefore, highlights a momentary relief and conceals the systematic violence and casualties of children that is the bigger picture of the Gaza crisis.

"Nearly 70% of Gaza war Dead Verified by the UN Are Women and Children."

The above-mentioned headline by *BBC NEWS* presented by Mallory Moench (Nov 2024), prefigures a crucial and shocking fact on civilian casualties, but the presentation of the context as a *War* is itself discursively important. *Gaza war* implies the existence of a symmetrical war on similar sides and does not specifically imply the immense asymmetries in military force, control of resources and civilian vulnerability between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza. If viewed critically from the lens of Fairclough's CDA approach it is obvious from the headline mentioned above that the use of lexical item War may serve to normalize mass killing as a reciprocal, though tragic, encounter as opposed to foreshadowing the prospect of systematic victimization or structural violence against a massively besieged population. Freedman (2024) argued that the words used to describe certain situations, including war or humanitarian crisis, can be used to minimize the responsibility and intent of mass civilian suffering. Even though the headline emphasizes the point that most of the confirmed dead are women and children, who are traditionally viewed as non-combatants, it nevertheless places their deaths within the more decontextualized context of war, which might not reveal the degree to which these figures are attributable to particular policies and patterns of attack in Gaza.

Findings

The analysis shows that there is a significant lexical inconsistency in the description of Palestinian and Israeli actors as Palestinians are commonly referred to as detainees, militants or Arab protesters, whereas Israelis are commonly referred to as hostages, civilians, or victims, establishing unequal vocalizations of legitimacy and sympathy. Palestinian suffering is expressed in passive and impersonal constructions repeatedly (e.g., people are dehydrating to death, death toll is increasing, starvation to death),

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whereas violence against Israelis is expressed in active, agentic constructions (e.g., Hamas killed, Hamas kidnapped, etc.). Moreover, the study finds that the Israeli acts in Gaza are often discussed using euphemistic or neutral terms like: pauses in fighting, Gaza war, which diminish the idea of occupation, siege and the structural violence. Collectively, these discursive patterns indicate that the ways in which the western media has portrayed Gaza, presents normalizing the way power is exercised and (mis)representing the presence of Palestinian experience and agency in the discourse.

The study also finds that selective attribution, evaluative vocabulary and asymmetrical naming practices are some of the features found in texts that show how media discourse renders one interpretation as normal and marginalizes other interpretations. The general socio-ideological discussion also emphasized that the Gaza representation in Western media is internalized in the historical geopolitical orientations, security discourse and cultural legacy. These structures determine the frame of events, legitimization of actions and foregrounding of suffering. This study highlights the importance of critical media literacy and being more aware of the way language helps to maintain or disrupt current power relations by revealing the linguistic and ideological processes that support these representations. The study affirms Fairclough's stance that media discourses are best sites for ideological investment.

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