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English Media and The Representation of Islam: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper aims to study the portrayal of Islam in English media employing critical discourse analysis theory. The purpose of the research is to reveal the attitudes, prejudices, and power relations in media discourse regarding Islam and Muslims. This research, through the examination of a sample of news articles, television broadcasts, and online media content, has been able to discern patterns and discourses that help build up this monolithic and negative perception of Islam. The study indicates that commonly, Islam is associated with violence, extremism, and cultural integration thus fueling Islamophobia and stereotype. Further, the study analyses the effects of such media portrayals on the community perceptions, policy formulation and the Muslims' experiences. The paper further brings out the point that these portrayals are not only the mirror images of societal prejudices that exist in a society but they actively contribute to the reinforcement of such prejudices. The paper calls for better and fair portrayals of Islam in the media as a way of enhancing tolerance and integration in the 'new' diverse society. The findings of this research therefore play an important role in providing insights into media representation, identity, and power relations that are crucial for a positive change towards a more civilized society and media culture.

Keywords: Discourse Analysis, English Media, Islam, Stereotype, Violence

The portrayal of Islam in the English media has been an area of interest to scholars due to the increasing cases of Islamophobia and political instabilities in the world. There has been an increased concern on how media headlines in particular tend to link Islam with violence,

extremism and backwardness leading to stereotyping and prejudice (Richardson, 2004; Poole, 2002). It has been even more apparent in post 9/11 media environments where Muslims are portrayed as posing a security threat and representatives of alien culture (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). They not only define the stereotyped views that are held by the society, but also form the basis of the policies that are implemented and the ways in which people interact with each other, thus creating a cycle of prejudice and suspicion. CDA can be useful in analyzing these media narratives since it provides a framework for exploring the ways in which media content is produced, distributed and communicated through language, discursive formations and practices (Van Dijk, 1993). Through analyzing media texts critically, it is possible to identify the hidden messages, hegemonic discourse, and the way gendered Islamophobia stereotyping operates to sustain prejudice.

It is crucial to grasp how English media portrays Islam because it is not just an issue of Muslim participation in the society but also a broader public concern. Media is often a major source of information for many people, and the stories it sells can create a major impact in intergroup relations and social harmony (Said, 1981). For instance, the portrayal of Islam as violent or threatening can be detrimental since it causes the exclusion or isolation of Muslims, thereby resulting in prejudice and acts of violence (Allen, 2010). Furthermore, these representations can create an identity and a self-perception of the Muslims especially the young Muslims who are struggling to find their place in a society that is dominantly non-Muslim society (Abbas, 2001).

The main purpose of this research paper is to analyze how English media portrays Islam through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis. More specifically, the goal of the project is to study representations of Islam and Muslims in the media, in print, broadcast, and digital media. In order to achieve this goal, the study aims at analyzing the various narratives, themes, and stereotypes manifested in media content with the view of establishing or determining the distinguishable popular prejudices. Furthermore, this study seeks to examine how these portrayals have affected the perception and attitude of the audience towards the Muslim community; how negative depiction in media fuels Islamophobia and the segregation of Muslims. Moreover, the research evaluates the effects of such representations on society and policies to impacts on social cohesiveness and policy formulation. In conclusion, this paper aims to add to the existing knowledge on media representation and critical discourse analysis by presenting an analysis of the portrayal of Islam with the hope that it will encourage media consumers to gain a more accurate and fair portrayal of the Muslim experience in media.

Literature Review

A number of previous academic works have focused on the issue of how Islam is portrayed in the Western media, and the key themes and stereotypical patterns that are built into the viewer's perception and consequent attitude. According to Richardson (2004) and Poole (2002), the negative stereotyping is rife and portrays Islam as a religion that supports violent and extreme acts, as well as other atrocious vices that are considered unbecoming of modern civilization. They often lead to the reinforcement of Islamophobia discourses which increases prejudice and discrimination of the Muslim population. In addition, Morey and Yaqin (2011) state that this media context post

9/11 is characterized by the production of news stories on Muslims in terms of security threats and cultural clash thus worsening their representation.

In the context of conceptual framework, CDA is conceptualized as the theoretical framework for the study to examine the representation of Islam in Media. As a theoretical framework advanced by Van Dijk (1993), apart from identifying how to use in the analysis of media language, discourse power relations. In this respect, CDA does attempt to uncover, when and what ideologies and/or hegemonic configuration within media images exist and how they construe and persist social relations. Intertextuality or cross-referencing, framing and ideological approach are also key viewpoints in understanding how messages on Islam through specific media outlets are constructed and conveyed (Fairclough, 1995).

With reference to the available theories of media representation, there are some which aim at providing an account into the representation of Islam in English media. There are two theoretical frameworks to consider here: the Encoding/Decoding model formulated by Stuart Hall in 1980 and Orientalism by Edward Said, published in 1978, and these models make it possible to understand how representations of Islam are being constructed and circulated as well as how it is being received and interpreted by the audience. It is the researcher's plan to employ the critical discourse analysis approach in combination with theories on the media representation of Islam, to identify and then examine the ways in which English media portrays Islam and thus, how the portrayal influences public discourse and relations in the society.

Methodology

The present research adopts a qualitative research design incorporated with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to determine how English media portray Islam. While gathering information, news article, television programs and online media information are collected using a formal manner where the sources encompasses a wider area on the matter under study and possibly using a random sampling technique. The patterns of representation, stereotyping, and discursive practices as far as representation of Islam in media are analyzed with help of coding, thematic analysis, and analysis of discourse in qualitative data analysis means. Furthermore, intertextuality analysis is employed to explore how discourses on Islam construct media narratives and circulate in them. By following this proposed methodological framework, the study seeks to unveil ideologies of dominance and submission in media representations of Islam while shedding light on the processes through which such representations are produced, disseminated, and consumed.

Historical Context of Islam in English Media

The portrayal of Islam in the English media has changed through the years and this is attributed to the societal transformations and global politics. As noted by Said (1978), the representation of Islam has been informed by colonialism and orientalism, which dominated the earlier periods. Concerning the early media portrayals, the representation of Muslims and Islam was highly Orientalizing and reinforced stereotyping of the other as primitive and barbarian. However, the socio-cultural context especially after the September 11, 2001 events has changed the media portrayal of Islam and Muslims where more and more the religious symbol is being associated with terrorism and security dangers (Morey & Yaqin, 2011). The World Trade Centre tragedy and

subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have definitely enhanced the stereotype portrayal of Islam in the western media and enhancing the culture of Islamophobia (Richardson, 2004).

Political and global incidents have greatly influenced how the media presents picture of Islam. For instance, the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the takeover of the American embassy and the hostages had a major impact on media discourses about Islam leading to negative portrayal of the religion (Kellner, 1993). Likewise, the Gulf War and growth of terrorism and extremism in the form of Al-Qaeda and ISIS has played a significant role in distancing the media in the depiction of Muslims as inherently violent and anti-western (Poole, 2002). However, with the current advancement in the use of the internet and the social networks this has led to the speedy passing of wrong and distorted images of the Islamic faith that have only served to create more prejudice and stereotype (Allen, 2010). In order to gain a better understanding of the aspects that have shaped the representation of Islam in English media, this study aims to offer a brief historical background of media portrayal and key events that contributed to the construction of the media image of Islam.

Contemporary Media Portrayals

Trends of portraying Islam in the contemporary media are multifaceted and diverse due to several factors such as technological factors as well as the social, political and cultural factors in the society. A recent study highlights that there is a continuous pattern that has emerged in the Western media to represent Islam as an ideology associated with terrorism and extremism especially in the aftermath of terrorist attacks that are believed to have been conducted by groups who have links to the Islam religion (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). However, there also cases of counter narratives being presented that change the current perceptions and portray a more realistic and complex understanding of Islam. Explorations of particular media organizations or moments, for example, how Muslim communities have been addressed by the press and television after acts of terrorism, or how the Islam has been presented in popular TV shows, provide research evidence for the diverse practices of different media (Poole, 2002). Also, print, online and television media is compared and understood how Islam is portrayed in the society through these different media which has distinct advantages and disadvantage in portraying Islam to the society.

Consequently, over the last few years, the use of digital media has grown remarkably as a tool of imparting information and voicing opinions and the use of social media cannot be overemphasized. However, the availability of information through the internet has also birthed issues such as fake news and the echo chamber effect that makes users to only get information that supports their belief systems (Allen, 2010). Furthermore, there has also been emergence of citizen journalism and other sources of other news providing other forms of representation of Muslims and the Islam by the other marginalized communities in the Muslim world. In line with this thinking, the present study would follow the given objectives so as to shed light on the contemporary media representation of Islam and to canvass a broader and more diverse analysis of media, religion, and identity in the contemporary world: First, it would identify the current state of media representation of Islam and identify how various religions are portrayed in modern media.

Discourse Strategies and Themes

Preconceived notions or ideologies relating to the representations of Muslim ‘other’ promote the idea that the sacred text has the power to transform its subjects into barbaric killers. The two common explanations include negativity of this religion that can be understood from the frequent association of this religion to violence and terrorism especially after incidents attributed to terrorism by Islamist groups (Richardson, 2004). The framing of this crime in a certain way inculcates Muslims and perpetuates islamophobia. Moreover, the concepts of rescue and liberation, especially in the context of ‘liberating’ the Muslim woman, is also used, which reinforces orientalist and patriarchal attitudes towards the substrate and diverse position of Muslim women (Abbas, 2001). This shows how the discursive construction of media discourses perpetuates such narratives from sensationalist language, a focus on manipulate images, and skewed reporting.

However, media portrayal of Muslims tend to portray them as having a single identity and culture thus making the different cultures to be a facade of one. Muslims are often depicted as aliens or the ‘other’ within cultural, religious, and political contexts, who do not share the same civilizing principles as western culture. Not only does this representation exclude Muslims in society, but it further imposes the perception in those who are not Muslims as to how they should behave and generally gives them a sense of authority over Muslims. However, there are cases when attempts to resist the hegemonic constructions and essentialization of the ‘Islamic threat’ can be detected within the media discourses, the voices that question Orientalist representations of Muslim otherness and provide more complex and diverse images of Islam and Muslim subjectivity (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). In this way, through identifying the discourse strategies and the themes that emerge in media representation of Islam, this study seeks to reveal the processes of othering and the forces that lie behind determining the subject positions within them as employing power relations.

Impact of Media Representation

The media portrayals of Islam always use stereotyped stories and paradigms that were created to inform the society’s impression of the Islamic personality and tradition. One of the common tropes is the construction of the religion of Islam as being somehow naturally associated with extremism and terrorism especially in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks carried out by groups or individuals espousing Islamist ideologies (Richardson, 2004). This framing perpetuates negative perceptions of Muslims and reinforces ideas of them being threatening, which only serves to fuel Islamophobia. Moreover, the vision of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’ waiting to be saved is commonly used, which recycles orientalist and patriarchal discourse that obfuscates the Muslim women’s voice and erases their subjectivity (Abbas, 2001). Semiotic analysis of language and imagery shows how media discourses perpetuate these narratives, through the use of dramatic language, images that are out of context, and news selected from a pool.

Also, the media provide oversimplified and stereotyped depictions of Muslim identity and culture where there is actually a vast difference in the Muslim communities across the globe. Muslims are often depicted as the aliens who are different from the mainstream culture and who

hold the barbaric values that are alien to the modern civilized world (Poole, 2002). This representation not only affects Muslim communities but also calibrates non-Muslims' privilege and entitlement in ways that are unimaginable. However, there are also cases of some voice of resistance and counter narratives which are constructed within the media discourses which work in opposition to the dominant stereotype and construct different representations of Islam and Muslim identity (Morey and Yaqin, 2011). This study examines the post-9/11 media portrayals of Islam with the goal of identifying the ideologies and power relations that inform individuals' opinions of Muslims and their religion.

Discussion

The conclusions drawn from this study provide understanding of the relationship between portrayal of Muslims in the media, people's perception and social norms, and Muslim minorities. The study brings into light the extent to which negative stereotyping and prejudice characterize media depictions of Islam and the ensuing social consequences on perception and interaction. The discursive construction of the 'other' evident in the portrayal of themes like Islamophobia, stereotyping, and especially othering means that there is a need to engage critically in the media discourses to counter the dominant and normative representations of the Muslim subjectivity and culture.

These findings are discussed in relation to the CDA and the theoretical frameworks related to the representation of media, which helps to unveil the underlying power relations and ideological contexts of media content. CDA can be useful to analyze language, images and discursive practices reflected in media construction of the Islamic world, especially as it shows how discourses legitimize prejudices and stereotyping. In addition, theories on media representation provide a framework on how socio-political context and cultural factors influence media constructions of Islam and its people in general, with regard to power relations, domination, and historical influences.

However, it is pertinent to recognize certain limitations that the current research possesses. Firstly, it is subjective and context based analysis as the work depends on the researcher's perception of the context. Secondly, the amount of media coverage that will be available may also be limited due to the internet access, choice of media sources that are in English, and the media coverage in the countries that may not use English as primary source of communication. Furthermore, it has been identified that, although CDA is a useful tool for analysis, its approach may lead to the underestimation of the agency and resistance in media discourse with possibilities for over-essentialization. However, this research offers important findings to the existing body of knowledge of media representation and critical discourse analysis, as well as a richer understanding of the processes of representation, power, and identity in today's media environment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the understandings developed from the research on the English media's portrayal of Islam by applying the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Among the findings that are pointed out include prejudice and discrimination in aspects of negative attitude

stereotyping, in the area of public opinion and policies as well as its impact on Muslims and societies. This study found out that there was a differential result in contemporary media depiction where fear of Islam and Muslims continued unabated and this saw to it that Muslims were sidelined in social and political processes. These implications show that there has much to be learnt for the media practitioners as well as on the kinds of policies that are enshrined in our constitution. In this case it could be implied that media organizations have the duty of portraying some specific perceptions of Islam and it becomes the responsibility of these organization to ensure that stereotype portrays are eliminated. And this can encompass, for example, measures such as the newsroom diversity, some specific editorial positions regarding Islam coverage, as well as supporting increased interaction with Muslim audiences. Thus, it is still important to comprehend how media contributes in enhancing the extent of social identity and evaluate general actions that may assist in enhancing media literacy and countering against the presence of hatred speech and fake news in social media.

For the further research, it is possible to consider the following issues as the topics for investigation: the manifestations of media representation of minorities and its effects on the society and public discourse in the future. This forms also social critics on discriminations of presentation of Islam via online media as well as social networking sites and inter cultural as well inter linguistic comparison of the perception. Although in media sociology there are very interesting topics for future research, we can point out some significant methodological gaps that have been identified in previous discussions, For example, there is a lack of longitudinal studies in which change over time in the portrayed media representations is observed, as well as the assessment of the effectiveness of media interventions for changing the representation of Islam and Muslims in the media. Therefore, it is for media literacy to deconstruct the processes of stereotyping of the Islamic representation and for the distinct collaboration of the media practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to minimize the prejudice discourse and generate the benevolent social dialogue.

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