ORIENTALISM AND THE LANGUAGE OF IDEOLOGY: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF ROBERT SPENCER'S "THE TRUTH ABOUT MUHAMMAD"

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ABSTRACT

The present study tries to lay bare the ideological stance of Robert Spencer in his book The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion by using Fairclough's (1989)[1] three-dimensional model of CDA. It tries to analyze how Spencer (2006)[2], despite his avowed claims of neutral scholarship, has tried to paint Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Islam as a religion in a typical orientalist perspective. This Orientalist treatment of Islam and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is neither new nor novel; however, in his effort to present his great scholarship about Islam and Muhammad, the linguistic structures Spencer has used are ideologically motivated and make his efforts at maintaining impartiality questionable. Such biased treatment of Islam contributes to the islamophobia that is prevalent in the West. The present study tries to expose the ideological biases of the writer through his linguistic choices with the help of three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough (1989).

KEYWORDS

ORIENTALISM, PROPHET MUHAMMAD, FAIR CLOUGH, CDA, ROBERT SPENCER, IDEOLOGY

1. Introduction

Orientalists look at the Eastern life and religion from their western ideological lens. Under the garb of neutral scholarship, they try to paint a picture of the East which suits their own agenda. Robert Spencer too has tried to present the image of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through his orientalist perspective. Despite his claim to resort to objective scholarship as when he says, "it is not my intention—to insult Muhammad, to deride him, to lampoon or mock him, or to write anything except a scrupulously accurate account of

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[1] Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

[2] Spencer, R. (2006). *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion.* New York: Regnery Publishing.

what he said and did about some key issues" (Spencer, 2006, p. 16)[3], he has made deliberate efforts at degrading the personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as the preacher and a political leader by using the ideologically loaded language in his book, *The Truth about Muhammad: The Founder of World's most Intolerant Religion*. As the title itself shows, the book is biased in its approach both in terms of the historical facts mentioned and the language used. He has tried to portray Islam as a violent religion by misrepresenting the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through the language that is highly loaded and at times even slanderous. The present study tries to lay bare the ideological biased language used by the author in portraying both Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)According to Phillips and Hardy (2002)[4], interactions are interpreted in the social environment and upon these interpretations the social realities are constructed which help in building a discourse. Only by doing the critical analysis of these discourses the implicit ideologies behind these social realities can be found. This study, therefore, explores the use of biased and loaded linguistic choices in (mis)presenting the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as a violent and intolerant person. Orientalism refers to the study of the Eastern societies, cultures, religions and people by the Western scholars (Said, 1979)[5]. This view has been adopted basically to criticize Islam in general and Prophet (P.B.U.H) in particular. The researcher has selected the extracts from Robert Spencer's book (2006): *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion* to reveal how the author has presented Prophet Muhammad as xenophobic and intolerant person despite the usual claim of neutral scholarship by the orientalists. The present study uses the theoretical framework as well as the methodology of CDA because of its suitability in analyzing the linguistics structures in relation to unequal power structures (van Dijk, 1993)[6]. According to van Dijk (1989)[7], CDA helps in exposing the social as well as political

[3] Spencer, R. (2006). *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion.* New York: Regnery Publishing.

[4] Phillips, N., & Hardy, C. (2002). *Discourse analysis: Investigating processes of social construction*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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[7] Van Dijk, T. A. (1989). *A handbook of discourse analysis*. London: Academic Press Limited.

inequalities and it also aims to change these inequalities with justice for the improvement of society. Hassan ET. Al (2019)[8] have similar views about CDA that it focuses on how with the help of text or speech one can execute his/her authority politically, socially and economically. Wodak (2001)[9] also believes that CDA studies language in relation to society.

Western societies generate discourse known as "Orientalist Discourse" for Eastern societies and as a result, the orientalist discourse of West creates a dichotomous link with East (Mora, 2009, p. 418)[10]. Sozen (1999)[11] has defined the Orientalist discourse as "putting into effect of West as a systematic scientific discipline which has associations, publications, customs, language and rhetoric in order for the West that aims to transform the East to actualize this aim" (p.138). Yegenoglu (2003)[12] posits that "Orientalist discourse tries to place in a certain status and to position the establishment process of the Western subject differently from the colonialist discourse" (p. 12-13). Mora (2009) has defined the purpose of Orientalist discourse as "West exploits other countries and communities through inflicting cultural change and transformation on them either from within via colonialist movements or from outside via 'Orientalist' discourses in line with its imperialist objectives" (p.418). Similarly, Parla (2001)[13] states that European people created massive texts according to their own perceptions of East by reproducing and adapting the perceptions of East. Hence, the orientalist discourse helped the West to perceive the East in a way that suited their needs.

2. Aim of the Study

The main aim of the study is to analyze the strategies the author has used to portray Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) in particular and Islam as a

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[8] Hassan, W., Rehman, A., Zafar, A., Akbar, F. & Masood, S. (2019). An Application of Fairclough's Three-Dimensional CDA Approach to Fraser Anning's Speech in Australian Senate. *Linguistic Forum* 1(1). http://linguisticforum.com/index.php/ling/article/view/5

[9] Wodak, R. (2001). What CDA is about: A summary of its history, important concepts and its developments. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 1-13). London: Sage.

[10] Mora, N. (2009). Orientalist discourse in media texts. *International Journal of Human Sciences*, 6(2), pp. 419-428. ISSN:1303-1534

[11] Sozen, E. (1999), Soylem, Paradigma Yayinlari, Istanbul.

[12] Yegenoglu, M. (2003). *Somurgeci Fantaziler, Metis Yayinlari*, Istanbul.

[13] Parla, J. (2001). Oryantalizm, Hayali Dogu. *Atlas Magazine*, (96), http://www.kesfetmekicinbak.com/atlaslar/y_dergi/arşiv

religion in general in a specific light that suits his ideology. It also intends to determine the extent to which the author has failed to maintain impartiality.

## 3. Overview of Robert Spencer's Book

Spencer's book titled, *The Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion* was published in 2006 by Regnery Publishing which is a subsidiary of Eagle Publishing. These publishers are notorious for publishing highly insidious books against Islam such as *The Politically Incorrect Guide to the South (and Why it Will Rise Again)* and Robert Spencer's first book, *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam (and the Crusades*. The book Truth about Muhammad carries a quotation which intends to highlight the violent nature of Islam. So, the very outlook of the book is prejudiced.

5. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The framework selected for this study is Fairclough's (1989)[14] three dimensional model of CDA for analyzing the implicit and explicit agenda of the author. The model has been selected for its efficacy in analyzing the implicit ideologies of the authors in constructing the discourse about social as well as political realities. Since most of the orientalist writings are primarily political in nature as they try to present a particular picture of the East to the West which suits their agenda, the discursive strategies used by the orientalists are an important concern of CDA, hence the use of three dimensional model.

Fairclough's model presents the three stages of analysis i.e. as description, interpretation and explanation. The following figure represents the dimensions of the analysis.

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[14] Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

Dimensions of Discourse
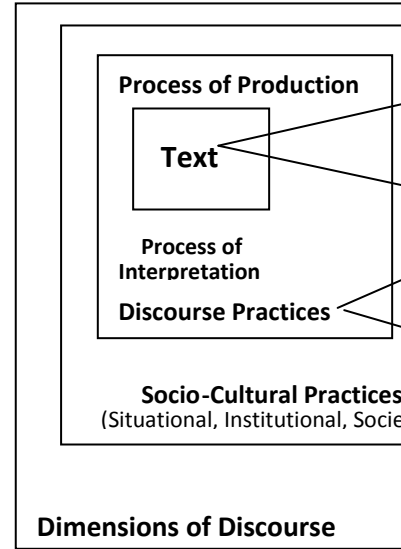
Source: (Fairclough, 1989)

According to Fairclough, social practices not only help in producing the text but they also have a key role in the reception of a text. So, a text is analyzed by taking help from its social context as well as the dominating discursive practices of a social context. The first dimension of CDA, known as "textual description", deals with the description of a text. It deals with the main content of the text by focusing on the vocabulary and grammar in order to illustrate the author's ideology that resides within the particular text. Baker and Ellece (2011)[15] point out that the first stage of Fairclough's CDA is related to the Hallidayian Systematic Functional Grammar which is concerned with the formal properties of the text. Fairclough believes that, "text analysis is just one part of the discourse" (1989, p. 109).[16] The second dimension of Fairclough's model, known as "discursive practice", deals with the interpretation of a text. It focuses on the production as well as consumption of the text. According to Fairclough (1989) "interpretations are generated through the dialectical interplay of cues" (p.141). This stage provides the deep understanding of the text and social structures. The discursive practices constitute the social identities and relations. At this stage, actions, interactions and social relations are emphasized. The third dimension of Fairclough's

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[15] Baker, P. & Ellece, S. (2011). *Key Terms in Discourse Analysis.* New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

[16] Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

model of CDA is known as "social practice", and it deals with the explanation of a discourse. This stage explains the underlying power relations of the first two stages. Fairclough (1989) defined it as "the relationship between interaction and social context" and "a social process, as a social practice, showing how it is determined by social structures…." (p.163). This stage focuses on the power of discourse and how ideologies are affected. All these dimensions are interrelated to highlight the ideology that resides within the text. This model helps in interpreting the text in its sociopolitical environment. The data has been selected through purposive sampling from the text of the Robert Spencer's book (2006): *The truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion*. The data has been analyzed by applying the Fairclough's (1989) model.

6. Data Analysis

Extract 1

> From the vantage point of fourteen hundred years later it is virtually impossible to tell with any certainty what is authentic in this mass of information and what isn't. Muslims themselves acknowledge that there are a great many forged ahadith … what the historical Muhammad actually said and did well-nigh insoluble. (Spencer, 2006, p. 25)[17]

Analysis

In this passage, the writer has tried to question the authenticity of the Islamic religious texts by referring to the distance of fourteen hundred years. The main point he is trying to make is that Islamic texts are not authentic because fourteen hundred years have passed and their authenticity cannot be confirmed. The very passage carries a logical fallacy. Islamic texts do not become less authentic only because fourteen hundred years have passed since they were created. That makes the argument weak and the stance biased. The language itself is highly biased. Despite the claims to the contrary, the use of linguistic structures like "virtually impossible to tell with any certainty what is authentic in this mass of information and what isn't" and "from the vantage point of fourteen hundred years later" show the inherent bias and the writer's deliberate attempt to discredit the Islamic religious texts without any solid proof. The words "forged ahadith" are insidious and defamatory in their nature and intention. The phrases like "historical Muhammad" and "well-nigh insoluble" to talk about the teachings of the Prophet (P.B.U.H) show that the author is desperately trying to present Islam and Islamic teachings as

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[17] Spencer, R. (2006). *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion.* New York: Regnery Publishing.

old, redundant and anachronistic and far removed from the present day realities. All these techniques have been used to misguide the non-Muslims about the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and Islam.

Extract 2

"From a strictly historical standpoint, it is impossible to state with certainty even that a man named Muhammad actually existed". (p. 31)[18].

Analysis

In this passage, the author deliberately tries to refute the very existence of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). The lexical choices of the author such as 'impossible', 'certainty' are used to create doubts in the minds of the readers about the existence of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W). These words are highly contested relationally as well as socially. The author has used these words to generate doubts in the minds of non-Muslims. This passage too carries a logical fallacy of ad hominem: the fallacy of attacking the person instead of answering their arguments. Spencer has used the classic orientalist technique of creating misperceptions about the Orient in order to try to justify the Occident. He has challenged the very existence of Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) with an unconvincing and vague argument because he had no supporting historical proofs to justify his argument.

Extract 3

Muhammad did not hesitate to extend the cycle of revenge… Ever since Muslims began fighting in imitation of their warrior prophet, this has been their standard of behavior" (Spencer, 2006, p. 119). In the second paragraph he stated that "….. In the third paragraph he declared..."

Analysis

In this paragraph too, Spencer has tried to deliberately use the lexical choices to prove albeit without proof that Islam is religion of violence and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) was the originator of that violence. The very constructions "the cycle of revenge" and "warrior prophet" are highly incendiary and provocative. The author has made a contradiction to what he has already stated as Islam being a peaceful religion and the Holy Prophet (PBUH) being a peace-loving person. In the initial pages of his book he quoted the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as saying, "You do not do evil to those who do evil to you, but you deal with them with forgiveness and kindness" (p. 4) and then again he says, "Muhammad didn't begin his prophetic career as a warrior, although he had

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[18] Spencer, R. (2006). *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion.* New York: Regnery Publishing.

participated in two local wars between his Quraysh tribe and a neighboring clan." (p. 95). Despite making these concessions, Spencer goes on to make personal attacks against the personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) later in his book. This only shows that the author, instead of finding enough material to prove anything wrong with the Holy Prophet and Islam in general, tries to make personal attacks under the influence of his radical ideology.

Extract 4

From a twenty-first-century perspective this is one of the most problematic aspects of Muhammad's status as "an excellent model of conduct": the treatment of women as war prizes … women victimized by this across the Islamic centuries (p. 133-134)[19].

Analysis

In this passage, the author tries to unjustly blame the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and Islam for starting the tradition of using women as war prizes despite the fact that this tradition was in vogue even before the Holy Prophet (PBUH) who in fact stopped this tradition. The author's use of irony in the shape of "an excellent model of conduct" proves his bias and his deliberate attempt at ridiculing the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and Islam. The statement has been made despite the author's earlier claim about the Holy Prophet: "The Prophet Muhammad who established the first known constitution in the world … the championing of the welfare of women, children and the poor, living as an equal among his people … giving any man or woman in parliament the right to vote, and guaranteeing respect for all religions" (p. 2). This again follows the pattern of contradicting the earlier claims later in the text just to stick with his ideology of hatred and Islamophobia. It also follows the Orientalist tradition of distorting the reality and portraying it inaccurately and thus making their claims of impartiality questionable.

Extract 5

Islam was founded by Mohammed, a demon-possessed pedophile who had twelve wives, and his last one was a nine-year-old girl (p. 170).

Analysis

The author, despite his claim of impartial scholarship, seems to follow the
 age-old adage of when you can find nothing wrong against your opponent, start abusing him. The author has used highly biased and abusive words like "demon-possessed" and "pedophile". The use of such

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[19] Spencer, R. (2006). *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion.* New York: Regnery Publishing.

words is unbecoming of any serious researcher and highly offensive for the Muslims. The very purpose of using such words is to incite hatred and unrest among Muslims so that some of them show some reaction and they may again get a chance of branding them as violent. This policy of inciting hatred by abusing the sacred religious figures of Muslims is an old ploy used by the Orientalists. Instead of researching himself about the real age of Hazrat Ayesha (RA), the author has resorted to believe some contentious sources about her age at the time of her marriage with the Holy Prophet (PBUH) just to call him a pedophile. This lays bare his claim of impartial scholarship and smacks of his own personal ideology of hate and vendetta.

7. Conclusion

This study has tried to explore how Robert Spencer has used a very decidedly ideologically loaded language in his book ''Truth about Muhammad: Founder of the World's most Intolerant Religion'' as an instrument of launching personal assault on the personality of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H). His claim of impartial judgement becomes questionable by his own linguistic choices of the words which are extremely disparaging, offensive, judgmental and paradoxical.

The use of discursive strategies to make discourse not only socially but also relationally and globally undermine the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and as a results human beings (Muslims as well as Non-Muslims) are affected due to such strategies. These "member resources" according to Fairclough (1989) become "specifically as ideologies" (p. 166). The present study aims to show to the readers how Robert Spencer has used language as a tool to fulfill his political agenda of Islamophobia by degrading, without any proof, the image and personality of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) by using highly incendiary and slanderous choice of words. With the application of CDA, this study has analyzed that the author has used language to misrepresent and distorted the reality about Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H).

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