

Review of Studies on Media Portrayal of Islam, Muslims and Iran

Maryam Jahedi (Corresponding author)
Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: 60-182126578 E-mail: jahedi_m@yahoo.com

Faiz Sathi Abdullah
Department of English, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: 60129789764 E-mail: drmfaiz@gmail.com

Jayakaran Mukundan
Department of Language and Humanities Education
Faculty of Educational Studies
Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia
Tel: 60-389468172 E-mail: jayakaranmukundan@yahoo.com

Abstract

This research aims to provide an overview of studies carried out on media representation of Islam, Muslims and Iran. The study intends to present theoretical and methodological approaches used to focus on media discourse as well as the findings of research on the treatment of Islam and Muslims by the mass media. Drawing on approaches such as framing paradigm, Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, Van Dijk's ideological square and critical discourse analysis, the previous literature illustrated the role of media discourse in the production and reproduction of Islam and Muslims as the negative Other.

Keywords: Islam, Framing analysis, Media representation; Muslims

1. Introduction

This paper attempts to review previous studies which examined how the mass media portrayed Islam, Muslims and Iran. The mass news media have a great role in shaping public opinions and they may ideologically sustain and reproduce social power relations and dominance through "privileged access to discourse" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 255). Moreover, news discourses "do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct and constitute them" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 3). Miller (1995) considers "the dependence of national identities on media of mass communication" (p. 31). He claims that what holds nations together are beliefs, which can be transmitted only through

cultural artifacts such as newspapers, electronic media, and so on. It is clear in the above notion that there are relations between news discourses and constructing nations; however, “the news does not reflect or construct the world truthfully: rather it constructs the world in such a way as to conform to an image shaped by partial interests -typically those of the powerful” (Montgomery, 2007, p. 21). Similarly, Said (1997, p. 49) states that “newspapers, news and opinions do not occur naturally; they are made, as the result of human will, history, social circumstances, institutions, and the conventions of one’s profession;” therefore, there is a “qualitative and quantitative tendency to favour certain views and certain representations of reality over others” (ibid.).

2. An Overview of Previous Studies

2.1 Portrayal of Islam and Muslims

Americans who were asked to name the words that come to mind when they think about “Islam” and “Muslims” named those events and names that associated with violence such as Osama bin Laden, the 9/11 tragedies, the idea and practices related to oppression such as jihad, and the places limited to the Middle East such as Iraq and Iran (Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2008, p. 3). Representation is defined as the “production of meaning through language” (Hall, 1997, p.16). According to Hall (ibid.), we use signs to communicate meaningfully with others. Moreover, languages can use signs not only to symbolize, stand for, and refer to objects, people, and events in the real world, but also they can indicate imaginary things and abstract ideas. Hall (1997) also argues:

Meaning is produced within language, in and through various representational systems which, for convenience, we call ‘languages’. Meaning is produced by practice, the ‘work’, of representation. It is constructed through signifying - i.e. meaning-producing-practices.

(Hall, 1997, p. 28)

Hall’s (1997) constructivist approach to representation of the Other highlights the discursive nature of the media representations. Hall (ibid.) argued that the Others, majority of Them rather than Us, are represented through binary form of representation such as “good/ bad, civilized/ primitive, and ugly/ excessively attractive” (p. 229). Further, he stated that representations of the Other, which he calls images, do not carry meaning on their own; however, they accumulate meaning by referring to other texts and contexts. This refers to intertextuality which is defined as “accumulation of meanings across different texts, where one image refers to another, or has its meaning altered by being ‘read’ in the context of other images” (Hall, 1997, p. 232).

Besides, Said's (1978, 1995) study is notable among other scholars as he offered a critique of Orientalism, or the Western construct of Muslim societies, and highlighted that certain representations of reality favor over others. Said (1995) described Orientalism "as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" i.e., Muslim societies (p. 88). In other words, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (ibid.). According to Said (1978) principle dogmas of Orientalism include "absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior"; the Oriental other is "eternal, uniform, incapable of defining itself", and requiring either to be feared or controlled (pp. 300-301).

Adopting Foucault's notion of power/knowledge, Said (1995) examined the discourse of Orientalism and observed that the West exercises power on the Orient through constructing specific kinds of knowledge about them. Said (1978, 1995, 1997) confirmed the distorted portrayal of Muslims by the American media, and argued that Islam was depicted as a backward and irrational religion. Similarly, Manan (2008) argued that dominant images and metaphors used to categorize Islam and Muslims include: "images of primitivity; images of violence and conflict; and metaphor of evil and animal metaphors" (p. 126). Lazar and Lazar (2008, pp. 104-107) also found the following Orientalist stereotypes in the U.S. presidential speeches attributed to Arab/Muslim Orientals: "Arabs thrive in conflict situations"; "moral degeneracy of the Arab Other"; duplicitous Arab; and, "uncivilized Other."

In the study of the news about conflict between Arabs and Israelis, Ghareeb (1983) argued that Western journalists attributed virtue to Israel and malevolence to the Arabs; hence, depicted Arabs as "backward, scheming, fanatic terrorists who are dirty, dishonest oversexed and corrupt" (p. 7). He introduced five major reasons that the media failed to cover the Middle East fairly and objectively: (1) cultural bias; (2) a think-alike atmosphere within the media; (3) the Arab-Israeli conflict; (4) media ignorance; and, 5) the Israeli lobby.

Similarly, Shaheen (1984) studied how Arabs were represented in the broadcast media by examining popular entertainment programs, cartoons and major documentaries, as well as independent and public channels that were related to Arabs. Shaheen (ibid.) pointed out that American television tended to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: "they are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism" (p. 4). Examining several American magazines, Suleiman (1988)

concluded that the majority of American news coverage on the war between Arabs and Israelis was biased against Arabs. According to him, the Israelis were portrayed as “Western-like and democratic”; whereas Arabs were represented as the “‘bad guys’, the aggressors against the ‘peace-loving’ Israelis” (ibid., p. 33).

Hafez (2000) highlighted that the Western mass media have a great tendency “to characterize Islam as a fanatic and violent religion cutting-off hands, repressing women, and representing a clear antagonism towards Western ideas of freedom, human rights and democracy” (p. 5). With the focus on broadsheet newspapers, Richardson (2004) suggested that ideological square (Van Dijk, 2000) has central role in the representation of Islam and Muslims as the negative Other. Richardson (ibid.) argued that through stereotypical topoi Muslims were represented as military threat; threat of extremism; threat to democracy; and social threat (gender inequality). According to Richardson (2004, p. 78), “anti-Muslim prejudice” was emphasized through referential strategies in the news, and “violence, religious extremism, and acts of terrorism” committed by Muslims were also highlighted. Further, Richardson (ibid.) argued that Muslim Iranians were depicted in a prejudicial manner and as a threat to the world.

Alazzany (2008) examined the representation of Islam and Muslims in *The NYT* news discourse after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 till 2003. Adopting Fowler’s (1991) critical linguistics and Fairclough’s (1995) approach of textual analysis, he found that the ideological themes such as violence, threat, evil and so on dominated in the news discourse which helped representation of Islam and Muslims as a threat to global stability. Alazzany (2008) argued that strategies of generalization and selection were ideologically significant in the news discourse as they were deliberately used to create a biased representation of Islam and Muslims by emphasizing the coverage of chaotic situation, but ignoring the positive aspects of the Islamic countries. He concluded that *The NYT* constructed the dichotomies of moderate versus extremist; and internal Muslims versus external Muslims. Indeed, according to Alazzany (ibid.), American Muslims were represented as peaceful moderate Muslims; however, external Muslims were portrayed as extremists, zealot, and violent who exercised extremist version of Osama bin Laden.

Examining two magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, Manan (2008, p. 124) argued that through the strategy of negative-other presentation the media represented “Islam and its many followers as deviant, volatile, evil, and anti-modern” after the September 11 attacks.

2.2 Media Representation of Iran

Dorman and Farhang (1987) studied the U.S. coverage of Iran since 1951 till 1978 in the U.S. mainstream press, including *The New York Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall street Journal*, *The Chicago Tribune*, and *The Los Angeles Times*. Using frame analysis, they compared the treatment of Iran by the U.S. media in different periods, namely before and during the year of Revolution, and observed that Iran was portrayed differently in those periods. According to Dorman and Farhang (ibid.) frames mean “constructions of social reality that result from journalistic decision making about what information to include in a news story, what language to use, what authorities to cite, which nuance to emphasize and so on” (p. 8). Dorman and Farhang (1987) found that the media used the terms such as “stern-willed”, “determined”, and “autocratic” to describe the Shah, but they represented the Revolution as “the result of something more fundamental: religious reaction” (p. 165), and “as more the work of turbaned religious zealots” (p. 166). Tadayon (1982) also found that American media distorted the image of Iranians, and as a result 90 percent of Americans were unfavorable towards Iran.

Entman’s (1991, 1993) studies were also rooted in framing paradigm (Goffman, 1974; Gitlin, 1980; Entamn, 1991) which according to him “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation”, and so on (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Gitlin (1980) has defined frames as “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (p. 7). Entman’s (1991) framing analysis focused on comparing the U.S. media coverage of two civilian airplanes that were shut down by the military: first, the downing of a Korean Airlines jet by a Soviet fighter plane in 1983, killing 269 passengers and crew; second, the U.S. downing of an Iranian plane in 1988, killing 290 passengers and crew. He found that the choices of words, metaphors, images, and so on emphasized by the media depicted very different pictures of the two incidents. Entman (ibid.) concluded that by de-emphasizing agency and the victims, plus the choice of graphics and adjectives, the media framed the U.S. downing of the Iranian plane as a technical problem, whereas the Soviet downing of the Korean plane was represented as a moral outrage.

Similarly, Mughees-uddin (1995) argued that the U.S. media portrayed Iran in a negative way, for example, as a “terrorist” or “fundamentalist” country. He believed that the major reason of such a negative image of Iran was related to its “Islamic character” represented as a threat to regional peace, and the interest of the U.S. and Israel. In the same

way, Gottschalk and Greenberg (2008), who studied political cartoons, observed that the actions of Khomeini and the revolutionaries of Iran were lexicalized as “crazy”, “backward”, “violent”, and “irrational” because of their association with Islam.

Drawing on Van Dijk (1998) and Halliday’s systemic functional linguistics, Koosha and Shams (2005) examined the headlines of six British newspapers’ coverage of Iran’s nuclear program from 2003 till 2006 to investigate how they transmitted particular ideologies. Focusing on *The Telegraph*, *Daily Mail*, *The Guardian*, *The Mirror*, *The Times*, and *The Independent*, they highlighted the discursive dichotomy of Us (EU as the savior) versus Them (Iran as a threat) as being salient in the news texts. Koosha and Shams (ibid.) argued that the dominating themes on Iran centered on “‘crisis’, ‘defiance’, ‘danger’, and the like’” (p. 115); whereas the EU was represented through the themes of “*power*, *crisis solving*, and *world-protection*” (p. 116). They also found that the British papers portrayed a negative image of Iran according to the “west-dominated international politics” (p. 134).

In the same way, employing Said’s concept of Orientalism and Van Dijk’s “ideological square”, Izadi and Saghaye-Biria (2007) looked at the editorial coverage of Iran’s nuclear program from 1984 to 2004 in three American newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. They examined the ideological role of the news media in their depiction of U.S. policies towards Iran’s nuclear program together with a focus on the construction of in- and out-group identities. Examining the lexical choices and argumentative structures of the editorials, Izadi and Saghaye-Biria (ibid.) found six Orientalist themes as the ideological underpinnings of Us (the West) versus Them (the Islamic Iran), comprising, as it were, “Oriental untrustworthiness”, “Islam as a threat”, “Oriental submissiveness”, “Oriental irrationality”, “Oriental inferiority”, and “Jews versus Muslims” (p. 151).

Similarly, using transitivity system and Fairclough’s (1998) framework, Behnam and Moshtaghi Zenouz (2008) aimed to show how Iran’s nuclear program was portrayed in four Iranian and British newspapers, namely, the *Iran Daily* and *Kayhan*, as well as *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. Through the transitivity analysis, Behnam and Moshtaghi Zenouz (ibid.) argued that the British media misrepresented Iran’s nuclear program and depicted the nation as “the perpetrator of a dreadful outrage and a social deviant” (p. 213). They also discerned an underlying ideology of polarization which represented the EU as “Us” and Iran as “Them”.

Jahedi and Abdullah (2012a) focused on the news discourse of the New York Times news media to examine how linguistic means and discursive strategies were used to portray Iran after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Moreover, they aimed to find how the media may contribute to negative or positive portrayal of Iran. Adopting critical discourse analysis, the findings showed that the media drew a negative image of Iran; it was constructed as the negative Other (violent, untrustworthy and a threat to world peace), and as part of the “axis of evil”.

When Iran along with North Korea and Iraq is described as “axis of evil”, it reminds us the three members of World War II, including Germany, Italy, and Japan (Peña, 2002; Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007). Axis “is a metonym for Nazism and fascism”; therefore, nobody “can say anything good about the Axis Powers, and anyone compared with them is stigmatized” (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007, p. 426). Besides, according to Heradstveit and Bonham (2007) the phrase “axis of evil”, “targets entire countries, not their leaders” (p. 437); thus, it appears that the media depicted a negative picture of the Iranian nation as a whole.

Drawing on critical discourse analysis and systemic functional linguistics, Jahedi and Abdullah (2012b) have also examined the discourse of Iranian hostage crisis (1979-1980) and the news texts around Iranian presidential election in June 2009 appeared in the front-page news articles of The New York Times. The study aimed to show how language properties were used to portray Iranians and to shed light on the observation that the news texts on Iran had ideological implications. The study found that through the processes of thematization, transitivity and lexicalization, the news media polarized between Us and Them; Iran was presented as out-group to associate negative attributes (evil, violent, etc.) to them.

More recently, Douai and Lauricella (2014) examined media representation of Sunni-Shia relations which had not previously been highlighted in the literature. Drawing on framing theory, propaganda model (by Herman and Chomsky), and Said’s concept of Orientalism, Douai and Lauricella (2014) investigated the news on Sunni-Shia relations appeared on two Western news media, including *Washington Post* and *The Globe and Mail*. They (2014) found that the news media had a negative tone in portrayal of the news regarding Shia/Sunni sects and portrayed tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam “from the ‘war on terrorism’ perspective” (p. 7).

3. Conclusion

According to the literature, the mass media play a significant role “on the production and reproduction of beliefs, opinions, stereotypes, prejudices, and ideologies” (Wodak & Busch, 2004). Previous studies showed that the dominant mass media tend to marginalize the Other and misrepresent the events regarding Islam and Muslims. It is found that despite considerable body of research on media representation of Islam and Muslims, little research has examined how the two major sects of Islam, Shia and Sunni, were treated by the mass media (Douai & Lauricella, 2014). Adopting different approaches such as constructive theory of representation, Orientalism, framing analysis, ideological square, and critical discourse analysis, previous research illustrated that the news media tried to portray a negative image of Islam, Muslims and Iran. The negative portrayal of Muslims was intensified following the September 11 attacks in 2001 (Peña, 2002; Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007; Manan, 2008; Salim, 2010, Jahedi & Abdullah, 2012a) and it is obvious that the mainstream news media depicted an overall negative picture of Iran after George W. Bush’s contentious “axis of evil” thesis. It seems that the “axis of evil” metaphor probably affected the West’s views on Iran (Heradstveit & Bonham, 2007).

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