

**Linguistic Framing of Religious Identity
in Global Media Narratives:
Analysing the Arba'een Pilgrimage
of Imam Hussain through
English Discourse**

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Abstract

The paper looks into how the English media language frame of Arba'een pilgrimage of Imam Hussain can be used to expand the notion of religious identity. This study uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by adopting Fairclough's three-dimensional model (1995) to analyse four media texts in order to know how discourse practices have been used to create the perceptions of Shia Islamic identity in the global spectrum. The study aims to investigate the lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical devices used in media to frame the Arba'een pilgrimage and to how the linguistic framing of the Arba'een pilgrimage in English discourse influences public perceptions of Shia Muslim identity, communal solidarity, or geopolitical narratives. The analysis shows that media forms relying on the orientalist models tend to focus on spectacle and neglect spiritual meaning and construct a number of antinomies between secular Western and religious Eastern worldviews. The results have shown that language can play an important role in protecting the picture of religious practices and personal identity in the minds of people through the correct use of use of headlines text, descriptive language and framing the context of the language. The paper concludes that the way power relations incorporated in media discourse led to the marginalisation or legitimisation of religious communities. These results have impacts on examining the representation of religious minorities in the media and language, which is used to create otherness across the world.

Keywords: Religious Identity, Media Discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Arba'een Pilgrimage, Linguistic Framing.

Introduction

An example of these largest gatherings of people on an annual basis is the Arba'een pilgrimage, held in commemoration of the forty days after the martyrdom of Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala and attended by millions of Shia Muslims worldwide (Nakash, 2019). Although it is one of the most grandiose pilgrimages with profound spiritual implications (Szanto, 2018), focused coverage of the event in Western media remains sparse, and where it is covered, it is subject to linguistic and cultural filtering, fostering distorted perceptions of Shia Islamic identity (Richardson, 2004). Religious representations in media discourse play a pivotal role in state-building and sustaining social identities, particularly for religious minorities operating in secular or religiously heterogeneous environments (van Dijk, 1993).

Media discourse does not passively describe reality; instead, it constructs meaning through linguistic choices, framing devices, and discourse practices embedded in broader power relations and ideologies (Fairclough, 1995). The construction of religious identity in media has gained significance in our globalized society, where outlets wield immense influence over public perceptions of religious groups (Said, 1997). The linguistic framing of Arba'een in English-language media reflects broader patterns of religious representation and identity formation in contemporary global discourse (Karim, 2003).

This study addresses a gap in scholarship on the linguistic construction of Shia Islamic identity in global media. While extensive literature exists on mainstream media portrayals of Islam generally (Saeed, 2007), little examines rhetorical strategies in reporting Shia-specific rituals and their role in identity construction (Mottahedeh, 1985). The Arba'een pilgrimage serves as an ideal case study due to its scale, spiritual significance, and divergent media representations (Afary & Anderson, 2010).

Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its theoretical framework (Wodak & Meyer, 2016), this paper analyses textual, discursive, and social practices in media representations of Arba'een. CDA reveals how micro-level language choices reflect and reinforce macro-level power structures (Fairclough, 2003). Four media texts will be examined to identify linguistic framing trends and their implications for religious identity construction (Baker et al., 2013).

Aims of the Study

The study aims to:

- Investigate the lexical, syntactic, and rhetorical devices used in English-language media to frame the Arba'een pilgrimage.
- Analyze how different global media outlets (Western, Middle Eastern, and independent sources) linguistically portray the Arba'een pilgrimage.
- Explore how the linguistic framing of the Arba'een pilgrimage in English discourse influences public perceptions of Shia Muslim identity.

Literature Review

1. Islamic Media Coverage:

The study of the Islam representation in the western media has recorded trends of Orientalist discourse, securitization and othering (Karim, 2003; Said, 1978). The theoretical underpinning of the analysis of the Western media reproduction of the Islamic Other through language and cultural tropes was provided by Edward Said (1978) in his seminal work Orientalism. This model has influenced the current research that explores how the media has framed Islamic practices as tools of power systems and cultural subordination (Mamdani, 2004; Morey & Yaqin, 2011).

In the linguistic studies of Islamic media coverage, a similar set of discursive patterns is observed. The study by Poole (2002) of the British newspapers and the study by Richardson (2004) illustrates how the lexical and metaphorical choices (e.g., radical, fanatic), narrative patterns frame Islamic practices as alien, threatening or incompatible with Western secular values (see also Baker et al., 2013). These kinds of strategies create a binary opposition to Islam and the West, which strengthens cultural and ideological boundaries (van Dijk, 1993).

The media studies also point to the tendency to view Islamic religious events (the pilgrimages, festivals, and rituals) through a secular western prism, focusing on the spectacle, the number of people, or the security threat rather than the spiritual or cultural meaning of the event (Esposito & Kalin, 2011; Eide et al., 2008). This reductionism can be seen as a part of a wider tendency in the Western media to reduce complicated religious phenomena to sensationalized stories, which fit into the already established ideological frameworks (Saeed, 2007; Rane et al., 2014).

It is important to note that there is very little attention given to media reports on Shia Islamic practices in scholarship. Although Islam has been studied through the lens of the Sunni-centric portrayals (Mottahedeh, 1985; Afary & Anderson, 2005), linguistic constructs of Shia rituals including their sidelining or distortion have received little attention (Nakash, 2019; Szanto, 2018). Given that it is one of the most significant Shia religious events, the Arbaeen pilgrimage provides a discerning case study to explore these representational gaps and their consequences on Shia identity construction in the global discourse (Aghaie, 2004; Rahimi & Gholami, 2017).

2. Power Relations in Religious Media Discourse:

The connection between media representation and power relation in case of a religion discourse has been well theorized in the discourse critique studies. Media institutions have certain social, political, and economic backgrounds that determine their representational functions and ways in which the religious groups will be represented to the general society. These power relations do not exist simply as external conditions but are also found in the linguistic and the discursive practices that are used in the media texts.

Critical discourse analysts have shown that media portrayal of religious groups reproduces and underpins the existing power relations and social structures. The source choice and the preferences given to linguistic frameworks as well as the underlining of the description of certain areas of religious practices have their role in the building of particular subject positions and categories of identities. Such representational decisions pose implications in the real world about the way that religious communities are conceived, understood and treated in wider social settings.

The power of discourse, which was described by Fairclough (1989) and van Dijk (1993), constitutes a theoretical framework that allows comprehending the ways of how media institutions can guide the power by using linguistic means and frames. The media agencies have immense influence to define the perception that people have on religious beliefs and people based on its choice of representation. Such power is both what is said and what is omitted, stressed and pushed to the edges of the media reports.

The studies of the religious media discourse have exposed the way power relations get operationalized within the framework of diverse linguistic strategies: exceptional wording, metaphorical patterns, narrative textures. These words are part of a general ideological stance that leads to the preserving of the existing social hierarchies. It is important to appreciate these power relations in order to understand the construction and negotiating of religious identity using media discourse.

Theoretical Framework

1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):

The given research draws the main theoretical basis on Critical Discourse Analysis that offers its systematic understanding of the role of discourse as the central social practice that both represents and shapes the social reality. CDA is especially well suited to analysis of media discourse because it specifically takes up the question of the links between language, power, and ideology within textual representations. The approach understands that discourse is not neutral, rather it is unavoidably influenced and influences configurations of social relations, social arrangements, and social identities.

The critical orientation of CDA resonates with this paper to explore the way, the power relations are situated in media representation of the religious practices. According to CDA scholars, discourse analysis is not only supposed to present the linguistic characteristics but also to focus on the role of various features in reproduction or changes of social inequalities and power. Such critical attitude is important in helping to comprehend how media depictions of the pilgrimage of Arba in the realm of religion manifest and reproduce, on a more general scale, patterns of religious marginalization or legitimization.

CDA has been described as a rather multidisciplinary approach which relies on linguistic, sociological, psychological, and political sciences in order to offer a broad framework of discourse analysis. This discursive approach opens the possibility to study linguistic matters in greater contexts of social and cultural backgrounds which furnish an understanding of how a decision of texts can reflect as well as create social relationships and social identity. The methodology is especially helpful in the study of religious media discourse that functions on the boundary of the linguistic, cultural, and ideological systems.

The radical nature of CDA conforms with the objective of this study that aims not only to describe the media representations but also aspire to bring about a more critical comprehension of how the representations themselves operate in the society. The combination of speaking about how choices in language help build religious identity can help improve media coverage of religious practices and religious people generally, by making it more balanced and sensitive.

2.Framing Theory in Media Studies and It's Application to Religious Coverage:

Framing theory is another supporting theory to the above discussion aimed at explaining the influence of media representations on meaning and the comprehension of the masses. Framing theory, which originated as described by Goffman (1974) to be subsequently adopted in the field of media studies by others like Entman (1993) or Gitlin (1980) analyse how the media texts are structured and presented to inform and lead to specific interpretations and knowledge of events and issues.

Framing theory has been used in the study of religious media coverage by the provision of explanation on the manner in which media bodies choose, highlight and contextualize facts on religious beliefs and practices as well as religious groups. Such framing views are not impartial but indicate special ideological standpoints and cultural assumptions concerning religion, spirituality and cultural distinction. Frames used in coverage of the media is vital in the perception and interpretation of the audiences on religious practices and communities.

The collection of religious media framing researches has made it evident that there are a few frames which are used frequently in the coverage of the Islamic practices and communities. They constitute the security frames,

which focuses on the issue of threatening security or conflicts, the cultural frames, which refers to the Islamic practice as foreign or exotic and the political frames, which conceptualizes religious practices as being related to a larger geopolitical situation. All these frames create various implications and connotations towards the interpretation of religious identity and community.

Applying the framing theory in the study of the coverage of Arba'een pilgrimage shares the possibility of identifying certain framing strategies as well as their consequences in terms of constructing religious identity. In analysing the presentation of the pilgrimage in scale, significance, cultural context, and political implications, an analysis will be able to determine patterns in the practices of representations processes and its implications on the cognition of the general population on Shia Islamic identity.

3.Identity Construction Through Language:

Language is central to the development and sustenance of social identities of which religious identity is included. With the help of choices of language usage, individuals and institutions place people in specific categories of identities and social relations. Language in the study of identity is a more significant aspect in the analysis of discourse especially in analysing how identities of minorities are constructed and negotiated in media discourse.

The construction of religious identity using language deals with several linguistic practices beginning with the level of use of language including word choice, syntax to wider narrative patterns and discursive practices. The depictions of religious activity in the media are used to create a religious identity by the contextualizing religious groups in specific cultural and social contexts, making some aspects of the religious process central and others peripheral, and institute relations between religious and worldly orientations.

The formation of the religious identity through media discourse is even more complicated in case of the religious minority groups working within the domains of rather secular or of a different religious environment. The representational media can be regarded as one of the main sources of knowledge about religious practices to the audience unfamiliar with specific traditions, and thus, the language decisions, which these media use, can be considered especially important to the construction of an identity and a perception of a community.

The study of the construction of religious identities has shown that the linguistic means of categorization, comparison, and evaluation are involved in the process of the positioning of religious groups within the wider social hierarchies. These discourses are not inert, they index, and promote, what already exists in terms of cultural assumption and power relations about religious difference and legitimacy.

4.Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model:

The three-dimensional model that Fairclough offers has a thorough structure of discourse analysis which involves the discourse by text, discourse in discourse practices and discourse in social practices. The model is especially appropriate to use in the analysis of media discourse because it makes it possible to investigate the linguistic properties in the context of their expansive production, distribution and consumption.

Textual level of Fairclough model depicts the study on usage of linguistic features in a textual context such as vocabulary, grammar, cohesion, and structure of a text. The focus of such a level of analysis is the analysis of how specific elements of language are used to create meaning as well as discourse positioning in regard to subjects. Textual analysis, which is one of the approaches used in media analysis, entails analysing

how such linguistic features as metaphor, transitivity, and modality have been used in representing religious practices and religious communities.

A dimension of discourse practice analyses the situations of the production, distribution and consumption of the text. This analysis looks at the production conditions of media texts based on specific institutional settings, the distribution of media texts to the audience, consumption and interpretation of media texts. In the case of the religious media discourse, this dimension is concerned with the style of representation of the religion acts by means of the analysis of the editorial policy, the work of journalists and readers that determine the direction of the text.

The social practice dimension is dealing with the larger scope of social and cultural practice in which discourse takes place. This is the level at which the connection between discourse practices and other social structures as well as power relations and ideology systems is analysed or examined. In the case of Arba'een pilgrimage coverage, such dimension means analysing the representation of the media in terms of its contribution to or reflection of more general processes of religious marginalization or legitimization in the contemporary globalized society.

Data Analysis

The data analysis section examines four media texts covering the Arba'een pilgrimage, applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model to understand how linguistic framing constructs religious identity. Each text is analysed for its textual features, discourse practices, and social practices to reveal patterns in religious representation and identity construction.

1. Analysis of Text (1):

“Millions of Shia Muslims converge on Iraq's Karbala for Arba'een pilgrimage, one of the world's largest religious gatherings. The annual commemoration draws pilgrims from across the globe to honour the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD” (Reuters, 2023).

Textual Analysis: The use of quantitative modelling in the first sentence is highlighted by a reference to millions and both in itself and following in the body text creates the first point of content-scale as the overriding index of newsworthiness. The word converge indicates a synchronized march towards a denouement which brings to mind the idea of mass mobilisation which might cause fear of insecurity among the western viewers. The uses of the phrase to label the event as one of the largest religious gatherings in the world put it in the international comparative context and not based on its spirituality in the event.

The second sentence creates the historical opening by the use of such an idiom as annual commemoration that expounds on the pilgrimage as an event of remembrance rather than a living spiritual adventure. The term martyrdom is used, which conveys Western notions of sacrifice and struggle to the Islamic reader, and the historical date given, 680 AD, lends historical distance, which can imply a more distant and therefore more ancient issue, than modern one.

Discourse Practice Analysis: the discourse shows a lack of cultural background on the background of the facts tradition of a typical Western news agency. The editorial choices show themselves in the production context where the price replaces the emphasis on the qualitative dimensions of spiritual manifestations as something inconsequential and incommensurable to the number and the date. The dissemination by the means of the international news wires implies a reading audience that does not know about Islamic practices, necessitating the explanatory framing putting emphasis on the pilgrimage as an alien cultural practice.

Social Practice Analysis: The language selections point to wider patterns in the mainstream media west to portray the Islamic ways of life through worldly concepts whereby primacy is given to natures that are visible to the naked eye than those that are spiritual. The rhetoric of scale and distance in history portrays the pilgrimage as a mass movement based on primordial wars instead of taking place in the modern religious life. It is a part of framing that is a form of othering of the Shia Islamic identity because this framing presents the practice as something dissimilar to the western-religious or secular commemorative practices.

2. Analysis of Text (2):

“The massive pilgrimage sees devotees walking for days from across Iraq and neighbouring countries, creating an extraordinary display of faith and endurance. Security forces have been deployed to ensure the safety of pilgrims as they make their way to the golden-domed shrine of Imam Hussein” (BBC News, 2023).

Textual Analysis: Massive is used as an adjective that supports the framing on scale, whereas devotees places participants on the level of the religious person opposed to the active spiritual person. The mention of

walking days indicates physical difficulty in pilgrimage and is a sign that appeals to the western appeal of religious adherence in terms of physical toughening. The phrase, extraordinary display of faith, makes the pilgrimage look like a show to watch, rather than a religious exercise to partake in.

The second line brings in security rhetoric with security forces have been deployed which slates the pilgrimage under western discourse of security in covering Islamic events. The use of such orientalist descriptive language as golden-domed shrine that stresses on architectural exoticism and the mention of Imam Hussein who brings out the more personal nature of religious individuality to the Western audiences are all included in the phrase.

Discourse Practice Analysis: Editorial policy of the BBC is based on the traditions of the public service broadcasting which aims at informing the viewers about what is happening in the world and at the same time keeping culturally aware. The linguistic decisions, however, have some underlying assumptions on the knowledge of the audience and cultural positioning. The production environment brings about editorial choices in the decision between informational content and the accessibility to the western public not at all familiar with Islamic practices.

Social Practise Analysis: The text is reflective of Western media general trends to define Islamic occurrences as the physical hardiness and security images. The stress on the visual experience of mass pilgrimage makes it formulate the Shia Islamic identity as an embodied and public entity instead of a spiritual and internal experience. The security framing contextualises the pilgrimage in terms of possible unrest, a part of existing Western uneasiness regarding Islamic events and gathering, and their social impacts.

3. Analysis of Text (3):

“The Arba’een pilgrimage represents a powerful demonstration of Shia unity and resistance, with participants often chanting slogans commemorating Hussein’s stand against tyranny and oppression. The event has taken on increased political significance in recent years, particularly in the context of regional sectarian tensions” (Al Jazeera English, 2023).

Textual Analysis: The part of the text that creates the pilgrimage as a political exercise instead of a pure spiritual activity is the term powerful demonstration. The notion of unity and resistance brings invariances of political terms to define the identity of Shia Islamic being, and such terms are constituted in the paradigms of group and resistance. The mention of the slogans being chanted polarizes the religious expression into political agitations, whereas the mention of Hussein standing up against tyranny and oppression framed the historical figure as political revolutionist instead of a religious figure.

By making the pilgrimage politically significant and sectarian tense, the second sentence clearly politicizes the religious practice by rendering it into terms of conflicting and divisive poles. It characterizes Shia Islamic identity within the discourse of threat and sets up a political existence thus, posing danger to regional stability.

Discourse Practice Analysis: The editorial style of Al Jazeera shows strong cultural orientation of the organization as a Middle Eastern news channel that is more acquainted with the Islamic cultures and the context of the region as compared to Western cultures. An aspect of the context of production recommended by the editors to make political aspects of religious practice central to their creation is that the network was more concerned with political processes in the region. On the level of linguistic choices, pre-assumptions of the knowledge of the audience regarding the sensory Islamic history and the modern Middle East politics are made.

Social Practice Analysis: The excerpt is representative of general trends in Middle Eastern coverage that pay special attention to political aspects of religion. The work of the pilgrimage into a political demonstration places the Shia Islamic identity within the discoursed space of resistance and opposition, which can naturalize the existing stereotypes around Islamic practices as overtly political. This framing includes the securitization of the religious identity by implying the political threat of spiritual practice.

4. Analysis of Text (4):

“For many pilgrims, the journey to Karbala represents a profound spiritual experience, offering opportunities for reflection, community bonding, and renewal of faith. The pilgrimage embodies core Islamic values of sacrifice, compassion, and social justice, connecting contemporary believers with foundational religious principles” (The Guardian, 2023).

Textual Analysis: The identity of the pilgrimage as a very spiritual experience is placed under debate with the help of the phrase; profound spiritual experience. The phrasal concepts of reflection, community bonding and renewal of faith give a precedence to internal spiritual aspects rather than outside the political connotations. The mention of the so-called core Islamic values places the pilgrimage in universalistic religious categories instead of sectarian ones.

It is in the inclusive use of language (contemporary believers and founding religious principles) in the second sentence that a seventh feature is assembled linking the past religious practice to the present. Not only do inscriptions on Islamic values translate into understandable Western terms but also hold onto the authenticity of the religion due to their values of sacrifice, compassion and social justice.

Discourse Practice Analysis: The editorial policy of the Guardian was influenced by the liberal Western traditions in the media industry that inherently means paying attention to cultural understanding and religious

tolerance. The production environment implies the editorial approach to relate culturally sensitive content with the focus on spiritual rather than political aspects of religious practice. The language used displays expectations of readers in the religion experience and culture variety.

Social Practice Analysis: The text also shows the wider trends of liberal Western media which strives to frame the Islamic practices in a positive way but not to lose the accessibility in front of the Western observers. The focus on the spiritual aspect defines the Shia Islamic identity as able to meet western notions of personal religion and equality. This characterization reminds part of the humanization of Islamic thought, as it introduces them to a universal context of spiritual pursuing and moral devotion.

Conclusion

The analysis of four emblematic Englishlanguage news reports—Reuters, BBC News, Al Jazeera English, and The Guardian—demonstrates that media language does far more than convey information about the Arba‘een pilgrimage: it actively constructs, negotiates, and legitimizes Shia Islamic identity. Western agencies repeatedly mobilize quantitative metrics and security rhetoric, framing the pilgrimage as a mass spectacle necessitating logistical oversight; this emphasis on numbers and control overshadows the event’s profound spiritual dimension and perpetuates a narrative of Shia practice as an ‘other.’ Middle Eastern portrayals foreground political resistance and communal solidarity, linking the ritual to broader sectarian power dynamics. Liberal Western outlets, while reintroducing values such as compassion, sacrifice, and social justice, nonetheless confine these discourses within familiar cultural schemas, thereby perpetuating residual orientalist assumptions. Across all cases, lexical choices (e.g., “massive,” “spectacle,” “resistance”) and framing devices at the discursivepractice and socialpractice levels reveal how power relations imbued in language either marginalize or humanize minority religious identities.

Interpreted through the lens of Fairclough's threedimensional model, these findings validate and extend the study's guiding hypotheses: linguistic framing functions as a vehicle for ideological positioning, reflecting and reinforcing entrenched cultural biases. At the textual dimension, recurrent metaphors and modality choices reveal evaluative stances; within discourse practices, editorial policies and distribution channels shape which narratives gain prominence; and, at the social level, media representations intersect with historical and geopolitical power structures to produce socially consequential perceptions. Theoretically, this integration of Critical Discourse Analysis and framing theory offers a robust framework for examining how microanalytic textual features scale up to macrolevel societal effects.

From a practical standpoint, the research underscores the imperative for media organizations to adopt reflexive editorial guidelines: integrating spiritual narratives alongside logistical details; ensuring balanced source selection, including voices from Shia communities; and critically interrogating security and politics-oriented tropes. Journalists and editors might establish partnerships with religious scholars to contextualize cultural specificities, thereby mitigating misrepresentation. Furthermore, media literacy initiatives—targeted at both producers and consumers—can foster critical awareness of framing devices and promote more nuanced public discourse.

Despite its contributions, the study has limitations. The selection of four outlets within a single year constrains generalizability; moreover, the exclusive focus on Englishlanguage print and online reports omits audiovisual and socialmedia forms where multimodal framing may operate differently. Future research should expand the corpus both longitudinally and across languages, investigate audience reception to framing strategies, and explore the interplay of textual and visual framing in digital platforms. Such efforts will deepen understanding of how media discourses shape religious identities in an increasingly interconnected global public sphere.

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