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Fear as a Political Propaganda: A Study on *Politics of Fear* by Al Gore

Madan Prasad Baral

Abstract

The practice of creating fear for personal interest or the interest of the political party is common throughout the world. Politicians use any sort of practice for power hunting. Fear not only influences the discourse but also shapes knowledge and reasoning capacity thereby creating an illusion in people. To expose illusion, counter-discourse or positive discourse is required. This study aims to explore how counter-discourse exposes illusion and creates awareness taking reference from the text 'Politics of Fear' by Al Gore. The study is done using the document analysis method and the information is analysed based on the framework consisting of five discursive strategies viz. framing, countering publicly, and counter-discursive strategies (logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing) for contesting the mainstream discourse as introduced by Macgilchrist (2007). It is argued that 'Politics of Fear' by Al Gore was an attempt to create awareness among the public against propaganda created by the then US President George W. Bush during election through the television advertisements.

Keywords: Propaganda, critical literacy, critical discourse analysis, counter-discourse, positive discourse analysis

Introduction

People opine that politicians are ready to use any strategies because of their power craze. This practice is justified using various arguments such as 'politics is a dirty game', 'There is no permanent foe in politics', and so on*.* Language and arguments of politicians generally lack credibility though they present their arguments in such a way that the general public is easily convinced. So, we need to have a critical lens to evaluate the authenticity of the public message found in the political discourse. As people are being brainwashed using persuasive language to allure the general public through the technique called propaganda (McClintock, 2005), it is our responsibility to empower people to free themselves from the grip of the illusionary language of politicians. To combat this scenario, the relevancy of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is increasing day by day. CDA blends the ideas from critical theory and discourse analysis and aims to explore the role of discourse as a hegemonic tool for exercising power (Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). Van Dijk (2001, p. 332) defines CDA as "a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the political context". Thus, CDA aims to critically explore the "relationship between language, ideology, power and social structure, for example, social inequality as it is constructed, re-produced, legitimized, and resisted in language and other modes of

communication" (Catalano and Waugh, 2020, p.1). Van Dijk (2001) lists gender inequality, ethnocentrism, antisemitism, nationalism, racism, media discourse and political discourse as the research areas of critical discourse analysis. So, critical discourse analysts present themselves against social inequality and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist all forms of oppression.

CDA has a practical association with critical literacy for identifying the forms of oppression in discourse through formal instruction. Critical literacy is deeply rooted in community and adult education throughout the world in general and postcolonial countries in particular (Morrell, 2015). Henry A. Giroux, Peter McLaren, Ira Shor, and Paulo Freire have contributed to bridging the between critical pedagogy and critical literacy (Nouri, & Sajjadi, 2014). Rogers and Wetzel (2013) assert critical literacy as a core area of an educational programme and propose three approaches to critical literacy: linguistic, multiple literacies and social justice. The linguistic approach to literacy concentrates on linguistic features such as text, structures, and their social functions. Multiple literacies are concerned with literacy through digital technologies and globalized communication networks whereas the social justice approach to critical literacy is oriented towards social transformation and emancipation.

Literature Review

The relevant literature regarding discourse analysis has been analysed in the following themes.

Positive Discourse Analysis: Counter Discourse

Simply, discourse analysis aims at identifying the hegemonic elements of a discourse. However, in practice, there is a constant struggle between hegemonic discourse and counter-discourse i.e. the discourse of hegemony and discourse for social justice counter each other. CDA is criticized on the ground that the researcher selects the discourses that justify the ideological biases of the researchers as it motivates the selection of features for personal attention and leaves a large number of texts un-interpreted (Bartlett, 2012). He further opines that CDA mainly focuses on negative tendencies and manipulations but does not concentrate towards social justice and emancipation whereas positive discourse analysis (counter-discourse) examines the credibility of the dominant message. In this reference, positive discourses are oriented towards positive change in the social world enhancing the emancipatory potential of the oppressed groups (Macgilchrist, 2007) and attempting to reveal as well as protest the domination created by power (Terdiman, 1989). Although counter-discourses are not sovereign and do not exhaust reality, reality can neither exist nor change without them (Terdiman, 1989). Thus, the use of counter-discourse is the key to maximising awareness against violence. (Oparinde & Matsha, 2021). This shows that counter-discourse is to aware people, combat illusionary discourses boosted by power centres and strengthen emancipatory potential.

Terrorism as the Dominant American Discourse

The US is a leading country in world power politics. The US establishment claims that its goal is to struggle against terrorism. So, terrorism has been a buzzword in the US context for a long and is also associated with the hatred of US people towards the Islamic community (Considine, 2017). It is a strategy of achieving the intended result creating fear in the larger society and terrorists justify the significance of their violence claiming that it is a means to bring positive change in the wider society (Garrison, 2004, Ganor, 2002). Most researchers are reluctant to provide a concrete definition of terrorism and take terrorism as a subjective concept and one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter (Garrison, 2004). However, Ganor (2002) refuses this proposition and argues that terrorism and guerrilla fighting should be distinguished. As Guerrilla fighters target military personnel, terrorists deliberately target civilians (Ganor, 2002). Schmid (2004) suggests a conceptual framework for interpreting terrorism discourse consisting of five conceptual lenses: terrorism as/and crime; terrorism

as/and politics; terrorism as/and warfare; terrorism as communication; and terrorism as/and religious fundamentalism.

General people opine that terrorism necessarily involves violence. However, Schmid (2004) opines that the concept of terrorism should not be limited only in terms of violence but its meaning is close to propaganda though violence and propaganda are close to each other. Violence aims at changing public behavior through force while propaganda aims at behaviour modification through persuasion. Terrorism uses violence as well as propaganda for behaviour modification. In this context, Altheide (2006) concedes that terminologies such as crime, victim, and fear are associated with terrorism to influence public discourse which is used as a tool for manipulating public sentiment by political decision-makers.

The existing socio-political agenda of the elite community shapes reality. Terrorism is an agenda that the US has been using for its interest to dominate its foes, which ultimately creates illusions to the world community in general and the US citizens in particular. American establishment creates new metaphors as discourses of illusion and combines them with other features of language and rhetoric for using that discourse for its interest. American strategy for combating terrorism can be regarded as the discourse of terrorism in form while the discourse of illusion in its substance grounded on fear (Bhatia, 2008). In a similar context, Riegler (2010) reported that American films always distort the accurate information regarding the root of terrorism and its developments and create an illusion for the general public. Similarly, Kam and Kinder (2007) opine that American reaction to terrorism relies on the ideals of *ethnocentrism*, keeping one's group in the center of everything which influences both cognition and belief giving space for both positive as well as negative emotions. The US school coursebooks include content on terrorism which ultimately creates fear, and terror as well as an illusion in the students towards terrorism (Burnham & Hooper, 2008). The U.S. attack on Iraq in 1998 by the Clinton government was justified creating fear against children claiming that the rescue of children promotes human rights (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999). American President George W. Bush announced a global campaign against the war on terrorism after ten days of the September 11 attack on the twin Towers for winning the hearts and minds of disaffected people in lands where terrorism thrives (Mockaitis, 2003). After that, language on the war against terrorism became dominant in the US political discourse (Jackson, 2018). The cursory view of the prevalent discourses may lead to the conclusion that American discourses are illusionary and excessively sensitise and emotionalise the public sentiment towards terrorism. Fear is increasingly used as a part of the discourse of fear and the discourse of fear is taken as a resource (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999).

After the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, former Vice President Al Gore criticized the American president for adopting an immoral strategy for party interest. Similarly, in 2016, Hillary Clinton also criticized Donald Trump for creating fear for the future (Jost et al., 2017). They concluded that the perceived threat of terrorism enhanced political benefits for certain presidential candidates.

Selection of the Text and its Rationale

As I have taught the course entitled *Interdisciplinary Readings* in M. Ed. first semester, I found this text quite relevant not only in American but also in Nepali context. This created a sort of curiosity in me to make a critical study of this article for intensive study and its implication in Nepali politics as well. So, I have studied the relevant literature to ensure that similar studies have been carried out on this issue and found that no studies have been conducted earlier. This encouraged me to carry out the study on this issue.

The article 'Politics of Fear' was published in 2004 in *Social Science Journal* published by John Hopkins University Press as an article and later included in the first chapter of the book entitled *Assault*

on Reason (2007) by Al Gore, the 45th American vice-president and presidential candidate in 2000 and winner of Nobel Peace Prize of 2007 (Stefoff, 2008, Turque, 2000). It counters the American discourse presented by the American establishment that was intended to incite fear in the people. I have used the lens of positive discourse analysis as the counter-discourse for analyzing the text. In this connection, this paper aims to explore the discourse elements in the text that counter the illusions of the discourse by the then-American establishment led by George W. Bush.

Methodology

This study is based on secondary sources as the already published sources have been used for information collection analysis and interpretation of the results. The text 'Politics of Fear' by Al Gore was the primary text and framework suggested by (Macgilchrist, 2007) was the basis for analysis. For this purpose, I have collected the sources, made initial screening to identify their relevancy and made their review and analysis.

Findings and Discussion

This section includes the theoretical framework, the findings of the study and a discussion of existing theories and earlier research.

For analyzing the discourse, this work adopts the framework prescribed by Macgilchrist (2007) for positive discourse analysis consisting of framing, countering publicly, and counter-discursive strategies (logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing). Framing refers to the background knowledge required for an in-depth understanding of the text. In the process of analyzing discourse, the researcher needs to explore the social, cultural, historical or economic background in which the discourse is created. Framing also includes the style of presenting the content and the writers' alignment or perspectives (Huckin, 1997). The second step demands countering the discourse in the public through mass media or public speech. The discourse presents the logic against the mainstream discourse for enhancing the emancipatory potential by arousing critical language awareness against the mainstream discourse (Wallace, 1999). The five basic strategies can be used to counter the text: logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing. In an inversion, the authors invert the mainstream view as simply countering a dominant frame when logical arguments do not work. For example, the discourse 'terrorism' is inverted with 'politics of fear'. Similarly, parody is the conscious form of intertextuality that involves insult, exaggeration and satire on social and political phenomena (Berger, 2016).

Intertextuality, a term explained by Bakhtin (1935), is the major feature of the text as texts borrow or refer to previous texts. For the present context, parody is the technique to indicate the illusions of the mainstream discourse. In complexification, the issue is consciously raised and circulated in higher mainstream media. Complexification is the common technique of party and populist politics (Schrøder & Phillips, 2007) to attract public sentiment or wide circulation of the message. Partial reframing is simply a technique of shifting an issue from conventional tradition to the alternative by providing enough justification with logic and knowledge. It creates room for presenting different interpretations allowing different meanings in new contexts. Radical reframing involves reporting an issue not only through dialogue but also with another background. Mainstream media might ignore the views of the oppressed groups and we have to invert mainstream views with logical arguments. Four level of explanation is sought in radical reframing: Lexico-grammar, publication, blending and the curiosity gap. In the lexico-grammar strategy, the author uses externalization, scare quotes, parody, and nominalisations to prove that the article is controversial and interesting to the readers. Balance or impartiality is the basic criteria in modern media which compels them to give space for the publication of alternative views. However, articles may be rejected if they cannot include at least one dominant frame in their discourse e.g. anti-

terrorist position in this instance. In blending, the author uses the background to create alternative views to counterattack the mainstream view while making it acceptable for the mainstream audience. Blending is used to make the marginal discourse and its explanation acceptable to the mainstream audience. Blending contributes to arousing the curiosity of the audience which makes the article likely to be published as editors are oriented towards its sale and business. No discourse is complete in itself and there is a continuous struggle to fill the gaps in the dominant discourse which is the scope of curiosity gap. This is possible by giving appropriate space to the marginal discourse. Marginal views can use appropriate techniques to fill the gap and fix their meaning to counter illusions and dominance.

In this paper, my objective is to explore the features of counter-discourse in the text 'The Politics of Fear' by Al Gore. My claim is that the text is counter against the American establishment and an example of counter-discourse for enhancing public awareness and avoiding illusion. To justify my claim, I have examined the text as per the framework prescribed by (Macgilchrist, 2007) for positive discourse analysis consisting of framing, countering publicly, and counter-discursive strategies (logical inversion, parody, complexification, partial reframing and radical reframing) as stated in the earlier section. A detailed analysis of the text is presented in the following section.

Framing and Countering

The text *Politics of Fear* by Nobel Peace Prize-winning author Al Gore highlights the exaggerated fear of Iraq intentionally created by the Bush administration after the Twin Tower attack. This created a negative attitude among the Americans against Iraq. The text is persuasive and uses impressive quotes and references such as 'Terrorism is the ultimate misuse of power for political ends,' 'Fear is the most powerful enemy of reason (Gore, 2004 p. 779). The text is the first unit of the seminal book entitled *'Assault on Reason.'* There is a reference to Al-Qaeda, a broad-based militant Islamist organization founded by Osama Bin Laden (Cohen-Almagor, 2017). The text expresses dissatisfaction with the exaggerated fear of terrorism created by the administration to exploit public sentiment. The text shows its alignment towards international peace and justice in favour of reason. The discourse is the counter against the dominant discourse and is published through Amazon, the internationally recognized publishing house.

Complexification and Partial Reframing

To complexify the issue, the author has associated the issue with party politics and public sentiment which resulted in the wide circulation of the message. As there is a reference to the mid-election of 2002, Democrats and Republicans, as well as sympathy towards the Islamic community, the issue has been effectively complexified by the author. Enough logic and justification have been supplied for reframing the issue (Dunaway et al., 2015). This shows that Al Gore successfully complexed the issue through media and reframing of logic is also sufficient.

Parody and Intertextuality

After the twin tower attack in the US, George W. Bush ordered American forces to attack Iraq as Saddam Hussein was charged with being linked with Osama Bin Laden in the attack. The appeal by Bush on television played a role in creating fear of terrorism. Thus, this text is a satire on the political administration led by George W. Bush. The author parodies the television advertisements played on mainstream television.

Apart from the parody, the text also involves references from other authors and texts. This phenomenon is called intertextuality in discourse. The author borrows from Edmund Burke, Louis D. Brandeis, F. D. Roosevelt, and Jorgen Habermas to mention a few (Gore, 2004).

Radical Reframing

The author has successfully used the criteria of radical reframing in the text. For this, he provides extensive background from past to present and becomes able to draw the attention of mainstream media. He presents logical comments against the mainstream argument that all Islamics are terrorists and challenges the establishment to present evidences. The author used several quotes that enhance the linguistic strength of the text. He begins his arguments by stating strong dissatisfaction against terrorism as the persuading tool for mainstream media and creating curiosity in the audience. Sufficient justification has been presented by the author to address the curiosity of the audience.

This study has explored the counter-discursive properties in the text, 'Politics of Fear' however it did not analyse how power influenced reality. Further studies can be made about critical language awareness and power relations.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has presented the counter-discursive properties of Politics of Fear by Al Gore. After examining the text through the lens prescribed by Macgilchrist (2007), it is found that the text countered the mainstream discourse and is an instance of counter-discourse that contributed to mitigating illusions created by mainstream discourses. Taking reference to the analytical framework, it is found that the text is counter against mainstream discourse and tackles illusion in a majority of people. Thus, the fear created by the then-American establishment for personal or party interest has been contributing to creating an illusion in public sentiment. Thus, the text contributed to creating public awareness against the illusions caused by the media language. As the present study is based only on counter-hegemonic and critical dimensions, a more extensive study is required based on wider samples of the author. As discourse is used for the interest of a certain person or group and it should always be viewed with skepticism. In this reference, the discourse vividly counters the established discourse that the American establishment struggles against terrorism. The discussion shows that 'Politics of Fear' by Al Gore has successfully countered the mainstream discourse.

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Mr. Madan Prasad Baral has been engaged for about two decades in teaching, teacher training and research. He is a teaching faculty at Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara. He has authored and co- authored about half a dozen of research articles in national and international journals, edited peer-reviewed journals and presented papers at various conferences. His research interests are critical discourse analysis, critical literacy and content and language-integrated learning. https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4133-2739