

# Social Actor of Iranian Minority Representation by American Online News Media: a Critical Discourse Analysis

Hawraa Farhan Muhammad Jawad, Muayyad Omran Chiad

M.A Student, Prof

English Department,

University of Karbala, Karbala, Iraq.

**Abstract:** Within the framework of critical discourse analysis, this paper aims to study Iranian minority representation by American online news media. After an overview of social actor model is provided, the selected discourse is analyzed on the basis of Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor model. Positive self-representation and negative other-representation in relation to minorities is conducted. Implicit racist ideology in American selected sample is made explicit.

**Key words:** social actor, minority, American reports, ideology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper critically discusses a linguistic and ideological analysis of Iranian minority representation by the selected American online news media.

All states, according to the United Nations (2012:2), more or less, include religious, ethnic, linguistic, etc. group/s of people less than majorities in number called minorities. Iran as a complex society for its population variety has assembled various clusters of minority groups that constitute its population.

As Van Dijk (1988: 224) states, media plays a crucial role in representing minorities and processing social information that leads to the reproduction of dominant ideologies.

Van Dijk (1995: 10-11) maintains, media is a powerful mean in power abuse to the extent that not only it influences the reader's mind but also is involved in impressing social, economic, political and cultural aspects of the society.

Rogers (2004: 3) claims that the critical discourse analysis aims at making opaque power relationships realized and illustrating racism and discrimination in societies.

Along with earlier studies about minority representation by authorities, a gap has been found in studying Iranian minority representation by American news media. Hence, the present study aims at studying the mentioned topic within the critical framework of discourse analysis.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study analyzes American online news reports about Iranian minorities within critical framework of discourse analysis to unravel the concealed ideology or ideologies in the selected reports. The qualitative analysis is supported by a quantitative method of analysis for more reliability and validity.

### 2. 1 Data and Sources of Data

Ten articles of three newspapers (New York Times, Washington Post, and USA Today) and only one television channel (Fox News) are selected. The time period in which the sample is elicited is from 2016 – 2019.

### 2. 2 Theoretical Framework

Van leeuwen (2008: 141) states that racism, hegemony, discrimination and power abuse implicitly exist in text and talk and this implicitness makes them neglected. Van leeuwen (2008: 32-46) classifies his social actor model in inclusion and exclusion. As far as the present paper is concerned, Van leeuwen's (ibid) inclusion is realized in discourse by many detailed sub-categories some of which related to the current study are as follows: activation/ passivation, genericization/ specification, association/ dissociation, individualization/ assimilation, nomination and aggregation.

#### 2. 2. 1 Macro-level Analysis

According to the macro-analysis of the selected sample of American reports the following major topics have been detected.

1- Persecution and suppression

1- *"The mullahs have launched a cut-throat campaign to silence their opponents, and on top of their list are Iran's persecuted Christians."* (Report No 4)

In the above example, Christians are living in a stifling situation because of the Iranian authorities who are specifically *"the mullahs"*. Today, the mullahs are known as a symbol of Islam, while not all mullahs are representatives of Islam. Islam is represented through the deeds not the mullahs. In fact the American media tends to mainly focus on Islam through the term *"mullahs"*. America attempts to falsely illustrate Islam as a harsh religion in which minorities do not live safely.

The term “silence” illustrates the macro topic of suppression for minorities in Iran with no freedom of speech against the governments’ policy.

## 2- Poverty and hunger

- 2- *“Too poor to even buy pens and notebooks for school, Mehdi left his home in Afghanistan soon after his 17th birthday and headed to Iran, hoping to make his way to Europe and find work. He never made it there.”* (Report No 6)

“Mehdi” as an Afghan teenager is represented as a poor boy who cannot afford the least necessities of his life because of the terrible economic living conditions in Iran.

## 3- Immigration

- 3- *“When Mehdi went to Iran in 2015, he worked, mostly on construction sites, to earn enough money to make a run for Europe.”* (Report No 6)

The above example states Mehdi’s failure as an Afghan boy, despite his perseverance in saving money to “make a run for Europe”. He tried to make Iran as a bridge to fulfill his dreams, yet he was not able to accomplish his goal.

## 4- Crime

- 4- *“Four evangelical Christians were arrested in May 2017 and sentenced each to 10 years in prison for house church activities and evangelism.”* (Report No 4)

Minorities according to American selected sample are demonstrated with no right to have their religious activities in Iran.

## 5- Discrimination

- 5- *“The number of Afghans in need has nearly doubled and pushed almost 3 million people into emergency levels of hunger.”* (Report No 8)

A terrible economic living condition among Afghans is demonstrated in the above example.

## 2.2.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

### 2.2.2.1 Activation/ Passivation

Activation is manifested when the social actor is actively represented in its role. Passivation is represented when the participant is the receiver of the action and passive in its role.

- 6- *The real pain will be felt by vulnerable communities already impacted by the punitive action taken against the Iranian economy over a year ago.*

‘The Iranian economy’ is the receiver of ‘the punitive action’.

### 2.2.2.2 Genericization

Social actors are essentially represented by many categories one of which is genericisation realized by the plural form without article or by the singular form with the definite or indefinite article.

7- *Afghans and flood victims in Iran*

### 2.2.2.3 Specification (individualization/ assimilation/ aggregation)

Specification is displayed in either individualization (individuals) or assimilation (groups) not necessarily in forms.

8- *The leaders making these decisions will not suffer the consequences.*

'The leaders' are individualized although in plural form.

Aggregation is realized when the social actor is treated as a statistical element.

9- *Christians are being persecuted around the globe.*

'Christians' are illustrated as groups 'being persecuted around the globe'.

10- *millions of the most vulnerable*

'The most vulnerable' is accompanied with 'millions'.

### 2.2.2.4 Association/ Dissociation

Other devices of representing the social actor in groups are association/ dissociation. Association occurs when the link between the participants is represented while dissociation happens when the mentioned link is unformed.

11- *not only Afghans but also Pakistanis, Iraqis and Lebanese*

All participants in (A) are associated to each other.

12- *The law heavily discriminates against non-Muslims.*

The link between 'non-Muslims' and 'the law' which represents the United states government is dissociated.

### 2.2.2.5 Nomination

The last device of social actor representation discussed in the current study is nomination through which the participants might be formally or informally represented.

13- *Iran's President Hassan Rouhani*

The social actor is formally demonstrated in (A).

*14- Nadarkhani was previously sentenced in 2010 to death.*

The social actor is informally represented in (B).

### 2.2.3 Quantitative Data Analysis in Micro-level

Below table displays the frequencies and relative frequencies of Social actor distribution of Iranian minorities' representation by American news reports.

Table 1 frequencies and relative frequencies of American news reports in minority representation in Iran

Data	Nomination	Specification	Genericization	Assimilation	Individualization	Aggregation	Association	Dissociation
American Reports	33.3%	22%	14.2%	11.2%	10%	4.9%	3.4%	0.5%

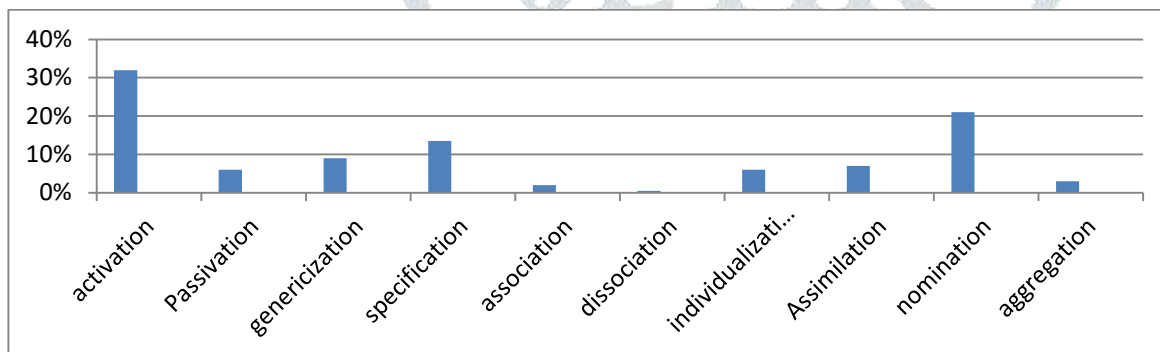


Figure 1 Social actor distribution related to Iranian minorities in American reports

The quantitative distribution of social actor in figure 1 and table 1 reveals the interest of American reports in representing Iranian minorities activated, yet what is more in consideration is the type of their activation. Since America polarizes between Iranian minorities and Iranian authorities, the U.S inclusively mentions Iranian minorities. In other words, America puts Iranian minorities as in-group and Iranian authorities as out-group. Hence, a great polarity between America and Iranian minorities in one side and Iranian authorities in other side is created.

Despite the fact that Iranian minorities are counted as in-group, their activation is demonstrated in their misery and hopelessness. They are treated as a despaired and isolated community that never has the ability to live without the help of others (here the U.S not Iran). America demonstrates its viewpoint that WE are strong and can support Iranian minorities while THEY (Iranian authorities) are unable to do that. Critically analyzing the sample, the reader distinguishes that what is paid much attention is the representation of disability of minorities than their real problems that led them to this disability. This is inferred through the distribution of

nomination and specification in social actor related to minorities. They are nominated informally and specified merely in their hopelessness and disability.

Genericization and assimilation are ascribed a considerable distribution; Iranian minorities are generalized and taken away from reader's mind, besides, they are assimilated and treated as groups of miserable people often in needs of American authorities. Moreover, they are passivized and individualized; the passivation refers to minorities as receivers of the action, people who always receive help from American society and confront obstacles from Iranian authorities. They are individualized only in case they leave in obedience, otherwise they are generalized. Minorities are in addition aggregated and treated as statistics not as humans with their own identity and humans like other part of the society (majority). Minorities are associated to the American government only to receive help while their relation to Iranian Government is unformed (dissociated) to reveal Iranian authorities' incapability in behaving fairly towards the minorities.

### III. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper critically analyzed ten selected American online news reports in an attempt to recognize the Iranian minority representation in American news media. Minorities on the basis of Van Leeuwen's (2008) social actor model were back-grounded and this led the researcher to unravel the racist ideology of American online media.

In all of the above major topics the American authority tries to demonstrate minorities in Iran in a stereotypical way back-grounding them. However, the selected sample tends to display its power in rescuing minorities from the misery that Iranian authority has made for them.

Ideologically, the American demonstration of Islam is much more apparent than its presentation of minorities. If a researcher, for instance studies about love, he/ she is not necessarily a lover or a beloved, or a person when memorizes the chapters in the Bible, that does not mean that he is a Christian. The same is true in this case that if a governor or an authority wears the uniform of clergymen that does not show his Islam at all. There is apparently a misconception between ideology and religion. When a society is called an Islamic society, that does not necessarily show its Islam. Islam is here merely utilized as a justification for that society to produce power; because, Islam as a God gift religion is powerful and extremely suitable to be used as a mask for authorities' discursive actions.

When America represents for instance the macro-topics of persecution and suppression, or poverty and hunger of minorities in Iran, it should not be misunderstood that Iran as a symbol of Islam commits these actions towards minorities. When an Islamic country applies racist ideology, that is definitely devoid of Islam.

The prejudice and hegemony in American racist ideology was inferred in critically analyzing the selected sample. Minorities were represented only as a mean for American representation of US vs. THEM and this was why minorities were back-grounded by American online media. In other words, America had utilized

minority representation to intensify the white side of US and reinforce the black side of THEM in a way that a wide polarization was created between American and Iranian authorities.

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## END NOTES

The American sample is extracted from the following websites:

[www.Foxnews.com](http://www.Foxnews.com)

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

[www.washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com)

[www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)

