



Islamophobia as Discursive Illusion: Identity Construction in the Speeches of Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Mahathir Mohamad

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the discursive illusions of Islamophobia crafted by three significant Muslim political actors: Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Mahathir Mohamad in their public speeches. Adopting Aditi Bhatia's (2015) concept of discursive illusions in public discourse, this study considers the political language as a means by which subjective and often deceptive versions of reality are produced, which influence public opinion and feelings. The aim was to uncover the discursive strategies of these leaders and analyse how such discourse helped to orient public opinion about Islamophobia to political gain by adhering to an ideology. Six speeches were presented in the United Nations General Assembly and at national fora, and they were purposively sampled and analysed qualitatively in terms of Bhatia's key theoretical concepts of historical background and context, the language and semiotic features used in the speeches, framing, and power relations. The results reveal that the three leaders employ the strategies of pronouns, repetition, historicisation, intertextuality, victimhood narratives, and self-other dichotomy to create a unity of Muslim identity and the West as unjust and hypocritical. They make analogies with antisemitism and play on Muslim pride in relation to Islamic civilisation, and question Eurocentric human rights discourse. The study concludes that such leaders frame a complex geopolitical issue into a binary moral discourse—with them playing a role as defenders of the Muslim Ummah—to substantiate both domestic legitimations and contexts while rendering their own political conundrums hidden. Politically, it is a study of the role of rhetoric in influencing discourse and public ends in the Muslim world, which is useful for policy makers and discourse analysts looking for insights into the politics of resistance and the construction of identity.

1. Introduction

Muslim world's political rulers have a passion for rhetoric to rationalise and justify political stands and actions. They have charismatic personalities, and they spread popular ideas with the help of illusions of discourse. The way they speak and the use of language can lead the public, provoke critical thinking, or lead them to become followers due to their emotional and fear-based approach. Leaders complement their concepts, figures, and quotations, historical markers and links, examples, and other language strategies.

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A technique of representing reality that does not necessarily correspond with reality is called a discursive illusion. The person develops their own ideas of reality based on their personal thinking and perception, which are influenced by factors such as environment, culture, age, beliefs, and social relations and serve as a basis for discursive arguments. Illusions may be individual or collective; the collective ones are difficult to overcome as they take the viewers closer to a socialised reality than to the cognitive reality (Bhatia, 2015). This is what political leaders do; they use this tendency and impose their opinion on others through emotionally charged words such as "must" and "should", or metaphors such as "conversion" or "purity agreements."

Discursive illusions in influential leaders' speeches are linguistic and rhetorical devices used to give a subjective and often distorted picture representation of reality to manipulate the perception of the audience and their feelings. In the literature, this approach is referred to as positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Bhatia, 2015; Jasim & Mustafa, 2020), and they demonstrate this by constructing a positive image of the speaker and delivering a negative image of opponents. Politicians carefully choose their language to position themselves as god-fearing and patriotic, and to make their opponents' motives and actions bad. Such politics of language is at the heart of the embedding of political ideology in public consciousness.

Historical circumstances are often invoked as a means of invoking emotion in Muslim audiences by Muslim political leaders. Through the knowledge and teachings of the Holy Quran and the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Muslims once had a prominent place in the world. The weakening of the Muslim power and authority of the Ottoman and Mughal empires led Muslims to come face to face with an ideology in the West that posited Islam as being dangerous and threatening (Ahmad, 2024). This lack of understanding by non-Muslims is what Esposito (2003) calls Islamophobia, and it has turned into a stereotype, linking Muslims with extremism, following the 9/11 attacks. Possibly, by stressing the concerns of ordinary people, Muslim leaders on poverty and injustice have some impact internationally because they could be targeted as terrorists at an international level when, in fact, they are expressing their grievances against international violations of their rights in various parts of the world (Khan, 2019; Erdogan, 2019; Mahathir, 2019).

Islamophobia is defined as a fear (or perceived threat) of Muslims (often considered a racial form of racism) by the perpetrators of violence towards Muslims (almost always perpetrators who are not Muslim). Islam, being the second religion in history after Christianity, and its change of the focus of religion, created the initial animosity against Muslims. Later, European colonialism confirmed itself by influencing Muslims as not being 'civilised' and Islam as being a religion of violence. This hostility escalated in the 1990s, gaining momentum as globalisation progressed in all parts of the world, but not in the Muslim region, and the criticism against Islamic law and religion became more vocal. Islamophobia was entrenched under the war on terror that we witnessed after the 9/11 attacks. Following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of eradicating the Al-Qaeda network, millions of Muslim lives were lost as a result of these invasions, which were carried out by propaganda through the media.

Within this context, three influential Muslim leaders—Imran Khan of Pakistan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey, and Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia—integrated Islamophobia into their political agendas. Both positioned themselves as custodians of Muslim interests and identity, speaking out against Islamophobia, which they saw as being on the same path as antisemitism. This study performs a critical discourse analysis of their speeches to understand the discursive illusions that they use.

The research aims were two-fold: firstly, to identify the discursive strategies employed by the Muslim political leaders in their usage of these speeches and secondly, to investigate the aspects of discursive illusions that are produced by Imran Khan, Erdoğan and Mahathir to shape the public opinion about Islamophobia. In turn, the question we addressed in this study was: What are the discursive moves by Muslim political leaders in their speeches? How then do these three leaders influence the general public opinion on Islamophobia by providing discursive illusions?

This research is significant because it discusses, interacts with, and analyses the discourse that comes from the Islamic world at a time when Islamophobia is intensifying in many countries. Leaders such as Imran Khan, Mahathir Mohamad, and Erdoğan have had a tangible influence with their speeches and statements at an international level and whose rhetorical discourses colour the Eurocentric discourses on Islam, which has traditionally been depicted as a backward and terrorist religion. This can be seen as an extension of the process of Critical Discourse Analysis and a contribution to the scholarship addressing Islamophobia since it provides an alternative account of what Islamophobia is in the discourse of Western powers; it also provides analysts and policy makers a glimpse of how discourse can be mobilised for resistance and identity construction in a geopolitical context.

2. Literature Review

The ideology in languages is examined using the theoretical approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Toolan (1997) differentiates between the two approaches: discourse, which is about description, and critical discourse analysis, which is about the interpretation of the text; Van Leeuwen (2008) views CDA as a tool of power and control beyond social construction. The

only two resources that attempt to explain how political discourse is impacted by context and ideology are Wodak (2015), who explains how leaders use emotive and simple language to create narratives, and Black (1965), who uses a neo-Aristotelian rhetorical approach to illustrate how political rhetoric can affect reality.

A series of recurrent linguistic devices has been found in political discourse analysis. Thus, it can be seen how politicians can appear in a favourable light, but their opponents in a bad light through lexicalisation, via words like "terror" and "terrorist," which have a lot of negative connotations (Nordlund, 2003; Van Dijk, 1997, 2000). However, as well as performing the grammatical function, pronouns are ideologically important, signifying to self and to other (Bramley 2001, Chilton & Schäffner 2002). Metaphor makes abstract ideas persuasive and emotionally resonant (Kulo, 2009; Stepanyan, 2015), and repetition helps to reinforce key messages and focus attention on key themes of a leader (Beard, 2000; McArthur, 1992).

Its main theoretical underpinning is Bhatia's (2015) *Discursive Illusions in Public Discourse: Theory and Practice*. Bhatia's notion of the discourse of illusion is 'the product of a subjective conceptualisation of reality, emerging from a historical repository of experiences embodying various linguistic and semiotic actions which often have intended socio-political consequences. Personal and collective historical experiences translate into individual concepts of reality, which political players can use for their own purposes and under the guise of presenting it as objective reality. According to Bhatia, historical context, linguistic and semiotic construction, framing, and situations of power are the most important mechanisms involved in the construction and maintenance of discursive illusions.

The framework and its variations are used in several studies to discuss and dissect Islamophobia in political speech. According to Bou (2019), both Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush developed an alternative discourse in which they were both victims, using Fairclough's model, in which the axis of conflict was religion. Turkey is depicted as the "last fortress of Islam," as Guo (2024) describes the way historical, cultural, and moderate Islamic values are the country's tools for combating Islamophobia. A study of Erdoğan's speeches (Bayram 2010; Badshah 2021) reveals how Erdoğan mixes Islamist rhetoric with neo-Ottoman nationalism to project himself as the saviour of Muslim dignity.

Based on the findings of this study, a discussion of Imran Khan's discourse also reveals discursive strategies related to Islamophobia. Abrar et al. (2024) analysed Khan's OIC address in the light of Fairclough's model, whereas Badshah (2021) analysed the use of the historical and religious references by Khan in the framework of the same model. Research on Mahathir's discourse (Haque & Khan, 2004; Tariq et al., 2023) reveals how he frames Islam as a faith of 'peace' and condemns the 'double standards' of the Western world and the structure of the United Nations Security Council.

Nevertheless, given this body of literature, there remains a gap in the application of Bhatia's theory of discursive illusion in the context of Islamophobia - Islamic culture - Islamic values in multiple eminent Muslim leaders in a comparative geopolitical context. This is what the present study aims to do, with an analysis of Khan's and Erdoğan's speeches along with Mahathir's speeches.

3. Method

In this study, a qualitative approach was used, which is appropriate for the purpose of interpreting discourse and text analysis, as it allows the analysis of the meaning in depth and helps clarify audience reception of political speech (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study was conducted by analysing texts (public speeches), providing in-depth information on discourse and the meaning-making that occurs in and through this discourse.

The theoretical background is Bhatia's (2015) model of discursive illusion in public discourse, as it explains how a politician can convince or manipulate her listeners through language and how the illusion of the discourse and the language itself is created through the use of power and emotion. The model has five key concepts: historical present, through which it operates by evoking and using history to complement and enhance ideology, using examples and quoting other leaders from history; metaphor and other semiotic effects, selectively emphasising certain aspects of the issue at hand while casting doubt on others; the discourse of illusion – claims by the speaker that reflect subjective perceptions but are presented as truth; framing – the process of selectively highlighting aspects of an issue but downplaying others; and power acting – formulating and/or disseminating the framing of an issue in ways that favour the interests of certain dominant groups and groups.

There were 22 Muslim political leaders who addressed the issue of Islamophobia and Muslim identity in their presentations, which were done on national or international platforms for this study. Three leaders were chosen purposively from this population - Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and Dr Mahathir Mohamad. The three selected accordingly are among the most influential Muslim leaders who have given significant contributions through their speeches. The criterion of the Muslim identity crisis discourse was predefined, and this made it appropriate for this study to use purposive sampling.

Two speeches per leader (one international and one national) were chosen to provide insight into a corpus of six speeches.

Table 1: Muslim Political Leaders and Selected Speeches

Leader	International Speech	National Speech
Imran Khan (former Prime Minister of Pakistan)	74th UNGA Session, 2019	First speech as PM of Pakistan, 19 August 2018
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (President of Turkey)	74th UNGA Session, 2019	Address to Pakistan's Parliament, 14 February 2020
Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Prime Minister of Malaysia)	74th UNGA Session, 2019	International Conference on the Question of Palestine, 28 February 2020

All speeches were transcribed in the form in which they were publicly posted on the Internet; particular emphasis was given to sections that dealt with misconceptions about Islam. Due consideration has been paid to the ethical aspects; the cultural aspects have been respected, ambiguous and biased descriptions and evaluation of the speeches have been avoided, and the analysis has done a clear job with regard to treating Islamophobia, and also care has been taken to ensure that the content of the research is not hateful in any way.

4. Findings

The analysis of the six speeches indicates that Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Mahathir Mohamad make heavy use of discursive strategies to influence, elicit emotion, and link their followers via religion, society, and politics.

4.1. Pronouns and collective identity

All three leaders used personal pronouns for what can be called a simultaneous unification and separation, making it an "us" versus "them" configuration. At the UN, Khan called for war reparations for the loss of a population of 70,000 in the war, 150 billion dollars to the economy, and "the catchword and the mantra of Islamic terrorism" (Khan, 2019). "Injustice must not be done to Palestine," Mahathir declared, "We must make the world peaceful for all" (Mahathir, 2019). Conversely, Erdoğan declared, "Those who do not raise their voices against injustice committed against Palestinians are only encouraging the perpetrators" (Erdoğan, 2019). This usage encourages a sense of unity and separation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Such a pattern is repeated in the expression of a collective identity, which is done explicitly. The use of 'our' in Khan's "Our Prophet (PBUH) lives in our hearts..." (Khan, 2019) creates a collective religious identity, and as Bhatia (2015) describes it, the exclusionary agendas are hidden within the language and rhetoric of a shared truth and values. In addition, in his rhetoric, the distinction between ethnic identity and national identity is blurred, as in the case of the use of the term Muslim country: "Muslim countries must work together... We must speak with one voice," while his domestic policies have institutionalised the supremacy of the Malays and Muslims. Erdoğan's rhetoric is Islamist, yet he wears a neo-Ottoman nationalist facade, portraying himself as the saviour of the people's Muslim dignity in the face of their secular neighbours in the West and cracking down on dissent at home.

4.2. Sentence type and repetition

Strategically, leaders use variations in sentence function to sway audiences to believe that their ideas are facts, not opinions. The juxtaposition of injustice drawn from Mahathir's exclamation: "The Holocaust lasted six years, and the Nakba has been going on for more than 70 years!" and his rhetorical, "But has any tribunal been established for the Palestinian victims?" elicits feelings. Erdoğan believes peace can be brought about by hortative constructions: "Let us solve this problem without delay on the basis of justice for the sake of humanity's peaceful future." By stating in his first speech after becoming Prime Minister that he would not live in the Prime Minister's House (Khan, 2018), Khan expressed his desire to serve rather than take advantage of his position.

These messages are repeated to provide reinforcement. Table 2 provides an overview of the most commonly used words said by each leader in the speeches sampled.

Table 2: Repeated Words by Leader

Imran Khan	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	Mahathir Mohamad
Islamophobia, Terrorism, Unity, Peace, Kashmir, Palestine, Enlightened Moderation, Freedom of Speech, Riyasat-e-Madina, Compassion, Justice, Marginalisation, Prophet (SAW), Hijab, Radical Islam	Islamophobia, Muslims, Oppression, Terrorism, Unity, Attack	Islamophobia, Double Standards, Israel, Injustice, Oppression, Terrorism, Muslims, Palestine, Blame, Violence, Fear, Religion

4.3. Victimhood, marginalisation and intertextuality

Each of these leaders regularly portrays Muslims as being "victimised" and "marginalised" around the world. Khan told the UNGA that the world is alienating Muslims by talking about Islam and terrorism. "Hijab is seen as a weapon," he said. "But why does a Muslim woman wearing more clothes have to be called a loss of freedom when a woman can take them off? Erdoğan, in his speeches on two occasions this year, referred to the Christchurch mosque attack and demanded that March 15 be observed as The International Day to Combat Islamophobia (2019, 2020). In a statement referring to the Palestinian crisis, Mahathir (2019) dubbed the world as 'silent' because the Muslim problems faced are often discarded. These strategies represent a similar approach to that of Bhatia (2010), who argues for discursive illusions as a way of constructing victimhood as a shared and justifiable reality.

This victimhood rhetoric is supported by intertextuality, which includes common religious, historical, and political references. Khan underlined that Islam was enshrined in justice as the Prophet PBUH established a welfare state in Madinah, where everyone was equal, he added. Erdoğan resorted to the intertext, utilising the Christchurch massacre and images of the Palestinian and Rohingya Muslims, using visual intertextuality through the image of Alan Kurdi. To make an intertextual comparison, Mahathir equated Jewish and Muslim suffering by comparing sensitivity over the Holocaust to Muslims' sensitivity over blasphemy. Bhatia (2015) speaks of an "illusory sense of 'historical inevitability' that could be created by the leaders through such allusions, through which they reframe Islamophobia along a 'longer history of marginalisation'.

4.4. Dichotomy of self and other, and historicisation

With Islamophobia as an external threat, Erdoğan creates a dichotomy between "self," which represents his leadership and Turkish legacy, and "terrorists, enemies." While Mahathir emphasises that he is "not for ourselves alone, but for the voiceless," he laments the failure of the United Nations to "resuscitate the original purpose of this great organisation.

This is further enriched by a consideration of historical context as an issue in doing identity work. Erdoğan appeals to the Ottoman Empire and Islamic civilisation to project Turkey as protector of Muslim civilisation; Khan constantly mentioned the "State of Madina" and the principles of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in the project of his reformer image for Pakistan; Mahathir constantly mentioned the postcolonial experiences and the process of the independence struggle of Malaysia and implied that the Western countries failed to protect the interests of Muslims. In all six, historicising collective identity takes the form of a spectrum: in each, the present-day plight of Muslims is set against the backdrop of a history of Muslim marginalisation, such as validating political positions and fostering solidarity through common accounts of past injustices (Bhatia, 2010, 2015).

4.5. Illusions of threat, resistance and neutrality

Bhatia's (2015) framework is used to identify three related illusions operating in the corpus. The sense of being menaced arises at points where Khan states Islam has been "equated... with terrorism" and Erdoğan refers to 'racism' and 'Islamophobia' and 'xenophobia' and casts anti-Muslim expression or prejudice as a facet of a 'global injustice'. Such faux resistance includes, for example, when Mahathir declared that "Muslims have no means to act against Israel... The world does nothing," and Erdoğan declared to "resist this injustice together," thus playing up the idea of resistance while positioning each leader as spokesperson for the global Muslim conscience. The double standard is where leaders pretend to be completely neutral while they are only selective in their neutrality and accountability: Khan's promise to "act against all violators of law" doesn't apply in his home country, where rioters are accountable.

4.6. Parallels with antisemitism and appeals to Muslim pride

However, Mahathir makes the point clear, saying that Islamophobia is akin to antisemitism and could have grave consequences if Muslims do not unite and continue to be marginalised. It is a global campaign of hatred against Islam, like the one that sparked the Holocaust, Erdoğan says directly. Given this historical analogy, there is an urgency and moral resonance to their calls for international action.

In addition to victimhood, the leaders play on Muslim pride. The Prophet (PBUH) established the first welfare state, founded on the pillars of justice, compassion, and merit – this is the model we need to embody," Khan says (UNGA, 2019). The "Çanakale" (Gallipoli) battle of the Ottoman army is one of Erdoğan's symbols, symbolising Muslim valour. Such reminders about Islamic civilisation and Islamic achievements create resilience, and, as Bhatia (2015) points out, are also acts of "loyalty screening" wherein political allegiance is connected to cultural honour.

4.7. Challenging Eurocentrism

Lastly, all three leaders questioned the representation of Islam by the former colonial powers. Mahathir made the point that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a "Western" thing, and if Malaysia was colonised in the past, it is a thing that

must not be embraced; Erdoğan "restores" Islamic civilisation as an alternative mode of being to the "West. This anti-Eurocentric discourse is what Bhatia (2015) calls for, strategic re-narration – not fresh facts, but less a contradiction of resisting a particular form of domination and imposing another within the domestic sphere, and more an alternative means of emphasising that a particular history is performed according to different stories.

5. Discussion

This reveals that all three leaders, Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Mahathir Mohamad, employ nonsense to deceive the public, present themselves as moral actors, and solidify political control and power. Their discourse is characterised by the intermingling of religious citations, emotional appeals, historical narration, and strategic ambiguity to create a fascinating story of Muslim victimisation and resistance that plays an ethical or ideological role as well. The Bhatia model is particularly suitable for the revelation of these strategies as it encapsulates the nature of constructed reality and lived reality, ideology and compassion, and solidarity and exclusion.

The results build on the current literature on political discourse and Islamophobia. Instead of analysing Erdoğan's and Khan's discourses separately (as Bayram 2010 and Badshah 2021 did before), this study juxtaposed all three leaders' discourses and was struck by how similar and yet different they are in their use of 'we' to mark a group identity, historicisation, and intertextual reference to a shared Islamic past that underpin a binary logic of 'us' versus 'them'. This indicates that Islamophobia operates as a "transnational discursive resource" for Muslim leaders to utilise outside of countries' specific domestic situations, as Bhatia puts it (2015).

It is worth emphasising that Islamophobia is being compared to antisemitism, and that both Mahathir and Erdoğan made an explicit comparison. It picks up the moral mandate to claim Holocaust remembrance and projects it onto Muslim complaints today, just as Bhatia (2010) describes in "pathos-driven discursive illusions": the overwhelming emotional feeling tends to dominate over the nuances of what is really going on. The grievances are not so much invented as cherry-picked and historically presented; that would make a moral story that would justify the right to speak on behalf of what is legitimate – not only from the point of view of the speaker but also for the audience.

These discoveries relate to the concept of the illusion of resistance and the illusion of neutrality, thus extending Bhatia's (2009, 2010) model by demonstrating mechanisms that work together instead of one-off. Both leaders profess to be critical of the injustice of the West but lament only the universal justice of all kinds, while the injustice of the regime remains unnoticed by them. For example, Erdoğan's narrative of a besieged Turkey excuses and masks the country's repression of opposition, while Mahathir's global advocacy for justice takes the focus away from the marginalisation of minority groups at home, and Khan's international advocacy for justice has been matched with a less ambitious stance on pluralism and freedom of the media. This is reflected in the paradox of postcolonial nationalism identified in the literature: "Resisting one form of domination and producing another.

The central focus of the contextual interpretation is the fact that in Bhatia's specific sense, Islamophobia is not a discursive illusion, as it clearly has some grounding in facts – even if the political leaders did not realise that when they asserted it – but is a much simpler multi-causal phenomenon that has been reduced to a binary one, with the political actors as the moral protagonists. As the results reveal, this kind of conversion successfully stirs up public emotion but also keeps public discourse at a non-reflective level in relation to their own involvement (with the other leader) in perpetuating structural inequality.

6. Conclusion

Based on Bhatia's (2015) model of discursive illusion, the findings of this study indicate that all three key speakers–Imran Khan, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and Mahathir Mohamad–strategically use the discursive illusion to tackle the multifaceted issue of Islamophobia on national and international forums, including the United Nations General Assembly. They create subjective realities with language and semiosis that, on the one hand, affect the perception of Islamophobia all over the world and, on the other hand, support their political positions. Khan emphasises the growing nature of Islamophobia since 9/11 and of Muslim women who wear the hijab being stigmatised; Erdoğan depicts Islamophobia as a poison that needs a UN-appointed Special Representative; Mahathir repeatedly states the issue at international and national forums alike. Each leader undermines the Western discourse about Islam being a religion of violence in their own way, constructs Islam as the religion of peace through language and semiotics, and each of them does this to consolidate power, foster collective identity, and contribute to the international debate.

The key value of the study is to show, through Bhatia's framework, how rhetoric serves as a tool to resist and construct identities in the three contexts under scrutiny, which have similar strategies despite their differences in terms of nations. This has real-world consequences for those studying political communication and policy makers who need to know how discourse around Islamophobia is mobilised for home affairs and foreign policy aims. Discourse illusions, when identified, can provide politically

savvy tools for performing a more critical analysis and for politicians, teachers and citizens to evaluate political discourses with greater care and less emotional acceptance of narratives they are trying to promote as objective facts.

Since the study covers only six speeches by three Muslim leaders, more speeches by other Muslim leaders on Islamophobia, marginalisation, and oppression may corroborate or add to the findings of the study. Future studies could expand the scope of the speeches analysed, as well as include data on how the audience received them, or a comparative analysis could be undertaken of non-Muslim leaders' addresses on religious identity to see if the discursive illusion model proposed by Bhatia could be generalised.

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