DISCOURSE, IDENTITY, AND CROWD REPRESENTATION: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE LAHORE BLASPHEMY INCIDENT

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ABSTRACT
This study aims to explore how cultural, religious and social factors contribute to crowd violence, particularly during the Lahore blasphemy event that occurred on February 23rd, 2024 using a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyze the language, narratives, and pattern of public representation of the incident. The study also unveils how media coverage and the FIR, as well as witnesses' views, construct discursive processes in which the crowd behavior is narratively justified. Crowd Psychology by Gustave Le Bon and the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel are applied as the interpretive models to provide the discursive construction of anonymity, contagion, suggestibility and social identity in the context of media narratives and eyewitness interviews. This work contributes to the academic discussion on literary works as it shows how the concept of crowd violence can be mediated by discourses and manifest itself as a result of interpretive systems, symbolic associations, and narrative conventions that define cultural perception.
Keywords*: crowd representation, social identity, blasphemy incident, critical discourse analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Religious fundamentalism has penetrated the cultural and ideological landscape of Pakistan in a way that is highly embedded in the national consciousness of the country. It is not a simple set of fixed dogmatic statements; on the contrary, it is a powerful socio-political carrier, which actively influences the opinion of the masses, their moral demands, and social behavior. Both academic and popular discourses are questioning ideas of religious identity, purity, and moral guardianship in sermons, media discourse, communal discussions, and politics. Within this atmosphere, charges of blasphemy quickly acquire a greater emotional tone and turn one or two cases into an acute group morality crisis. The scaffolding of the resulting normative responses, which occur in relation to this social context, has been documented by scholars as influencing the practices of the judiciary, the media, and grassroots mobilization. Therefore, a substantive analysis of the Lahore blasphemy incident has to be placed in the wider socio-religious context that has been established as it is in this context within which the significance of the incident is produced and interpreted.

This paper focuses on how the cultural, religious and social factors affect the collective crowd behavior and the violent mobilization were produced in the Lahore blasphemy incident that occurred on February 23, 2024. It takes another dimension where the discursive and socio-cultural explanation of collective behavior is presented. The works by Le Bon, *Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, and Tajfel's, Social Identity Theory, provide a necessary understanding of the

group dynamics. It also employs Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the central tool of the analysis of media representations and religious speech along with cultural narratives related to the event.

The Critical Discourse Analysis paradigm developed by Fairclough guides the study along three inter-linked dimensions. The textual aspect assists in thorough examination of the use of vocabulary, metaphors, intertextualism and representational decisions specific to news reports, statements and witness testimonies. The discursive practice dimension focuses on the production, spread, and deconstruction of these writings, clarifying the interpretative processes that formulate the ideas of blasphemy, moral obligation and ethnic identity into the discourse. The context of the social practice places the discourses in terms of the general ideological complex, which includes religious power, cultural memory, and moral paradigms, which dominate the sociopolitical environment in Pakistan. These structures, together, allow a complete study of the representation of language, ideology and the reason behind the mobilization of crowds (Yu and Zheng, 2022).

This interdisciplinary paradigm increases understanding of the crowd representation and collective identity formation in the discussion connected with the Lahore blasphemy incident. The paper focuses on the interaction of language, ideology, and cultural narrative in creating the conditions that facilitate, justify, and perpetuate violent mass responses.

Statement of Problem

Collective violent situations in Pakistan, linked with blasphemy, can emerge in the framework of a multifaceted system of cultural discourses, religious imagery, and socio-political struggles. The existing discourses often tend to focus on psychological or law and order perspectives, but the discursive processes that construct the meaning of the event are insufficiently examined. Little academic attention has been given to the influence of media language, cultural perceptions and practices of representation on crowd identity and the justification of violence. This paper offers a more detailed understanding of the cultural and communicative dynamics that occur in the instances of crowd violence.

Research Questions

The questions of the research are:

1. Which discursive and representational patterns appear in media and public accounts of the Lahore blasphemy incident?
2. What psychological factors play a role in intensifying crowd violence in the Lahore incident?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Le Bon's Crowd Psychology

One of the most notable social psychologists in France was Gustave Le Bon, who became famous due to his revolutionary work on psychology of crowds that was published in his famous book *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind.* The concept proposed by Le Bon focuses on the psychological change that people undergo when they become a part of a crowd. According to the author, crowds have a distinct psychological identity which could well lead to significantly different actions of individuals when alone (Le Bon, 2009).

According to Le Bon, anonymity in a group leads to poor personal accountability and responsibility thus leading to people acting in a way that they would not even think about doing when they are alone (Reicher, 2012). The anonymity allows people within a crowd to leave their individual identities and conscience, which might result in behaving contrary to the accepted norms of the society.

Le Bon's concept of contagion relates to how emotions and behaviors spread quickly through a crowd. This process leads to a homogeneity of thought and activity, as individuals in a crowd are influenced by the dominant attitudes and acts around them (Reicher, 2012). Contagion can cause the amplification of emotions, such as wrath, fear, or joy, and frequently results in the crowd functioning as a single entity. "In a crowd, every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest. This is not an exaggeration but a simple expression of the observed facts." (Le Bon, 2009).

In Le Bon's theory, suggestibility is the degree to which group members are more easily swayed by the opinions of those in positions of authority or the prevailing ideology (Le Bon, 2009). When people are in a large group, they are less able to think critically and more likely to follow the lead of those who already have their opinions heard. People in the crowd tend to act irrationally and impulsively when they follow the lead of a charismatic leader or the prevailing emotion. According to Le Bon, "These sentiments are atavistic residuum of the instincts of the primitive man, which fear of punishment obliges the isolated and responsible individual to curb. Thus, it is that crowds are so easily led into the worst excesses" (Le Bon, 2009).

Le Bon emphasizes the importance of leaders in influencing a group's actions and decisions. People with great charm and the ability to read the mood and wants of the crowd are usually the ones who take the lead when there is a large group of people, "in the case of human crowds the chief is often nothing more than a ringleader or agitator, but as such he plays a considerable part. His will is a nucleus around which the opinions of the crowd are grouped and attain to identity" (Le Bon, 2009). Regardless of the good intentions or bad intentions, these leaders can evoke and enhance emotions and lead the audience to the already pre-deemed goals.

The theory proposed by Le Bon provides an excellent approach towards understanding the psychological transformation that takes place within the crowd. These concepts are imperative to the analysis of cases like the Lahore crowd violence when the group dynamics are influential on the individual behaviours to a large extent. The findings of Le Bon are used to explain the occurrence of normally rational individuals engaging in extreme actions under the influence of anonymity, emotional infections, and susceptibility to influence in a group.

Social Identity Theory

In 1979, Tajfel developed the Social Identity Theory (SIT) further with the help of Tajfel and Turner to become a social psychological theory (Trepte & Loy, 2017). It brings to light the influence of social interactions on individual behavior. The Social Identity Theory suggests that the sense of belonging to social groups influences the attitudes and behavior of people and vice versa. According to this theory, people categorize themselves and others in various social groups, including religious, ethnic, or cultural (Trepte & Loy, 2017). This categorization can help one to simplify and understand the social world. After people categorize themselves as belonging to a specific group, they identify themselves with a group and it becomes a significant part of their self-concept (Trepte & Loy 2017). This is what is termed as social identification. People conform their attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs to match the norms and ideals of their social group.

Social Identity Theory highlights the significance of social comparison in maintaining and improving self-esteem (Trepte & Loy 2017). People habitually point out the similarities and dissimilarities between their social groups and other groups to uphold an optimistic feeling of social identity. These interactions and comparisons might result in the rise of bias and discernment between groups.

In the article *Crowd Psychology*, the author claims that crowd psychology results from industrialization and the rise of mass society (Reicher, 2012). According to Reicher, Le Bon's concept is centered on the idea of loss, and he argues in his book that an individual becomes anonymous when they join a crowd (2012). The author further mentions the Emergent Norm Theory explained by Tunner and Killian and argues that crowds do not become homogenous instantly; instead, there is an earlier period of circumstances that influence crowds. According to the author, the social identity model mainly focuses on intra-group relations within crowds and analyzes how individual and inter-individual relations change and disturb behaviors and sentiments. Reicher (2012) has talked about the important of social identity model in order to better understand the crowd psychology in his article.

In his work, Stage (2013) argued that web communication exhibits many characteristics of real crowds. Collective flaming, hype and online bullying are examples where people can behave like crowds without necessarily being physically there. Online communication is faster, more immediate, and intense, and this facilitates the fusion of mediated publics and traditional crowds and confronts the clear-cut division between the mediated publics and unmediated crowds (Stage 2013). The author also discussed how online venues, in this case, blogs can create a level of investment that is as efficient as physical crowds. Virtual crowding is a phenomenon that can be discussed as the collective response of bloggers to emotive events when there is a large number of people participating in the process and being active. The analysis conducted by Stage (2013) shows that the same psychological dynamics may be replicated in case of online interactions. This fact implies that the concept of an online crowd is not a paradox but a real fact in the age of the Internet.

Leach (1986) provided an in-depth analysis of how the concepts of the crowds and mass society were handled by American intellectuals and social scientists during the first half of the 20th century. The author put a lot of stress on the interplay between the social theories that keep developing and the practical aspects of managing large and uncontrollable organizations (Leach 1986). Leach said the influence of the European crowd theorists, like Gustave Le Bon, whose theories on the irrational and emotional nature of crowds were influential in America. These theories were of special interest to American thinkers and practitioners trying to deal with the challenges posed by urbanization, industrialization and the advent of mass media which contributed to the formation of new patterns of collective behavior (Leach, 1986).

Barnes explored the vast impact that Le Bons theories have had on social psychology. Barnes explained that the Le Bonian theory of crowd psychology, which argues that members of crowds lose responsibility and are controlled by the overall disposition and action of the group, has greatly impacted our perception of social and political dynamics (Barnes, 2025).

Malmberg (2023) discussed the intersection of media studies, the psychology of crowds in the work of Le Bon, and qualitative-normative research on propaganda throughout 140 years, between 1880 and 2020. He argued that the landmark work by Le Bon on psychology of crowds was the baseline in understanding how leaders and mass media can exploit individuals within groups and ruin their identities (Malmberg, 2023). His perceptions help in bringing out the emotional and irrational nature of crowds that are easily manipulated through techniques such as affirmation, repetition, contagion and leader influence.

In the article, *Influence of Social Identity on Self-Efficacy Beliefs Through Perceived Social Support: A Social Identity Theory Perspective,* the authors have explored the complex relationship between social identity, apparent social support and social beliefs. The have used social identity theory to understand how the identification of individual has an effect on their self-efficacy (Guan

& So, 2016). According to the authors, social identity significantly influences the beliefs of individuals and their ability to perform their work and achieve goals.

There are many studies on crowd violence and crowd behavior, but not many that use crowd psychology and social identity theory in the context of Pakistan. The lack of awareness of the intricate cultural and social dynamics that contribute to such an incident as the Lahore crowd violence is not entirely due to the past research, which was predominantly initiated in the West. As such, the analysis of the crowd behavior that is peculiar to the setting of Pakistan needs to be detailed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study relies on employs Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as its main methodological framework supplemented by the theoretical approaches such as Le Bon's Crowd Psychology and Tajfel's Social Identity Theory. Although Le Bon and Tajfel belong to the traditions of psychology, their conceptions are applied as the discursive tools within a CDA paradigm to examine the linguistic, ideological and representational patterns of media reporting and general discourse on the Lahore blasphemy incident.

Data Analysis

The data of the study includes:

- The FIR report at the Ichhra Police Station (translated to English by the author).
- News articles in *The News, The Nation*, and *Dawn*.
- Two interviews with a shopkeeper and a police officer who were involved in the incident. The interviews were conducted and recorded by the author of the article with further translation of the answers to English.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) serves as the main tool of examination of the language, narrative patterns, and cultural meanings that were related to the incident. The study applies the Three-Dimensional Model of Norman Fairclough, which is a systematic approach of studying speech in three dimensions that interrelate to each other.

i. Textual Analysis (Description)

The linguistic features of the selected texts are analyzed at this level and include lexical choices, metaphoric and evaluative language, structuring of the narrative, intertextual references, the use of pronouns and markers of identification and modality and tone. This stage defines the language structure of meanings that pertain to the crowd, the accused woman, the idea of blasphemy, and the moral feelings that accompany the incident.

ii. Discursive Practice (Interpretation)

This dimension focuses on the production, distribution, and the use of discourse. It analyzes:

- the creation of narratives by the mass media;
- the cultural and religious perceptions' distribution among various eyewitnesses.

iii. Social Practice (Clarification)

The third dimension contextualizes discussion to broad socio-cultural and ideological contexts such as: religious sentiment in Pakistan; cultural norms related to honor and holiness; historical accounts of blasphemy; power relations and communal ethical systems. This level explains why certain discourses appeared, the reasons they correspond to the general opinion, and what ideological background supports them.

Le Bon's Crowd Psychology and Social Identity Theory

Although these two theories are originated from different schools of psychology, but their combination result in an inclusive framework to study crowd behavior. On the one hand, Le Bon

discusses the immediate psychological change that occurs in people when they are a part of a crowd. Similarly, Social Identity Theory provides the depth understanding of social identities and thereby offers the rationale for people's involvement in the crowd violence.

These theoretical frameworks expound the process of subjective experiences that led to the incident in Lahore.

ANALYSIS

I.   Textual Analysis

Descriptive Construction of Anonymity

The FIR report reveals that there was a crowd of about 300-400 males shouting slogans. The absence of clear identities, except six known instigators, emphasizes a textual theme of homogenization of masses.

Media publications consistently convey analogous characterizations:

- *The News* characterizes the gathering as "harassers who encircled the woman" (2024).
- *Dawn* denotes a "ferocious mob" (2024).
- Interviews with the shopkeeper and the police officer indicate that "numbers surged within minutes," instilling a "sense of invincibility" in individuals.

Such lexical patterns have constructed the crowd not as a group of people, but as one emotional unit. The use of words like "mob", "harassers" and "ferocious" and the lack of names of the individuals emphasize the idea of a collective and indefinite mass. This depiction is in line with the concept of anonymity by Le Bon when the individual identity becomes diffused in the collective identity and the responsibility becomes spread out. These linguistic decisions do not just describe the scene, but they actively constitute the behavior of the crowd as an outcome of collective impulse. The stress on size and emotional intensity and absence of individuality are normalizing the view that extraordinary behavior like violence is facilitated by the anonymity of the crowd.

Emotional Contagion and Escalation

The rapidly spread emotion, which is one of the main discursive categories by Le Bon, is shown in texts.

The FIR report states:

- The crowd was "loudly chanting slogans" وہ نعرے مار رہے تھے
- The crowd was "advancing with the intent to kill the couple" جو میاں بیوی کو قتل کرنے کی نیت سے بڑھ رہا تھا
- The crowd was "inciting one another" اور لوگوں کو اشتعال دلوا رہے تھے

This underscores collaborative amplification, wherein emotions intensify through verbal reiteration and audience engagement.

Media narratives echo this escalation:

- *The News* reports that the woman was rescued "just before the crowd's anticipated violence" (2024).
- The shopkeeper describes emotions spreading "within no time".

These are examples of discursive contagion: words are spread in the same way as emotions, not facts. Crowd appears to be driven by anger and impulsive behavior. Loud chanting, shouting slogans and a speedy crowd formation contributed to the escalation of the situation.

Suggestibility and Collective Persuasion

According to the FIR report, the charges were fake and embraced by the crowd without substantiation. The report states:

- they wanted to kill the couple on the basis of fabricated reason.

(جھوٹی اور منگھرٹ وجھ بنا کرمیاں اور بیوی کو قتل کرنا چاہتے تھے.)

Similar evidence is revealed in interviews:

- The shopkeeper stated: "Once the idea of blasphemy emerged, individuals ceased to pay attention."
- The police officer observed: "A rational explanation became unattainable."

These examples demonstrate suggestibility, willingness to accept prevailing assertions without their critical examination.

Construction of Social Identity

There are identity indicators that are well represented in incident. The FIR report identifies the crowd as one, undifferentiated group by using the phrase "illegal mob", "unknown persons", and common violent purpose repetitively. The defendant and her husband are portrayed as "out of group" since they are described as violators of divine regulations.

Dawn newspaper (2024) reports that the accusation that the dress bore "Quranic verses" instantly presents the girl as a possible offender of the sacred rules and thus out of the moral community, until an institution takes action.

In *The News* (2024), expressions like, "wanted to punish her" and "religious offence shape" the woman as one against whom collective action is right which strengthens categorization (crowd vs. accused). The language is an example of the principles of classification (crowd versus couple), identification (the crowd as guardians), and social comparison (perceived ethical superiority) by Tajfel (Guan & So, 2016). Identity thus comes out as primary discursive force that enhances behavior of mob.

II.   Discursive Practice

This section analyses the production, circulation and interpretation of discourse with the help of newspaper article and interviews.

- *The News* emphasizes the necessity of prompt police response (2024).
- *The Nation* emphasizes legal proceedings, observing the "ambiguity of blasphemy allegations" (2024).
- *Dawn* contextualizes the incident amid ethical and political discussions, "The girl in her statement strongly rejected the allegations of committing blasphemy, saying she could not even think of disrespecting Islam as she was from a religious family" (2024).

Multiple references familiarize a wider audience with the event, reinforcing emotional and ideological interpretations.

Intertextuality and Cultural Memory

The media sources refer to the past incidents of blasphemy which makes the incident related to a larger cultural history. In a particular instance, *Dawn* (2024) makes explicit mention of the fact that similar blasphemy claims have led to communal lynching in numerous other instances throughout the country in the past, as collective memory does contain fear of religious offence. Similarly, *The News* (2024) quotes a police official saying that "this is an everyday thing almost," and also cites previous incidences in Firdous Market and Ichhra, which desensitizes the anticipation of instant action. These allusions strengthen fear, urgency and the culturally

constructed ideas of honor and religious safety. Consequently, these trends turn the Lahore's incident into a national narrative cycle but not a localized one.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the study demonstrate that the incident is not mere representation of a behavioral phenomenon, but a discursive pattern of cultural narratives, and identity constructions present in media reports, institutional documents and eyewitnesses' testimonies. The three-dimensional model by Fairclough as well as the interpretive categories of anonymity, contagion, suggestibility and social identity helped to develop a deeper understanding of the ways in which the collective affect and violent mobilization is created and maintained by means of language. The results of data analysis revealed that the description of the crowd was often focused on its collective and nameless features.

The FIR report, the newspaper articles and witnesses' interviews represented the crowd as a unified emotional unit, which discursively obliterated personal responsibility. The process of emotional growth became a common theme, with newspapers and witnesses' testimonies showing that anger and moral outrage spread like wildfire after the blasphemy accusation. This discursive strategy helps in highlighting the power of words in escalating negative emotions and making the transformation of normal social behavior into violent mobilization. These facts indicate that suggestibility played an important role in determining the crowd behavior. The fact that the accusation of blasphemy is taken without scrutiny, shows the desire to accept mainstream discourses when stakes are high.

The audience was constantly presented as the guardians of religious purity, and the accused woman was presented as the violator of the communal values. The gap in identity, which was sustaining through media language and public discourse, affirmed the hostile behavior of the crowd and the ideological boundaries between in-groups and out-groups. The study found that newspaper articles reproduced culturally mediated stereotypes on blasphemy, religious honor and moral duty.

The data showed how fear, urgency, and the spreading threat, whereas the intertextual allusions linked the event to a greater tradition of religiously based violence in Pakistan. These discourses, placed in the context of a larger social and ideological system, showed that the cultural memory and the collective identity affect the response of the masses to the accusation of blasphemy.

The recommendations for the further studies lie in the need to have more responsible and contextualized media reporting of delicate religious matters. Media organizations need to adopt discursive strategies that prevent recreations of fear-based narratives and avoid language that unwillingly justifies crowd's actions. The law enforcement agencies should aim at giving priority to early intervention strategies that depend on the understanding of discursive escalation. Communication management, crowd psychology and conflict de-escalation training courses can help the police to work better in a challenging environment. Community-based education should aim at challenging the negative cultural discourses and encouraging the critical approach to religious iconography.

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