



On the Validation of Laclau and Mouffe's Theory of Discourse: A Case of a Persian Film

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Abstract

The present study aimed to validate the usefulness of Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory in discourse analysis through eliciting interpretations of a film provided by a number of Iranian participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds and persuasions. To achieve the objectives of the study, we chose as our data a Persian film which had already been analysed by an Iranian distinguished discourse analyst using Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory. We then asked three groups (five in each) of participants to watch the film and provide us with their open-ended interpretations of the episodes which the analyst had analysed in detail as examples to better illustrate his analyses of the film. Comparisons between the analyst's analyses and the participants' interpretations revealed both convergences and divergences, demonstrating the need to accommodate the alternative interpretations in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. Pedagogical implications are discussed for those who are interested in analysing different types of discourse.

Keywords: discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe, socio-cultural persuasions, interpretations of readers, alternative interpretations

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Introduction

There is not always a one-to-one correspondence between linguistic elements/means and their pragmatic functions. When people use language, they convey through it assumptions and ideologies not always directly stated but indirectly implied. Thus, sometimes more is implied and, in turn, understood from a particular utterance than is said. Fairclough (1992) believes that assumed meanings have particular ideological importance and power structures thrive on meanings accepted as given. These assumptions and ideologies are closely intertwined with power and hegemony. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), whatever is produced in a society is influenced by power and is necessarily ideological, constructing particular meanings and putting other meanings to subordinate positions. The concept of ideology in discourse analysis is partly influenced by Althusser's structural Marxist approach. Althusser (1971) argues that the individual becomes an ideological subject through a process of interpellation whereby discourses appeal to the individual as a subject. Althusser (1971) defines *ideology* as a system of representations that masks our true relations to one another in society by constructing imaginary relations between people and between them and the social formation. However, Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of ideology differs from other concepts of ideology. They believe that we cannot liberate ourselves from ideology and there is no hope that we can find a way out of it. In this theory, a society without ideology is unthinkable. Texts (e.g., readers' interpretations) as elements of social events prove as rich sites in which ideologies can be represented and individuals' interpretations are likely to be influenced by their social, political and cultural orientations. Given the significance of ideology in people's interpretations of discourse, the current research aimed at validating the usefulness Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory in discourse analysis through eliciting interpretations of a film provided by a number of Iranian participants from different socio-cultural persuasions.

In the following, we first provide an overview of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory and critical discourse analysis (CAD) followed by a section that elaborates data selection criteria and procedures. Then, the analyst's original analysis of the film is presented followed by the participants' analysis of the film. The analyst is a Persian discourse analyst who has analysed episodes of the film drawing on the analytical tools provided in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse (see section 2 below). We then move on to comparing the analyst's analyses and the participants' interpretations to examine how far Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse acknowledges the audience's interpretations. The article concludes with a brief summary of findings and implications for discourse analysis.

Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory

Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory delineates the idea that social reality is the product of discursive practices and it is always open to interpretation. This provides new avenues for ongoing social struggles hinging on the definitions of identity and society. The theory presents itself as a comprehensive framework,

facilitating the analysis of socio-political discourses. It can reveal how dominant discourses in a society lead to the production of cultural artifacts. Jorgenson and Phillips (2002) compares Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse with critical discourse analysis and discursive psychology and point out that they both carry out critical research, analysing power relations and formulating normative perspectives from which a critique of such relations can be made with an eye on the possibilities for social change. However, they have distinctive philosophical and theoretical "understandings of discourse, social practice and critique, which lead to particular aims, methods and empirical focal points' (p. 2).

The theory is informed by both post-Saussurian linguistics and post-Marxist social thought. In this theory, the entire social field is seen as an array of processes in which meaning is constructed. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), all social phenomena have discursal and political characteristics. They consider that discourse is a bigger system which has dominance over other social phenomena and systems and shapes them. They point out that it is these political structures that lead us to think and do in a particular way and as a result of which the society is built. In fact, in Laclau and Mouffe's terms, politics is conceived of as a far-reaching concept which refers to the ongoing process by which we construct and structure the social world in ways that we exclude alternative possibilities (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

Power, subject and collective identity are three important concepts in this theory. Like Foucault, Laclau and Mouffe believe that power is not something which belongs to one group and is absent in other groups. Rather, power is something that builds the social. Our knowledge, identity and personal and social positions are the products of power. Informed by Foucault (1972), Laclau and Mouffe (1985) believe that subjects are shaped or constructed within discursive practices, hence the constitutive function of discourse. The theory was also influenced by Althusser's (1971) interpellation in constructing the concept of "subject". Interpellation is a process whereby discourses construct social positions for individuals by appealing to them as subjects and making them ideological subjects. Individuals are, therefore, placed or interpellated in certain positions through particular ways of talking. Drawing on Lacan's (1977) insights, Laclau (1993) conceived the subject of an incomplete being which strives to become a "whole" and always attempts to find itself through investing in discourses. It is the discourses which provide the subject with "subject positions".

In this theory, the boundary between the identity of the subject and its collective identity is blurred. They are both shaped as a result of interaction with the world outside. The identity of the subject is constructed as a result of conflicts between its unconscious and the world outside. In the theory of Laclau and Mouffe, fight over the construction of meaning has a pivotal role. No discourses are shaped and stabilized since all discourses attempt to construct reality and present different policies for social actions in conflict with other discourses. Social conflict takes place when different identities reject one another. According to Laclau and Mouffe, this conflict constructs the identity of the artist and manifests itself in all his actions,

discourse and behaviors. It makes him preserve particular meanings and drive other meanings to a margin. Therefore, a key concept in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse is discursive struggle where discourses are involved in an ongoing conflict with each other to gain hegemony establishing their own understandings of language (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002).

In addition to being a theory of discourse in its own right, Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse introduced key concepts that were appreciated and advocated by the critical discourse analysis theorists. One of them is articulation, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), is any practice that creates a relation among elements in such way that the identity of these elements goes under a transformation. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) believe that existing discourses are challenged and reproduced by specific articulations through mixing meanings in particular ways. Therefore, there are always struggles between different discourses to ascribe meanings to the individual signs.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory has been extensively used to analyze different films (e.g., Ravadrad & Aghaei, 2016; Ahangar et al, 2020; Pahlavannezhad, 2022). It has proved to provide discourse analysts with practical tools to analyse films. However, one question which may be raised is whether Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse appreciates alternative interpretations of other people at the philosophical-paradigmatic level. By alternative interpretations, we here mean meanings that the audience derive from reading a text as a result of interactions between the text, context and pretext. More particularly, the audience construct meanings of a piece of discourse by conflating what is in their minds, what is in the text and the contextual (socio-political) factors which influence the way the text is interpreted or deconstructed. Therefore, our validation work relates to interpretive validity in which, taking an emic perspective, we aim at studying the phenomena on the basis of the participants' perspectives (Maxwell, 1992). Moreover, in relation to the processes and activities involved in production and consumption, Fairclough (1995) believes the processes of production and consumption have not been effectively transferred into practical methods and calls for further explorations of the circumstances of actual use without which we may obtain a distorted picture of how a discourse functions and how it is interpreted. Also, Widdowson (2004) claims that discourse analysis practitioners leave rarely an alternative interpretation other than what they said a particular text produces. According to Widdowson (2004), interpretations are likely to be influenced through socio-culturally informed schematic preconceptions of readers as well. He suggests ethnographic enquiries which could explore how readers of distinct socio-cultural background and political affiliations actually respond while engaging with textual discourses. Widdowson (2004) quotes Bartlett's (1932) study as an example of the use of this method where he invited subjects to read through a North American folktale story 'The War of the Ghosts', and subsequently reproduce what they remember. Bartlett's analysis indicated that the reproduced versions differed from the original story in some ways, and these differences were interpreted as evidence of how people's socio-culturally

informed schematic preconceptions can shape their interpretation and understanding of a given text.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) emerged from the work of Roger Fowler and his colleagues, and was later advanced by Norman Fairclough. Over the past 30 years, CDA has been viewed as a form of linguistically-oriented, critical social research in actual social issues and forms of inequality, such as racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and sexism (Reisigl, 2018). The linguistic model that is particularly well-suited for the task is often identified as Halliday's S/F grammar. Kress (1996) argues that CDA aims to bring "a system of excessive inequalities of power into crisis by uncovering its workings and its effects through the analysis of potent cultural objects – texts – and thereby to help in achieving a more equitable social order" (Kress, 1996, p. 15). Also, according to Van Leeuwen (2018), CDA must not only investigate how social practices are represented and evaluated in texts, they must also evaluate these representations and evaluations. In the words of Fairclough (1995), discourse is "constitutive" or "constructive" of social structure, and not merely constrained by it. He differentiates three kinds of "constructive effect" that are caused by discourse: the formation of social self or identity, the formation of social relationships between people, and the formation of "systems of knowledge and belief".

However, Fairclough's approach to discourse analysis has come under criticism. In this approach, only one part of a text or certain linguistic features in isolation from its co-textual connections are chosen for analysis and others are ignored. And almost no criteria for relevance are actually provided. Doing this reduces the whole text to a clause which misrepresents the very nature of the text. Therefore, the question arises as to what motivates the authors' choice of one rather than the other (i.e., sampling)? Also, CDA practitioners fail to bear in mind dependence of meaning on the audience's interpretations. A related objection that Widdowson (2004) has raised about CDA is that the interpretations of discourse have "a privileged status, a unique validity even, because they are based on the analysis of textual facts", (p. 169) paying no or little attention to alternative interpretations. Stated otherwise, interpretations which CDA practitioners come by seem to depend solely on results of analysis of textual facts. Discourse interpretations cannot be derived by way of only an aggregate of lexicogrammatical elements for the reason that different people may come up with different interpretations based on socio-culturally informed schematic preconceptions.

Given that critical discourse analysis fails to acknowledge the dependence of meaning on the audience's interpretations, the present study aims to examine whether Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory acknowledges alternative interpretations. To this end, a Persian film which had been previously analysed by one of the distinguished Iranian discourse analysts was given to three groups of participants, who came from different socio-cultural backgrounds, to watch. The

readers. The analyst had drawn on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to analyse parts of the film. The analyst's analysis of the film found support for what the framework claimed the text was written for (See below for detailed analysis of the film by the analyst).

Methodology

Participants

To serve the objectives of the study, efforts were made to choose the participants who came from different socio-cultural backgrounds. To identify their socio-cultural backgrounds, we asked them a number of questions about their education, occupation, political and cultural literacies, and their analytical skills and came up with three groups of socio-culturally and politically different participants. University students ranged in age between 20 and 25 and had got BA degrees. Two of them were male and three were female. High school teachers ranged in age between 27 and 35 and they all had MA degrees in their fields of teaching. Three of them were male and the other two were female. University teachers varied in age from 40 to 45 and they all had Ph.D. degrees. Two of them were male and the other three were female. There were five participants in each group.

Data Selection Criteria and Procedures

A Persian film which had already been analyzed by a distinguished Persian discourse analyst using Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of discourse constitutes the data for the present study. As touched upon earlier, the purpose was to validate the usefulness of discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in discourse analysis through eliciting interpretations of a number of Iranian participants. By interpretation we, here, mean background assumptions (or members' resources, to use Fairclough's term (1989) people bring to the process of discourse analysis. Or in other words, people construct meanings of a piece of discourse by conflating what is in their minds, what is in the text and the contextual (socio-political) factors which influence the way the text is interpreted or deconstructed. To this end, following the same procedure suggested by Widdowson (2004) we selected three groups of participants to watch the original Persian film. We asked them to give particular attention to episodes of the film (which had already been analysed in detail as examples to better illustrate his analyses of the film) and give use open-ended interpretations of them. Finally, we compared the analyst's analyses and the participants' interpretations to see how far they differed and were mediated by the participants' socio-culturally informed schematic understandings and preconceptions.

To make comparison valid, the two researchers studied both the analyst's analyses and the participants' interpretations independently. Then, they went over the data some time later. Inter-rater reliability was estimated with Cohen's Kappa at 0.93, which according to Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165), is almost a perfect agreement.

Summary of the Film

The film retells the story of a combatant, named *Amin Haghi*, who is the chief director of a newspaper. He has returned from the war between Iran and Iraq. Amin tries to publish anti-war memories of his martyr brother who was one of the chief commanders. However, there are some people with vague shadows in the film who attempt to prevent him from publishing the memories. He is severely tortured and prosecuted. Then, he is brought to the court of law when attempts to torture and prosecute him fail. He is kept in prison for two months before his trial. When his wife and friends attempt to bail him out, they are involved in illegal activities. Akbar Haghi (who is his uncle and is affiliated to the conservative party) gets him out of prison. Finally, it is revealed that his uncle who is the election candidate guides what happened to Amin Haghi. At the end of the film, Amin Haghi is killed after it is found out that his wife is pregnant.

Results and Discussion

The analyst believes that the film “*party*” was produced when there was a debate between two main political wings namely, the “reformists” and “conservatives” in Iran. He points out that this gave rise to the construction of different discourses which represent themselves positively and others negatively. Differentiation involves a distinct boundary that separates an individual or group of social actors from an actor or group who share similarities with them, establishing the distinction between the “self” and the “other,” or between “us” and “them,” as with “others”. This polarization has impacted on the way people behaved in the society especially when it comes to produce cultural products or artifacts. The “*party*” which is a cultural product is no exception. According to the analyst, the self-positive representation has been affected by the dominant reformist discourse. One of the main tenets which the film wants to highlight is “freedom” besides the concepts of “law” and “people”. According to the analytical tools of Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of discourse discussed above, freedom, law and people as nodal points organise the rival discourses of the film, master signifiers act to organise identity of the characters and “the society of Iran” as a social space is organised by myths as key signifiers. Freedom, law and people are floating signifiers which the rival discourses in the film namely “reformists” and “conservatives” struggle to imbue with different meanings to constitute knowledge, reality identities and social relations in the film. The analyst believes that there are instances in the film in which the rival discourses come to maintain hegemonic intervention by being antagonistic with one another towards the nodal signifiers in the film. Also, in the film the rival discourses invested key signifiers with different meanings and link them to different chains of equivalence. What follows are first the analyses of the analyst followed by the participants’ interpretations of some parts of the film which had been analysed by the analyst. Table 1 summarizes the percentages of convergence between the analyst’s analyses and the participants’ interpretations.

Table 1

Percentage of Convergence Between the Analyst's Analyses and the Participants' Interpretations

Film parts Participants	Convergence with the analyst's analyses (%)						
	Part 1	Part 2	Part 3	Part 4	Part 5	Part 6	Part 7
University student participants	80%	60%	100%	0%	100%	100%	100%
School teacher participants	0%	0%	100%	0%	100%	80%	100%
University teacher participants	100%	100%	100%	20%	100%	100%	20%

The Analyst's Analysis of Part 1

This sentence begins the film “the film is dedicated to those who lift stones to build freedom not to those who lift stones to build tombs” which according to the analyst, indicates from the outset the conflict between the two competing discourses in the whole society (and as a result the discourse dominant over the minds of producers of the film). The discourses which establish a borderline between “we” and “they” or “self” and “other”. Those who lift stones to build freedom are the “we” of the film or the reformists and those who killed the freedom and those who lift stones to build tombs are the “they” of the film or the conservatives. Efforts are made on the part of the producers to present a different definition of the “freedom” from the point of the view of the reformists, the efforts that are made to reject the conservatives’ definition of freedom and continues up the end of the film. Therefore, the film is an attempt to give a particular definition of the “freedom” and “law” on the part of the reformists and at the same time it is an attempt to marginalize the definitions presented by the conservatives.

The Participants' Analyses of Part 1

With reference to the student participants four of the university student participants reported that the purpose of this sentence is to present a different definition of freedom. Definition which is highly valued and reshaped by the producers of the film which belong to the dominant discourses in the society. They all argued that to the film producers, to reach freedom is equal to losing one’s life. Therefore, the new definition presented of the freedom in the film is to highlight the values and thoughts of those who belong to this discourse. Thus, these participants’ interpretations of the film coincide with that of the analyst. Only one of them reported that the sentence beginning the film might have had attracted viewers to keep watching the film up to the end of the film: “As it is a common practice to use a *maxim* or what you may call it an *aphorism* to begin a film to have the viewer on the edge of the bench ...”

With relation to the high school teacher participants, four out of the five participants reported that the purpose of this opening sentence is to present a

definition favored by the producers of the film in that one should go to great pains if one desires to reach it. The participants argued that this way of reaching freedom reflects what the film producers conceive of freedom as is evident in the one of the comments: "Reaching freedom seems to be a hard task in the country and to reach it, you have to go through unexpected frustrations".

Therefore, this definition has been impacted on discourses to which the film producers belong (that is the reformist discourse).). Still, one of the high school teacher participants believed that the main purpose of this sentence is that the job of the press is to free public minds and the media does this as if they carry stones on their shoulders. This does not seem to support nor reject a particular line of thinking. The finding, here, echoes Widdowson's (2004) criticism of CDA, among others, which have not acknowledged alternative interpretations against that of the analysts themselves.

With relation to the university teacher participants, all the participants reported that the opening sentence describes the director's worldview of the freedom. They believed that having knowledge of the unpleasant status of the notion of the freedom in the society, the director of the film presents a new definition of the freedom and believed that there are still freedom seekers who go to great pains and lose their belongings to reach freedom. One of them commented that: "Losing physical belongings is just one from among many of the difficulties you have to encounter due to the current status of affairs in the country".

These interpretations are consistent with that of the analyst who considered that efforts are made on the part of the producers to present a different definition of the "freedom" from the point of the view of the reformists, the efforts that are made to reject the conservatives' definition of freedom and continues up the end of the film. All in all, comparison of the interpretations of the participants with that of the analyst showed some divergence, reflecting the concern raised by Widdowson (2004) that discourse theories, including Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of discourse, that should acknowledge the audience interpretations as well.

The Analyst' Analysis of Part 2

The notion of "freedom" is present all over the film. The title of the newspaper which Amin Haghi directs is "*nedaye azadi*" or "voice of freedom". Moreover, the name of one of the characters of the film who is sick and seems to be one of Amin's relatives is "Azad" "*free*" in English. Four interesting points about "Azad" is noteworthy. His name is Azad. Azad is sick. Azad has sought freedom in Amin. Azad dies as a result of involvement in activities that the "they" of the film have done. Azad represents "freedom", the freedom that seems to be sick and is in need of attention. The ones who should take care of freedom in Iran are the reformist journalists. However, the conservatives kill Azad at last since they *lift stones to build tombs*. The analyst particularly focuses our attention on one episode of the film in which the inspector inspects Amin.

Inspector: *why have you kept silent while you answer well in your newspaper?*

Amin Haghi: *I prefer to speak where there is a law.*

Inspector: *Heh, heh,.. Law? First, bring down that handkerchief from your eyes (Amin brings it down). Look carefully! Remember me! (Big slap) you now found out that I don't hide myself.*

Amin Haghi: *So the friendly talk means this?*

Inspector: *The friendly talk means this for you who keep talking of the law and don't know its meaning. Dear look, this is your court of law. I am your lawyer, judge and as well as your attorney general. You are right, there is freedom of speech. But the shape of friendly talk is different for such rubbish people as you who do flirtation with the name of freedom of speech and spread dirt in a few papers in your newspaper and call it enlightenment. For you there is not something after freedom of speech. My dear look at me otherwise I'll beat you within an inch of your life. You think that you can do anything now that your brother is a martyr.*

Amin Haghi: *Who are you?*

(Again Amin is given another big slap and he is featured while falling down to the ground.)

According to the analyst, the above conversation between Amin Haghi and the inspector is centered around two different lines of ways over the two notions: "freedom" and "law". Amin Haghi says that *I prefer to speak where there is the law* which means that there is no law here and the "they" of the film has violated the law.

Participants' Analysis of Part 2

One university student participant reported that by frequently using freedom in the film the director wanted to express his concern over freedom which was the main concern at the time at which the film was produced.

Another believed that the director wanted to imply that people are free to express their opinions and they should not be punished for expressing their ideas as commented below: "Being punished there in the film is one instance of freedom violation. It doesn't matter who and how violates it. I think that it shouldn't be done under any condition".

However, two of the student participants reported that by using freedom more frequently in the film the director wanted to convey the message that characters (belonging to different rival discourses) in the film seek freedom but freedom means different things for each: "I think that there in the film is the scene of rival discourses competing with one another to gain power and control over the other and over general audience."

With reference to high school teacher participants, all participants reported that by employing the concept of the "freedom", the director wanted to imply that "freedom is not sought only by the people who have religious face. Unveiled women

(referring to Mrs. Ariani who, in some parts of the film, showed little inclination to wear scarf as a religious index) can also work towards freedom. This is an opposition on the part of the director against the conservatives who think that unveiled women cannot be good candidates for spreading freedom". Therefore, as these interpretations revealed the concept of freedom is defined and constructed differently by different discourses (here, the two rival discourses do not agree on the concept of freedom) lending support to Laclau and Mouffe' theory of discourse that each structures reality in different ways and compete to define what is true (here, freedom) within the particular aspect of the social life in Iran (hence truth being discursively created). However, this finding demonstrates that like CDA, Laclau and Mouffe' theory of discourse doesn't appreciate alternative interpretations.

The university teacher participants reported that the main concern of the director over the frequent use of the concept "freedom" is to express that freedom is not paid attention in the society. Only powerful people can express. They believed that "*Nedaye Azadi*" (Voice of Freedom) is one piece of evidence highlighting the necessity of establishing and maintaining the right for people to have freedom. The boy "Azad" (meaning free in English) is another piece of evidence towards freedom as indicated in the following comment: "The prosecutor is everything there in the film. He is the judge, the lawyer and the attorney general (as we see the prosecutor saying these), violating the right of Amin to have his own lawyer to defend."

Analyst's Analysis of Part 3

According to the analyst, the director of the film has tried to employ linguistic items to show that the film is extremely violent. Such pejorative terms as "*do flirtation with the name of freedom of speech*" "*I'll beat you within an inch of your life*" and "*rubbish people*" which the inspector keeps using during the interrogation whereas we never see Amin Haghi use such expressions. According to the analyst, this aims at winning the audience's sympathy with the "we" of the film and developing a sense of rancor and hatred towards the "they" of the film.

The Participants' Analysis of Part 3

With reference to the university student participants, we found they believed it shows the true nature of the inspector and the association to which he was affiliated. They pointed out the inappropriacy of the inspector's behavior towards Amin Haghi. They added that the inspector belonged to those people who view a prosecution session as being atrocious and cruel towards the accused. They reported that the director has intentionally inserted this part as a means of collecting sympathy towards Amin and the association to which he belonged. Therefore, it raises a sense of sympathy towards "we" of the film and develops a sense of rancor and hatred towards the "they" of the film. One of them said that: "I felt some sort of emotional I saw the inspector's behavior towards Amin Haghi. It was unacceptable."

The high school teacher participants reported that the director of the film has employed these linguistic items in order to show that the "they" of the film are cruel, impolite, angry, prejudiced, and illogical. They also pointed out violence and the inappropriacy of the behaviour of the "they" of the film with cultural activists.

Therefore, the “we” of the film is represented in positive ways and encourages the viewer to sympathize with Amin and indicate their hatred and rancor towards the inspector (who is affiliated with the “they” of the film): “If I had been the prosecutor, I wouldn’t have treated him like that. It was so cruel and inhumane. I felt sympathetic with Mr Haghi.”

The university teacher participants reported that the way the inspector treats Amin Haghi represents the dictatorial discourses which are always pregnant with contempt and insult. The freedom and value of people are downgraded in these discourses. Injecting a sense of hatred and dislike into the viewer is the main purpose of this episode. Therefore, there seems to be a convergence in the way the student, high school teacher and university teacher participants interpret this episode of the film with that of the analyst. They all reported that the “we” of the film wins the sympathy of the viewer by negatively representing the “they” of the film: “Using any instances of these types of linguistics expressions by anyone is really offensive and it doesn’t matter who has used them. I think it just develops a sense of hatred in the audience.”

The Analyst's Analysis of Part 4

Discourses can be manifested not only through language, but also through other semiotic forms. In addition to the fact that the film uses linguistic items to represent the “we” of the film positively and the “they” of the film negatively, it also uses veritable semiotic devices such as pictures, colour and background music to help both make meaning and highlight the “we” of the film and driving the “they” of the film to the margin. During the whole interrogation, the interrogator is in the dark and is never seen by the film viewer. In contrast, Amin Haghi who represents the “we” of the film is kept appearing in the screen with big views. Highlighting the “we” of the film and marginalizing of the “they” of the film continues up to the end of the film. Most of the characters that we see in the film belong to the “we” of the film and only one or two of the characters of the film belong to the “they” of the film. These become much more obvious when we pay attention to how music is used in the film. According to the analyst, music plays a significant role in the film in that wherever it is present in the film, it intends to highlight the presence of “we” of the film and its absence makes the “they” of the film remain on the sidelines. No music is heard until the interrogation ends with this sentence “who are you?”. Music is played as the title of the film appears on the screen and accompanies it and the cast.

The Participants' Analysis of Part 4

With reference to the student participants, they all reported that the absence of music during the inspection and when it is played as the title of the film appears on the screen and accompanies it and the cast arouse the curiosity of the viewers and keep them in the suspense to see what will happen in the rest of the film. This episode of the film does not seem to win the viewers’ sympathy towards Amin, the “we” of the film. Therefore, there seems to be divergence between the analyst and the student participants in the interpretation of this episode of the film: “During the

inspection, I just wanted to know what will happen now that there is no music. My guess was that there was going to something unpleasant to happen.”

With reference to the high school teacher participants, there found to be varying interpretations among them with one of them expressing that “freedom seekers won’t sit still. They might be controlled for a time but will make the voice of freedom louder and louder”.

Another high school teacher participant reported that the purpose here is to “encourage and induce the viewer come close to the director and feel sympathy with him. Probably, this music is the voice of the freedom-seekers which is not turned off with torture and suppression”.

Still another high school teacher participant reported that the purpose here is to “inject fear and silence into the audience and attract the attention of the viewer to follow what is going to happen in the film”.

These interpretations go against that of the analyst where he believed that the music fulfills the function of highlighting the presence of “we” of the film and its absence allows the “they” of the film to remain on the sidelines (hence bringing to attention discourse analysts’ no or little attention (if any) to the audience’s alternative interpretations.

With reference to the university teacher participants, one participant reported that the absence of the music is to “show the calcification and silence that even the music daren’t express itself. It shows the top end of sheer dictatorship and bloodsucking”. Or another university teacher participant believed that by this the director wanted “to show that freedom is suppressed in the society. The absence of music in the inspections is indicative of suppression of freedom in the society”.

These reports are inconsistent with that of the analyst. However, only one participant interpreted the absence of music in almost the same way as the analyst in that like the analyst this university teacher participant believed that the presence of music is to arouse a sense of sympathy towards the “we” of the film and a sense of hatred towards the “they” of the film: “Silence can show loneliness, absence of the music creates silence which can show that Amin is alone in reaching his goal. When it is inserted, it can show a film towards the goal”.

The Analyst’s Analysis of Part 5

There are some other concepts that are challenged in the film. When the reformists came to power, their political rivals i.e., conservatives used such concepts as “cultural aggression”, “Islamic and republic values” to convey the idea that the reformists will spread the western cultures to the whole society and the Islamic republic values will lose their significance. To respond to these allegations, the reformists try to present their definitions of these notions so as to both challenge the conservatives’ misinterpretation of them as well as drive them to the margin. According to the analyst we see instances of this in the film where Amin Haghi is freed alone and blind in an unknown place. In response to his wife’s question, Negar Aryani, “who has done this to you”, he says:

They were those whom I spoke on the phone several times. For this reason, I got into their car. First I thought they were my war friends that have problems with me and my writings. I thought that if I talked to them for hours we could sort out the misunderstandings. Halfway through the talk I found out that I have made a rough guess ... [the scene of Amin falling to the ground is replayed with music in the background and big view]. People have changed. My eyes were closed and I did not understand what happened till I arrived home. They were not the children of the war.

In this episode, the “we” of the film has been represented in a way that they were of those people who have fought in the war and belonged to the group of children of the war. According to the analyst, that Amin is a war combatant and his brother is a martyr is an attempt to define the “we” of the film based on the values and concept that are strongly accepted in the society of Iran. This reflects that the “we” of the film is not “western” and is not only a threat to the Islamic and republic values but the “we” of the film is the strong defenders of those values. At the same time, this episode of the film is an attempt on the part of the director to redefine the “they” of the film in ways that the “they” of the film are kept away from the Islamic and republic values. Consequently, Amin Haghi says at the end of the episode “*They were not the children of the war*”.

The Participants' Analysis of Part 5

One university student participant reported that “the director wants to come closer to the children of the war and say that we belong to their group”. Another participant believed that “they were not the children of war”, the director wanted to bring to the attention of the viewer “those who have not fought in the war but are the main beneficiaries of the war”.

The high school teacher participants showed convergence with those of student participants where they reported that the director wants to differentiate between those who really fought for the country and those who did not fight but made misuse of the name of the real fighters (combatants). They also reported that only the children of war have the right to inspect not those who do not have any right on the shoulder of the martyrdom. One of them said that: “In the director’s opinion, the inspector carries just the title of the children of the war. They aren’t the war combatants. They are there to misuse whatever you might imagine to reach their own personal interests”.

All the university teacher participants converged on the idea that by “they were not the children of the war” the director refers to people who have used other people’s intentions (people who have lost their lives to reach freedom) to reach their wishes. Stated otherwise, they believed that the children of war came from people and understand people. However, these people begin to annoy other people instead of listening to them. They are mercenaries.

The Analyst's Analysis of Part 6

A form of positive presentation of self and negative presentation of others influences every other aspect of discourse. Over the past years one of the main

concerns of the reformist party in Iran was to acquit themselves of any affiliation to the western values given the fact that they have been accused to be transferring western cultures and values to the Islamic and republic values by their political rival i.e., conservatives. In the film discussed so far, this internal disagreement between the two political parties is evident and the producers who belong to the reformist party choose discourses which show their positions explicitly when Amin Haghi interviews with a BBC correspondent:

BBC Correspondent: *We want to have a telephone conversation with you in pursuance of publication of the last volume of your newspaper and reflection of your martyr brother's manuscript.*

Amin Haghi: *Excuse me, I don't want to interview.*

BBC Correspondent: *We have only some short questions about the present situations and limitations of the Iranian journalists and how you think about the way the court of press deal with the Iranian journalists in general.*

Amin Haghi: *Well. Yeah. But these short questions constitute an interview which I said that I don't want to interview. Besides, I don't want anyone to make political misuses of my brother's manuscript.*

BBC Correspondent: *you know that press crimes are not political nowhere in the world whereas yours are political.*

Amin Haghi: *I know. You don't need to remind me of that.*

BBC Correspondent: *Mr Haghi! How do you think the reformist party have written about the way the court of press behaves towards the journalists?*

Amin Haghi: *Look! It is a duty for all of press and media to protect their rights. And if you see that one particular newspaper (no matter to which political party it belongs) defends me or condemns my call for the court does not mean that they defend me but they criticize the way the press is being treated.*

BBC Correspondent: *But it seems that after the publication of the brother's manuscript and opposition outside the country, a particular political party tries to ...*

Amin Haghi: *First, these manuscripts do not show anything except that a war combatant thinks that he should not fight exactly at a time when he decides to fight for the benefit and expediency of his country. Second, you and people like you don't have the right to consider me like those people who come and talk in your radio. Neither am I a combatant nor my aim is to put down the country. And If I have any complaints, I will pose them in my country. Not like those people I go abroad and make ... there.*

BBC Correspondent: *We think alike. I didn't expect ...*

Amin Haghi: *Look Sir. Neither do I want to nor did I want to interview with you. You made our talk reach this point. Tell me do we think alike? Sir, my thoughts and opinions are in no ways similar to yours.*

According to the analyst, some point should be paid attention. According to the BBC correspondent Amin Haghi has been accused of a political crime. Amin Haghi insists that his crime is not political and has not intended to make political uses of his brother's writings. According to the analyst, the reason why this point has been stressed in the film is that within these years the conservatives have tried to show that the reformists' activities are political and by means of this they can prevent the reformists from doing any activities.

The Participants' Analysis of Part 6

All the student participants reported that Amin looks for creating an environment in which people including media can have freedom of speech since there was no or little freedom of speech in Iran. Their intentions are not subversion. For instance, one participant reported that "If something is published in the newspaper and it is against the policies of the dominant, it is considered a crime and its agents should be punished".

Four of the high school teacher participants reported: "Amin differentiates between his compatriots (though he is opposed to him) and the foreigners (though they support him). This emphasizes that Amin's crime is not political and the correspondent wants to make political use of this". One high school teacher participant appeared to interpret this episode in a different way saying that "the BBC correspondent wanted to stimulate Amin to oppose Iran".

All the university teacher participants reported that this part of the film wants to show that journalists are given no or little freedom to media activities. For example, one university teacher participant believed that the purpose of the director of the film in including this episode is to say that "In Iran, there is no or little freedom of speech and whoever tries to think of reaching freedom or bringing freedom to other people are accused of committing political crimes". Another reported that:

It shows that in other parts of the world, media crimes are investigated by a related court. However, the film shows that it is not obeyed in Iran and instead of media courts groups affiliated to the power investigate this issue and oppress and suppress people for expressing their ideas.

Almost all these interpretations on the part of student, high school teacher and university teacher participants corresponded to that of the analyst indicating that there are constraints on the activities of media.

The Analyst' Analysis of Part 7

Finally, with reference to Amin Haghi: *Look Sir, my thoughts and opinions are in no ways similar to yours.* According to the analyst, attempts are made in the film so as to highlight the point that the "we" of the film or the reformists are in no

ways affiliated to the west or to those Iranians who have sought freedom in foreign countries and now stand against the country.

The Participants' Analysis of Part 7

All the student participants converged on the idea that the inclusion of this sentence in the film showed that Amin differentiated between himself and the BBC correspondent and his corporation. They reasoned that foreign mass media try to look for what they think they have to find. All the high school teacher participants reported that Amin says that although he is critical of the country, this does not mean that he disagrees with the totality of the law in the country. They also reported that the inclusion of this part helps Amin to differentiate between the self and those who are enemies to Iran and he will not cooperate with those opposing Iran. According to one university teacher participant:

This is where the complex notion of freedom is defined. Freedom does not mean betraying to the country and back to people and the martyrs. Freedom is not putting hands to hands with the enemies of Iran to kill people.

A different interpretation comes from a university teacher participant who believed that: "Amin in fact calls on the opposing party to stop fanning the flames by saying "we should be united. BBC and the like seek to plant seeds of conflicts between us".

Here, there seems to be a divergence between the university teacher participant and the analyst. The analyst believed that in this episode attempts are made to highlight the point that the "we" of the film makes a boundary with the opposing party whereas the university teacher participants believed that the purpose here is to reduce the tension rather than fan the flames.

Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to validate the usefulness of discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985) in discourse analysis through eliciting alternative interpretations derived from a number of Iranian participants of different socio-cultural persuasions. All in all, the analyses revealed that although there were some convergences in the interpretations of the analyst and the participants in some parts of the film, there were some divergences as well reflecting the need to accommodate the alternative interpretations in Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. Therefore, the present study brought to the forefront the importance of background assumptions (or members' resources, to use Fairclough' term (1989) people bring to the process of interpretations meaning that people construct meanings of a piece of discourse by conflating what is in their minds, what is in the text and the contextual (socio-political) factors which influence the way a text is interpreted or deconstructed. More particularly, the present paper underscored the usefulness of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse in analysing political discourses revealing how dominant discourses in a society lead to the production of cultural products. Using this theory, we found that such concepts as "law" and

“freedom” as instances of reality were defined and constructed in the film which in fact mirrored how these concepts are defined and constructed in the society of Iran.

The rival discourses that were competing to acquire hegemony over one another in the society left imprints of themselves in a cultural product i.e., film. Stated otherwise, throughout the film we were witness to the fact that the two rival discourses pie for dominance within a given aspect of the social sphere. The film maker's understanding of these aspects was certainly influenced by the ongoing struggle between the two rival discourses, with perceptions and interpretations of the people in the society (e.g., the participants) and their identities are always subject to new redefinition since meanings are continually renegotiated and reconfigured as a result of being in contact with rival discourses.

Our participants and the analyst as members of this society influenced by both their individual experiences and collective frames of perceptions converged on some aspects and diverged on the other aspects reflecting Foucault's (1972) assertion that ‘discourse is not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 55). Rather, in a process referred to as ‘interpellation’, Althusser (1971) and Foucault (1972) suggest that language serves to create and impose on individuals a particular social position which impacts on how they and act. Therefore, the results raised the significance of including the interpretations of lay readers of different socio-political and socio-cultural backgrounds in any theory of discourse. Since this is the first study in an Iranian context examining the usefulness of Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse in analysing political discourses the results should be treated with caution. Consequently, further studies are needed to confirm whether it is indeed an effective and appropriate methodological framework for conducting discourse analysis research in other modes of discourse such as written texts. In fact, even Fairclough (1992) admits that ‘texts are open to different interpretations depending on the context and interpreter’ (p. 28) and calls for carrying out rigorous research to establish some empirical evidence for how texts are to be interpreted by people of different socio-cultural backgrounds.

As for the limitation of the study, it is to be noted that we had access to only student, high school teacher and university teacher participants. Although the participants provided us with their interpretations of the film, we suggest that seeking people's interpretations, belonging to other socio-cultural backgrounds would consolidate our results. Therefore, this opens up future research to invite participants from different socio-cultural backgrounds and political persuasions to interpret discourses (interalia, films) previously analysed by discourse analysts employing models of theories of discourse. This line of research should tell us whether theories of discourse analyses appreciate alternative interpretations of the laymen other than the ones reached at by distinguished discourse analysts. In addition to providing the discourse analyzer with analytical tools to analyse and interpret the discourse, we argue that each theory of discourse should take into account readers' interpretations of the piece of discourse as well.

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