
Dehumanization and Media Framing: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Palestinians in Western Media

Abeer Piracha* and Farhat Fatima*

Abstract

In circumstances characterized by colonial histories and power disparities, narratives play a critical role in establishing legitimacy, authority, and legality. This study examines the effects of Western media narratives about Palestine that consistently go beyond bias to produce dehumanization of Palestinians based on colonialist epistemology and through lexicon, framing, and language use. The study uses qualitative critical discourse analysis to examine how Palestinians, especially Palestinian youngsters, are portrayed as either innate threats, victims, or anonymous crowds, while Israeli actions are justified as self-defense. This paper places current media coverage in the context of Palestine's more than 75 years of settler-colonial rule, using discourse analysis, media theories, and post-colonial theory. It is easy to detect the existence of a hierarchy of humanization in which Palestinian suffering is rendered invisible, accepted as normal, or ethically questionable by examining the vocabulary used by the Western media in relation to casualty reports, resistance, terrorism, and childhood. According to the study, these depictions are not coincidental; rather, they are a reflection of Western media's larger ideological role as a colonial continuity agent. In order to stop demeaning Palestinian lives and struggle, the article concludes by examining new challenges to these narratives via social media and advocating for the dismantling of prevailing media discourse.

Keywords: Palestinian representation, Western media, dehumanization, colonial discourse, critical discourse analysis, narrative power.

Introduction

“Narrative in general, from the folk tale to the novel, from annals to the fully realized ‘history,’ has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority.” — Hayden White (1980)

Western media coverage of Palestine is not objective reporting but a deliberate construction of a narrative, a narrative that reinforces authority,

legitimacy, and moral order, while suppressing any resistance to colonial domination. As Hayden White (1980, p. 8) argued, the structure of a narrative determines how events are presented as well as who can experience events as reality. When there are long histories of colonialism and existing disparities of power, the use of narrative as a method of producing domination and delegitimizing resistance can become even more pronounced. For example, the

* Dr Abeer Piracha, Department of Postcolonial Literature, Adjunct Professor, Dallas College, Texas, USA. Email: apiracha@uco.edu

* Farhat Fatima, Department of English Linguistics & Allied Studies, NED (University of Engineering and Technology), Karachi. Email: farhatfatima.k@gmail.com

way in which Western media portrays Palestinians represents such dynamics. Instead of presenting a balanced or neutral view of Palestinians, the Western media has developed an “ugly” narrative. An ugly narrative that dehumanizes Palestinians and legitimates Israeli state violence by using careful and strategic language, framing, and omission.

The dehumanization of Palestinians in Western media is not simply a result of poor journalism. It is part of the colonialist discourse of dehumanization and the use of colonialist tactics. Palestinians are continually portrayed through the lens of colonialists who consider the Palestinian resistance as an act of barbarism, terrorism, and violence. These colonialist stereotypes have been employed by colonial powers to justify the expulsion and subjugation of indigenous peoples throughout history. This is not new; rather, it has been ongoing for centuries, with colonists using the power of the media to justify their colonial and imperial acts. The colonial representation in the media in the case of Palestine is no different. However, the portrayal of Palestinians in Western media differs significantly from the portrayals of other groups that are victims of genocide. For example, Holocaust survivors are continually portrayed as being innocent and victimized. There is no equivalent to the rhetoric of dehumanization, mass killings, and collective punishment used to describe Palestinians.

This stark difference in representation becomes particularly significant when it comes to the children. Children who are otherwise considered everywhere as innocent civilians and any act of terror perpetrated against them is considered a gross act of injustice everywhere are represented differently when it comes to Palestinian children. When considering the representation of Palestinian children in Western media, Palestinian children are often portrayed as not being innocent. The use of the term “minor” rather than “children” is intentional, intended to avoid evoking the sympathy associated with the term “children”. Thus, the narratives surrounding Palestinian children are vastly different from the normative constructs of childhood

innocence and serve to provide a framework for understanding the high levels of violence experienced by Palestinian civilians. The “unchildling” of Palestinian children is not simply a reflection of media bias. The process is reflective of the colonial logic that denies Palestinians full humanity from birth. Omer Alkedad (2025) mentions in his book how a British TV anchor described the Israeli military killing a 4-year-old girl in the West Bank by saying: “A stray bullet found its way into a van and killed a four-year-old young lady.” (60) A four-year-old girl who by every definition should be described as a toddler, or a child, an innocent girl etc. was deliberately described as a “young lady” to somehow justify the killing of that girl or at the very least making the whole act of terrorism milder.

The events of October 7th, 2023, placed Palestine in the spotlight globally, and that particular event brought forth the hypocrisy of Western Media into broad daylight. The Western media coverage of the event treated the issue as if it occurred in a vacuum, with no prior history or context. However, the Western media knew that the struggle of the Palestinian people began long before October 2023, i.e., more than 75 years ago, with the beginning of settler colonialism, the dispossession of Palestinians, and the military occupation of Palestinian lands. Western Media removed the history of settler colonialism but kept referencing the history of the Holocaust. The biased depiction of historical events proves that there can never be an objective Western media, as they claim to be. The Western media deliberately takes out the colonial dimension of the Palestinians’ struggle for liberation to depict them as irrational aggressors rather than an oppressed nation fighting back against structural violence. This depiction of Palestinians’ struggle as irrational aggression constructs a discourse in which Israel appears to defend itself from attacks by Palestinians, no matter how destructive their acts are, and deaths of Palestinians are considered collateral damage.

The above discussion attempted to point out some examples of such discrepancies in Western

Media reports concerning Palestine. However, in order to really appreciate the evolution of Western media discourse about the Palestinian case, we must look into such evolution. As Chomsky (2015) put it, “forgetting the past is to preclude the future.” Historical ambitions, grievances, and conflicts do not just disappear; rather, they are merely relocated. Palestine can be considered an extreme case of such relocation of grievances and ambitions.

Despite an overwhelming amount of scholarly research that supports the position that Israel’s presence in Palestine constitutes settler colonialism, very few mainstream Western media outlets frame Israel as a colonial state. Instead of naming Israel as a colonial state, mainstream Western media frames the conflict as complex, ancient, or intractable, thus obscuring the obvious colonial power at play. Likewise, the use of the word apartheid when it comes to Israel is seldom used, though the textbook definition of apartheid is a policy or system of segregation or discrimination on grounds of race; but after October 7th, the use of apartheid with respect to Israel became too controversial even though there is a system of segregation in Israel when it comes to laws, as there are different laws for Jewish citizens’ vs. Palestinian citizens.

The words “genocide” or “ethnic cleansing” have largely been avoided by the Western media, even though the International Court of Justice in January 2024 called Israeli actions “a plausible” violation of the Genocide Convention, and legal scholars increasingly call it a genocide. This word was seldom used by mainstream media. Analysis of BBC articles from late 2023 shows that “genocide” was rarely used, and in some cases, the guests were interrupted when they used the term “genocide”. A leaked internal memo from The New York Times shows that the staff was instructed to steer clear of words like “genocide” and “ethnic cleansing” in their reporting. The situation was framed as “war” or “conflict” between two equal powers, which it was not. This is despite the fact that historically Western media has never hesitated to use the word “genocide” when the events have not been related to Israel-

Palestine. For example, in 2003, to describe the killing in Darfur, Sudan, the word “genocide” came into the media lexicon pretty early, and there was no hesitation. Likewise, the word “genocide” has been used with respect to Uyghurs in China. It shows that it is not that the Western media shows similar restraint in using the word genocide, but rather that restraint has only been shown with respect to Palestinians.

Several academics have challenged the erasure of the colonial nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For example, Hamid Dabashi (2011, p. 37) characterized Israel’s founding and expansion as the “armed robbery” of Palestinian land by European colonial settlers, facilitated by the imperial power of the West and cloaked in humanitarian language. In the same vein, according to Ilan Pappé (2015, p. 21), the Palestinian narrative is not an anomaly but follows the pattern of colonization where European settlers invade a foreign territory, oust the native population, and write a new history of the conquered territory in order to justify the subjugation of the natives. However, Western media present the case of Palestine as an anomaly and thus absolve colonizers of moral judgment.

Colonialism tends to adopt a way of disappearing specific groups of people from stories; at first by recognition rather than physical ways. According to Sanbar (2001, p. 88), immediately after 1948, one of the earliest ways of talking about the Zionists is denying the existence of the Palestinian people altogether. The Palestinians were categorized as either refugees or Israeli Arabs to take away their nationhood, their history, and their politics. This form of disappearing has helped to perpetuate the myth of “a land without people for a people without land.” In spite of the demography contradicting the myth, it still rings true in today’s media discourse.

The selective use of memories of the Holocaust has been used in perpetuating this particular discourse because, for the most part, Jews have been instrumental in protecting any Israeli actions from any form of ethical scrutiny. In addition, Western media has contributed greatly towards keeping alive

this particular discourse through its selective use of language which manipulates the association between victimhood and accountability. As noted by Said and Mohr (2008, p. 75), the Western view of Palestinians has been dominated by how they are perceived as fighters, terrorists, and dangerous.

This change has significant implications; once Palestinians are framed mainly in terms of violence, the deaths of Palestinians become easier to rationalize, and their acts of resistance lose their political context. Pappé (2006, p. 14) emphasizes that labeling Palestinian resistance as terrorism while framing Israeli military actions as self-defense is not just biased reporting—it creates substantial barriers to achieving a just resolution.

Herein, language has real political implications. Language is an active player in shaping moral reality because it defines actors, victims, and the nature of action involved. As Barkho (2011, p. 301) states, the language used in media serves not only to describe social realities but also reflects the existing power relations. Thus, settlements become neighborhoods, military attacks become clashes, and targeted killings turn into retaliation so as to hide illegal activities. Moreover, whenever Palestinians get killed by Israel, the passive form of expression (“they died”, “were found dead”) is applied to avoid responsibility for the deaths, while Israeli people who get killed are directly connected with the actions of Palestinians.

In this paper, the aim is to discuss how such linguistics helps in creating an “ugly” narrative, which normalizes the death of Palestinians, criminalizes their resistance, and makes it constantly questionable how human they really are. Using the method of critical discourse analysis, this paper situates media narratives within the larger colonial discourse about Palestine, considering the power of language rather than its style. Discussing the language used in talking about casualties, resistance, settlements, and children, this paper demonstrates how the Western media participates in sustaining colonial hierarchies about whose life is valuable and whose grief matters. This paper is not just an

academic discussion. Social media has created new venues for the circulation of Palestinian voices that have been suppressed for so long by mainstream outlets. And although it does not yet compete with the BBC or The Guardian in terms of influence, it has started undermining its monopoly. “Colonial narratives,” says Pappé (2006, p. 17), “do not dissolve spontaneously; they must be systematically demolished brick by brick.” Consequently, exposing the dehumanizing work of the Western media is not just another academic task. It is an important step in the larger process of re-humanization that requires acknowledging Palestinian lives as equal morally to the coverage that consistently refuses to do it.

Theoretical Framework

Any analysis of how Western media portrays Palestinians must start with an examination of the underlying historical and colonial contexts that inform both the production and reception of such narratives. The dehumanizing portrayal of Palestinians through the lens of Western media did not only commence post-October 7th. It cannot be characterized as a unique incident or as biased. Instead, it must be placed in the context of justifying colonialism alongside erasing Palestinian narratives and identities.

The Palestinian issue is considered one of the oldest cases of settler colonialism in the world today; however, it is ironically absent from much of the post-colonial discourse that dominates today. It is absent because there is a conscious effort by the West to push aside this instance of imperialism and develop a discourse in which we are not just past “post-colonialism” but are actually well beyond the “post-colonial” period. The problem is that the case of Palestine demonstrates quite clearly the fallacy of the argument that we have reached the point of being post-colonial or post-imperial. Colonialism is alive and well, but it has only adapted and adjusted its strategy for existence.

According to Williams (2012, p. 63), the continued exclusion of Palestine in the discussion on

post-colonialism is evidence of the success of the narratives created by Zionists and the West. By portraying the Israeli occupation as an historical necessity or an anomaly, the media and Western scholars who believe that there is no post-colonialism yet have successfully isolated it from post-colonial criticism. The post-colonial critique was meant to challenge the morality of colonialism. Hence, violence towards the Palestinians continues and will continue because it is taking place in a place where dominant theories do not intend to look.

Pappé (2015, p. 44) explained the Palestinian experience in terms of the language and context that have always been used in speaking about the colonial powers. He illustrates how the European colonizers come to the land that is occupied by native inhabitants, establish themselves through displacing the population and ethnic cleansing, and then rewrite history to make it appear as if everything that happened was inevitable. The trend seems to be no different from what we had seen before during other acts of colonization. What is impressive is the fact that although there is an obvious historical trend of colonization, the West insists on portraying the entire process as an “exception.” Western media is providing justification for the act of active colonialism and putting a barrier for Palestinians to get any justice.

Pappé is not alone in categorizing Israel as a colonial state. Dabashi (2011, p. 52) made an even more direct criticism of Israel’s creation and growth by describing it as “the armed robbery of the Palestinians’ homeland by a band of European colonizers”. He further explains that this robbery was facilitated by the moral authority of Western imperial powers. According to Dabashi, in the mainstream rhetoric, Israel has always been portrayed as “victims,” and this deliberate transformation of aggressors into perceived victims is not only a matter of rhetoric. This is part of an ideological reversal where not only Israel but Western imperialism defines itself as being constantly threatened while simultaneously exercising colonial violence. Whether it’s the case of

Israel, where it victimizes itself and, in order to remain a victim, it constantly refers back to the Holocaust, or in the case of American Imperialism, where it constantly refers back to 9/11, acting as victims, while continuing to perpetrate wars against many muslim countries. These reversals are echoed and reaffirmed by media narratives that portray Israel and the USA as defending themselves against an irrational, savage enemy; in the prior case, the enemy is Palestinians, and in the latter it is “Muslims” in general.

Historical experience teaches that in essence, this colonial project has been premised on erasure. In the case of Israeli colonialism, Palestinians have been erased both literally and figuratively. Sanbar describes the way in which denial of Palestinian existence became a central political tool in the case of post-1948 Palestine. “The Palestinian people do not exist” was not just an exaggeration. It was the operational/political statement that allowed for mass expulsion, rendering the Palestinian people without any rights or historic presence. Denial of their existence was a necessary move, since otherwise, it would become impossible to justify Palestinians’ displacement from their land. After that, Palestinians were able to be categorized in new ways: “refugees,” “Arabs,” “Israeli Arabs,” etc. These categories were not seen as peoples but rather administrative issues. This is what Sanbar defines as “a long absence”, and it continues to shape how Palestinians are represented today.

One example of a phrase that excludes the Palestinians from the history of their own homeland is “A land without people for a people without land”. This is a phrase that works only when Palestinians are excluded from the picture altogether. In spite of the fact that it was clear even back then that this was no longer true, we see examples of Western media using it anyway. Here, the question that we should ask is why the establishment of Israel is being justified through this phrase; and the answer is simple – because this phrase works as a justification of colonialism. The most troubling part about all of this is the part of Holocaust remembrance involved

in the process. Holocaust is indeed one of the worst atrocities in history, and there is no questioning that, but it is continuously being used as an excuse for violence by the victims of that atrocity. Pappé (2010, p. 118) identifies this pattern and demands attention to this continuous victimization of Jews in Israel.

Because it is the way that memory of Jewish suffering has been strategically mobilized, and the purpose is not to prevent future injustice, but to provide moral cover for a new form of colonial dispossession. Norman Finkelstein (2000, p. 81), in his famous book, "The holocaust industry," explains how the holocaust memory has been used by the American Jewish establishment and how Israel exploits the Holocaust memory for political and financial gains and in order to further Israeli interests.

Jewish suffering is recognized in Western discourse as universal and absolute, while Palestinian suffering is rendered provisional or as a necessity for the survival of the permanent "victims". Said and Mohr (2008, p. 76) identified this pattern decades ago: the Palestinians appear in Western consciousness primarily as fighters, terrorists, lawless actors, instead of people living under occupation.

This transformation did not occur organically; as explained above, one can find a similar pattern of colonialism and imperialism in American Imperialism. This change is fundamentally associated with post-9/11 rhetoric about terrorism, where all the different struggles for self-determination and identities have been reduced to one single security problem. In such a way, the Palestinian struggle against colonization becomes one of terrorism. As Pappé states (2006, p. 11), the very fact of the designation of such a problem is used to delegitimize Palestinian resistance from the very beginning, when any kind of struggle becomes immoral while Israeli military violence remains necessary to defend oneself. Such an attitude can be easily traced in the recent events; the murder committed on October 7th is characterized as terrorism conducted by barbarians but not as the

struggle of resistance fighters. This attitude became the justification for the murder of civilians, even women and children, for two years.

The rhetoric was advanced in part by the mainstream Western media. The media did not mention who perpetrated the crime when they were reporting about the murder of civilians in Gaza compared to when they were reporting on Israelis being murdered. Alaqad (2025, p. 34) states that the Western media always reported passively when reporting about Palestinians' deaths by using such phrases as "children have died" rather than saying "Israeli killed children," where the perpetrator is purposely omitted. According to Barkho (2011, p. 298), the media organizations do not just mirror reality but construct it through the language management process that is institutionalized in them.

From the choice of vocabulary, syntax, and framing processes, the political ideology of the media organization can be seen. The media guidelines, especially in Western public broadcasters, determine the narration process and whose voices will be validated or excluded from it. Processes such as lexicalization, over-lexicalization, and agent deletion, according to Fairclough (2003, p. 129), are means of naturalizing inequality through discourse. These processes not only make responsibility invisible but also render the violence abstract in nature.

Literature Review:

Media Representation of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict shows time and time again that Western media report news not from a neutral, but ideological point of view, rather than a detached one of journalism. Numerous academic fields within the social sciences have documented how linguistic, framing, and narrative choice work to favor the perspectives of Israelis, while ignoring or invalidating those of Palestinians. These studies provide the essential background needed to understand dehumanization as a structural

component of the discourse used by Western media, and not a journalistic mistake.

To begin the discussion, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979, p. 3) remains a seminal text in representing Palestinians and analyzing the bias against Palestinians. Said argues that Western narratives about the Arab and Muslim world are developed based on colonial epistemologies that create the "Other" as irrational, violent, and threatening. Said and Mohr (1998, p. 166) specifically discuss the visual and textual marginalization of Palestinians in their canonical book, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. In the book, they highlighted that Palestinians are visible to the public as "fighters, terrorists, and lawless pariahs." This portrayal illustrates how representation itself is a site of violence because it creates an image of the "militant/terrorist" instead of the dispossessed refugee. Once the primary image of Palestinians is that of the militant/terrorist, their suffering does not carry any weight, and their deaths will be viewed as acceptable or as a necessity.

Scholars have discussed how the Western media frequently portrays Palestinian nationalism and resistance as terrorism, and simultaneously legitimizes the actions of the Israeli military and views them as acts of self-defense. These two constructs are fundamentally asymmetric because they provide legitimacy to Israel's use of force, and simultaneously criminalize the use of force by Palestinians through labeling their resistance as terrorism. This type of framing is a part of a larger structure of settler colonialism, and it emphasizes that this is not an accident but is essential to the continued control over colonized peoples.

Barkho (2008, p. 283) has conducted extensive research into how Western media cover the subject of Palestine, particularly through his examination of the BBC. This is an example of one of the most comprehensive analyses on how institutions depict themselves through their languages as far as Palestine is concerned. According to him, there is a major difference in how the agency has been depicted in matters of death and massacres. As

already stated above, in case Palestinians get murdered or massacred, there is no indication about the perpetrators of the killing, but whenever the Israelis get murdered, the identities of the perpetrators are always revealed. This shows the priorities of the institution, and it did not begin after October 7th.

In his analysis, Barkho (2011, p. 303) reviews the internal policies of Western media organizations. According to Barkho, the way in which certain media organizations employ certain terms in describing an event is indicative of the fact that they serve as tools for advocating an ideology. The author points out that the role of media organizations is to form a narrative by selecting and leaving out information in favor of the state and its political interests. In his analysis, he helps us understand how such terms as "settlements," "clashes," and "retaliation" are used by media organizations to hide any violation of international law and to characterize the actions of Israel as defensive measures against Palestinian aggression.

This paper builds on previous literature by bringing in colonial history, media discourse, and geopolitics into the analysis of Palestinian representation in Western media. Furthermore, although many studies of representation discuss the existence of an asymmetry in representation, fewer have examined how these individual narratives create a hierarchy of humanization that determines which side is more humanized and therefore deserving of human rights protections, and which side can be dehumanized and denied those rights.

Therefore, the study seeks to contribute to existing scholarship in post-colonial theory, critical discourse analysis, and media studies to provide a nuanced understanding of how Western media constructs its narratives as part of a broader colonial system of meaning-making. The study seeks to do this by focusing on the ways in which Palestinians are dehumanized in Western media through narratives about violence, resistance, and children, and to situate these narratives as contributing to the continuation of colonialism today. Finally, instead of

viewing biased reporting as an exception, the study views Western media discourse as an integral component of colonial systems of power and oppression.

Research Methodology

From the aforementioned historical and theoretical framework, the study seeks to explore how the media narratives created in the West constitute tools of dehumanization in relation to the continuing settler-colonial framework in Palestine. Instead of treating media accounts as collections of innocent misconceptions, the study views media narratives as sites of power through which meaning, legitimacy, and moral value are constructed.

The study aims to answer two research questions. The first question investigates what kind of language and framing Western media employ to dehumanize Palestinians in their reporting on the Israel-Palestine conflict, while also examining how they justify Israeli violence against Palestinians. The second question explores how such media representations tend to reproduce colonial ideologies rather than presenting neutral and objective accounts. Overall, these questions seek to explore not only potential biases in media portrayals but also the ways in which colonial ideologies are perpetuated through these representations.

1. Research Design:

In this study, we adopted a qualitative approach by means of critical discourse analysis to critically assess the ways in which power relations are articulated through the language and discourse that is utilized to perpetuate inequality within the society (Fairclough, 2003, p. 9). This research focuses on the social construction of media representation as something constructed through history, politics, and institutional factors rather than a direct reflection of reality, making it appropriate for CDA as a methodology of this research. The applicability of CDA in this research is determined

by the theoretical framework of CDA, according to which language serves as a tool for domination and control in both colonial and post-colonial societies. Media narratives are analyzed taking into account not only what the media tell us but also what they do not tell us. What gets normalized in media narratives and what becomes impossible to articulate in them is highlighted.

2. Data Selection and Corpus

The data for the current research is collected from the news, headlines, and transcripts of broadcasts from various major media organizations in the Western world, including BBC, CBS News, and The Guardian. There are several reasons why the mentioned media organizations were selected: they have a wide global audience, strong institutional authority, and often claim their neutrality in reporting about international events.

The period of time for collecting the data was the violent conflict between Israel and Palestine that happened in autumn and winter of 2023. The selection of the above-mentioned time period was conditioned by the fact that there is great interest in the media toward it, and the language usage was evident at this point. By focusing on this time frame, the research shows how periods of crisis can reinforce the existing narrative structure rather than creating new ones.

The analysis concentrates on lead paragraphs and headlines, as they represent the most direct and obvious means of creating narratives. It examines the language used by reporters to describe civilian casualties, specifically deaths, and to assign responsibility for these losses. Additionally, it considers the language employed to depict Palestinian resistance to Israel and the actions taken by the Israeli military. The analysis also includes stories about Palestinian children and prisoners or detainees.

Instead of examining a representative sample of the media, the research focused on discursively significant media texts. Rather than considering the

texts to be different and unique instances of behavior by each particular media outlet, the study considered the selected media texts as instances of how each particular media outlet's behaviors function in an institutional framework.

3. Analytical Framework

The analysis utilizes some of the established techniques from the field of critical discourse analysis to investigate the ways in which language contributes to power dynamics. Attention was especially paid to the following aspects of discourse:

- **Lexical Choice:**

In the current research, the focus is on the ideological charge carried by such words as “killed,” “died,” “clashes,” “retaliation,” “terrorism,” and “settlements”. Patterns in lexical choice are identified with the aim of determining how they contribute to normalization of Israeli violence while downplaying Palestinian suffering.

- **Agency and Grammar:**

Attention is specifically paid to active/passive voice, subject deletion, and grammatical position. Omission of Israelis in reports about Palestinian casualties is identified as an example of a discursive move that contributes to erasing Israeli agency, while identifying agents of Israeli death reports is considered a way of emphasizing victimhood.

- **Resistance Framing:**

Continuous presentation of Palestinian resistance as acts of terrorism is interpreted as discursive framing that conflates political activism and criminal behavior. It is considered within the framework of post-9/11 security discourse and its consequences for public perception.

- **Children:**

Discourse about Palestinian children (references to “minors”, “youths”, or “young

detainees”) is considered within the framework of Shalhoub-Kevorkian's “unchilding” discourse to identify the ways in which innocence of childhood is denied in colonial discourse.

- **Silencing and Absence:**

Lastly, the research also looks at silences that are built into discourse in regard to such topics as international law, settler colonialism, and structural violence.

4. Ethical and Analytical Considerations

While this particular research does not make use of any humans in its conduct, ethics play an important role in analyzing the representations of violence, death, and children in Western media. These forms of depiction have considerable impacts on society, the population, and the justification for the state's use of violence. Thus, these considerations help indicate the ethical responsibility associated with critically analyzing such narratives in the Western media. Instead of presenting this study as objective, a more accurate understanding of it takes a stance against the dehumanization of the “Other” and considers such a stance essential for discussing and analyzing Western media content.

These research questions and the methods used to answer them provide the foundation for discussing how Western media narratives have functioned as instruments of colonialism and the justification of violence. Furthermore, by focusing on the language within these media narratives, it is also possible to reveal how the concept of dehumanization is not just depicted within these media texts, but as a foundational concept of the Western media narratives that analyze the indigenous peoples of the Americas and their societies.

Findings

By analyzing the representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Western media, one notices recurring discursive tactics aimed at the

dehumanization of Palestinians and justifying violence against them on the part of Israelis. These are not just mere linguistic devices but well-established narrative structures within the practice of media institutionality. Using such strategies as lexical asymmetry, grammatical manipulation, strategic framing, and narrative suppression, Western media constructs a hierarchy of humanity that is inherently colonial.

1. Lexical Asymmetry and the Hierarchy of Life

A particularly significant aspect of the data collected here relates to the use of different vocabulary when describing the deaths of Israelis and Palestinians in reports issued by Western media outlets. Consistently, when describing Israeli casualties, Western media outlets describe the causal agent's action using the verb "killed", while when describing Palestinian casualties, they typically use the passive voice and the depersonalized verb "died". While this difference is primarily one of lexicon, there is an important difference in implication. When one uses the verb "killed" in English, the implication is that the causal agent acted deliberately and violently and can be identified. The verb "died", however, implies that the event occurred independently of the causal agent.

Lexical asymmetry of this type was illustrated in BBC World's report dated October 9th, as follows: "Over 500 people have died in Gaza after Israel launched massive retaliatory airstrikes... More than 700 people have been killed in Israel since Hamas launched its attacks."

In this instance, the structure of the sentence makes it clear that Hamas is the actor responsible for the deaths of Israelis, while the grammatical structure obscures the fact that Israel is responsible for the deaths of Palestinians. Similarly, CBS News' report regarding the deaths of Palestinians states: "More than 20,000 Palestinians have died in Gaza during Israel's war against Hamas," and then later

states: "Hamas militants... killed some 1,200 people."

These examples illustrate that the linguistic choices made by Western media outlets do not represent a neutral or objective representation of the conflict. Instead, they symbolize the prioritizing of the story of both parties.

Moreover, the usage of the word "died" in relation to Palestinians' deaths contributes to the creation of a linguistic context where the death of a large number of people is considered to be just an unfortunate accident rather than an outcome of the actions undertaken on purpose by the military forces. Thus, the asymmetry of the vocabulary, such as "died" and "killed," establishes the hierarchy of values where the death of Israelis is considered outrageous, while Palestinians' death is simply ignored.

2. Agent Deletion and the Obscuring of Responsibility

The notion of agent deletion is directly connected to that of lexical asymmetry. It stands for the consistent exclusion or omission of the agent who is the cause of the death of Palestinians in reports published by the Western mass media outlets. According to Barkho (2008, p. 285), the author focuses on this problem in his analysis of BBC reports and finds that, when it comes to the death of Palestinians, the agent is consistently missing in the reports, while in the case of the death of Israelis, the agents are consistently mentioned.

For instance, headlines such as "Three Killed in West Bank Clashes" do not say anything about who killed whom and how; thus, the readers' perception of the event remains superficial and depoliticized. According to the definition of the media, it would be called "neutral reporting," but we understand that, on the contrary, headlines such as "Tel Aviv Suicide Bomb Kills Nine" give us all the necessary information about the action, place, and implied perpetrators of the crime. The purpose of this is to deflect attention from the actions of the

dominant actors in the conflict and thus protect them from scrutiny.

Agent deletion transforms violence into abstractness. Palestinian deaths are transformed into events that occur, rather than into acts that are deliberately and intentionally perpetrated. Furthermore, the grammatical invisibility of Palestinian deaths serves to erase the morality of those deaths. The purpose is to protect the Israeli military from accountability and to reinforce the image of Palestinians as either violent actors or as passive casualties whose political context is irrelevant.

3. Terrorism as a Discursive Containment Strategy

Another significant finding in this study is that there continues to be an overwhelming reliance on Western media to frame Palestinian resistance as terrorism. Regardless of the form and/or historical context of resistance, all resistance is conflated into a single crime category. According to Pappé (2006, p. 16), the terrorism-framing of Palestinian resistance has become so prevalent that virtually all of Palestinian history is now told primarily in the same terrorism terminology, as there remains very little room to politically interpret Palestinian actions/resistance or legally analyze them.

This labeling of “terrorism” as a way to discuss Palestinian resistance works to depoliticize anti-colonial struggle and, at the same time, to morally justify violence committed by Israel. The violence committed by Palestinians is depicted in the media as irrational, barbaric, and an existential threat to Israelis; whereas the violence committed by Israel is characterized with terms like “retaliation,” “response,” etc. This is a reversal of the colonialist’s logic that defines the oppressed as the oppressor and the oppressor as the oppressed.

Furthermore, within this storytelling framework, Palestinian death is de facto legitimized. Since Palestinians are defined as terrorists, their deaths can be viewed as justifiable as well as

necessary. By telling stories about Palestinian resistance within a discursively contained space, this study demonstrates how Palestinian resistance is removed from the realm of International Law and placed squarely within the Global Security Discourse, where the nuances of morality are reduced to a binary classification system of good vs. bad.

4. Normalization of Illegality through Language

In addition to contributing to dehumanization through the portrayal of Palestinians in Western media, the normalization of Israeli settler colonial expansion is also contributed to by Western media narratives. It is common for media outlets to refer to illegal Israeli settler colonial expansions as “neighborhoods” or “communities”, thus reducing their colonial and legal implications. Often, even when the term “settlers” is used by media outlets, this term is followed by language that undermines the legitimacy of the settlers’ actions by suggesting there is no clear violation of the laws in place. The BBC rarely uses the term “illegal” to describe illegal settlements. Instead, the BBC uses terms such as “considered illegal under international law...a claim disputed by Israel” (Barkho 2006, p. 291).

In using these types of terms, the BBC simultaneously acknowledges the legality of the settlements while also undermining them, thereby providing the same level of narrative standing to both Israel and the international community regarding the legality of the settlements. The use of this type of language conflates the disparity of power between Israel and the Palestinian people. It also frames settler colonialism as a normal part of colonial expansion while framing Palestinian dispossession as simply another victim of a tragic event in a larger conflict. The way in which neutral language is used to portray settler colonialism as simply one of many forms of colonialism practiced by the West makes it difficult to judge any acts of structural violence committed against Palestinians as unethical acts.

5. Narrative Silence and the Management of Visibility

Aside from what is said, the Western media narratives about Israel-Palestine can also be defined by what goes unspoken in them. Cases where Israeli actions could be called ethnic cleansing, war crimes, or even genocide are either not covered, not covered extensively, or euphemistically described through narrative silence. Such a narrative silence becomes tacit approval of these actions.

There is also no sustained conversation about issues of international law, apartheid, or settler colonialism, because Western media outlets choose to engage in narrative management. They focus on episodic violence rather than structural factors in order to make Palestinians' deaths seem tragic but ordinary.

6. Dehumanization and the Production of Moral Distance

As such, these forms of language create moral distance between Western viewers and Palestinian suffering. Not only do words describe the violence committed; words create the emotions that people have in reaction to the events being reported on. The use of passive structures, euphemisms, and labels enables the Western media to condition viewers to empathize with victims of Israeli violence while remaining emotionally distant from Palestinians suffering.

Indeed, moral distance is crucial for the perpetuation of colonial violence. Were the lives of Palestinians consistently reported upon in a way that would allow people to see them as fully human beings, worth grieving, punishing, and providing justice for, the violence could never continue. The work done ideologically by Western media is thus critical in order to allow Palestinians to continue to be dehumanized within society.

7. Palestinian Children and the Politics of “Unchilding”

The process of dehumanizing Palestinians within the narrative provided by Western media (within the context of Palestine) finds one of its most appalling articulations in how Western media portrays Palestinian children. Adults who participate in efforts of resistance in Palestine are often labeled in the West as “terrorists.” Yet, when this same label is applied to children, it becomes clear how violent the narratives created by Western media are. In recent years, Western media has increasingly been describing Palestinian children not as civilian children to be protected but as future threats or militants, or as administration whose suffering can be described through linguistic management rather than moral confrontation.

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian's theory of “unchilding” provides a convincing theory for understanding this phenomenon. As stated in her book, *Incarcerated Childhood and the Politics of Unchilding*, she proposes that “the Palestinian children are gradually being stripped of their socio-legal-moral childhood subjectivities through militarized, legalized, and discursively produced ways” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2019, p. 6). It creates space for normalization and justification of violence against children, until finally becoming invisible to the public eye. Not only that, but instead of being seen as victims of the occupation, the children are transformed into security threats.

Evidence supports the significance of this phenomenon. As mentioned by Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019, p. 48), according to UNICEF's reports, around 700 Palestinian children are being arrested, interrogated, and detained by Israeli military forces yearly. Over the last ten years, about 7,000 children were arrested, prosecuted, and imprisoned by the Israeli military justice system, which is two children on average per day. These numbers reveal not isolated events but rather a systematic mechanism of criminalizing children, which would cause global condemnation if practiced elsewhere. Nevertheless, it is rarely conveyed in Western media sources.

Violence against children is made acceptable by media discourses. Western media frequently refers to the jailed Palestinians as “minors” and/or “youths” instead of “children.” The awareness of early vulnerability is somewhat disconnected by these concepts. It’s important to utilize alternative wording. The term “minor” refers to a legal designation rather than a vulnerable person, making the imprisonment of minors appear normal rather than blatantly immoral.

The Guardian article from November 22nd, which claimed that “the hostages to be released are women and children, and the Palestinian prisoners are also women aged eighteen or less,” exemplified this kind of framing. In addition to hiding the reality that Palestinian children as young as 10 years old are being held, the piece removed the crucial boundaries between power and law, confusing hostage-taking with incarceration under military occupation. Furthermore, by framing the detention as ordinary or reciprocal, such language suggests that the custody of children is acceptable and typical.

Israeli children, on the other hand, are frequently portrayed as innocent, traumatized, and protected. On the other hand, Palestinian children are shown from a security perspective. Media outlets highlight emotional distress, fear, and vulnerability when Israeli children are injured. On the other hand, when Palestinian children are killed or imprisoned, their sorrow is frequently overshadowed by the greater number of casualties or seen as an unfortunate outcome of the struggle. A hierarchy of childhood itself, in which some children are narratively disposable and others are grievable, is reinforced by such asymmetries.

Furthermore, the normalization of deadly force serves to further legitimize the erasure of Palestinian children. The killing of Palestinian children is frequently not examined by Western media with the same moral intensity that is applied to Israeli civilian killings. While headlines may claim that children perished in Gaza without going into detail about how, by whom, or under what circumstances, the perpetrator of the violence is also either completely

excluded or not specifically named. Therefore, rather than being a preventive act of violence that calls for accountability, the killing of children is presented as a sorrowful but inevitable tragedy.

Unchilding is both symbolic and essentially political, according to Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2019, p. 73). The colonial government redefines Palestinian youngsters as a threat by depriving them of their innocence. This framing makes it possible for actions like raids at night, questioning without parental consent, military trials, and incarceration to be justified under the pretext of security. A large portion of the Western media just mirrors the reasoning of the powerful rather than challenging this system.

As a result, such a story has significant ramifications. Children’s deaths lose moral significance when they are discursively transformed into threats. The violence that is inflicted upon them is either neutralized or justified. This method is similar to past colonial narratives that legitimized harsh forms of dominance by portraying indigenous children as barbaric, dangerous, or in need of control.

Silence in the media is essential to maintaining this process. Seldom do Western media outlets inquire about the reasons for the initial detention of Palestinian youngsters, the legal basis for their prosecution, or how these actions comply with international humanitarian law. The lack of these inquiries is indicative of a larger reluctance to confront Israeli rule or recognize the colonial circumstances that Palestinian youngsters endure. Western media reduces systematic violence to single occurrences with no political significance by eschewing structural analysis.

This discursive treatment of Palestinian children reveals the ethical bankruptcy of claims to media neutrality. All children’s suffering would require equal moral attention if neutrality were to be the guiding concept. Rather, a colonial order in which Palestinian children exist beyond the bounds of universal humanity is reinforced by the selective application of empathy by Western media.

Thus, the “ugly” narrative explored throughout this study culminates in the politics of unchilding. It

reveals how dehumanization functions through subtle verbal techniques that normalize the unthinkable as well as overt demonization. Western media contributes to a narrative framework that makes Palestinian children's suffering bearable, their deaths ordinary, and their futures negotiable by depriving them of their innocence.

Comprehending this procedure is crucial for both media criticism and identifying the wider ethical ramifications of discourse. When language allows children to be imprisoned and killed without protest, it exposes a narrative order that is fundamentally at odds with justice. The unchilding of Palestinian children is a purposeful narrative result of colonial continuity maintained by media power, not a tragic byproduct of conflict reporting.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Western media portrayals of Palestinians are not only biased or unequal; rather, they are constructed in a colonial manner that determines what we perceive, who is legitimate, and who is acknowledged as having moral standing. A number of different ways of representing Palestinians exist in Western media (lexical asymmetry, agent deletion, selective labeling, and narrative silencing) that help create a hierarchy of humanization among Israelis and Palestinians. In other words, Western media gives full "grievability" to the deaths of Israelis, and only conditional, hidden, or disposable status to the deaths of Palestinians. These patterns of communication in Western media don't exist in a vacuum; they represent larger historical and ideological patterns created from settler colonialism and post 9/11 security discourse.

Western media has used the term "terrorism" to frame Palestinian resistance almost exclusively. Using this term reduces political struggle to crime, eliminating the possibility of making sense of this struggle legally, historically, or ethically. Western media uses this discursive containment to eliminate legitimacy for anti-colonial resistance and to

eliminate responsibility for the violence committed by Israel under the guise of self-defense. The consistent failure to include the colonial context of the conflict in the media creates an environment where violence is seen as episodic and a result of years of structural domination.

This study also shows how dehumanizing Palestinians occurs most intensely through neutral-appearing grammatical and narrative techniques. The use of passive construction to describe the killings of Palestinians; the normalization of settler colonial expansion using euphemistic language; and the administration of Palestinian children collectively in the media all transform violence into abstract concepts. These abstractions create a level of emotional distance and allow for audience members to be conditioned to sympathize selectively and to view the suffering of Palestinians as unavoidable.

A particularly stark example of the structure of this narrative is the treatment of Palestinian children in the media. The politics of "unchilding" demonstrates how the colonial powers redefine even the category of childhood (a category around the world associated with innocence and safety). When covering Palestinian children, Western media adopts the same vocabulary and priorities as the Israeli military and court system, which contributes to the normalization of child incarceration, harm, and murder. In this instance, journalistic impartiality is in line with power, which highlights the limitations of the claim to journalistic neutrality.

These structures have practical implications and are not only about representation. Public opinion, policy discussions, and the definition of permissible violence are all influenced by media narratives. Dehumanizing Palestinians on a regular basis reduces the need for responsibility, violates international law, and makes continuous dispossession politically feasible.

Nonetheless, there are new counter-narratives that imply that this domination is incomplete, particularly on social media. Increasingly, Palestinian voices, activists, and independent journalists are questioning prevailing frames of

reference and drawing parallels between historical colonial atrocities and contemporary behaviors. These issues show the frailty of prevailing narratives and the possibility of their disruption, even though they lack the institutional strength of mainstream media.

Conclusion

According to this study, Western media narratives on Palestine serve as dehumanizing tools rather than impartial information sources. Mainstream Western media upholds a colonial narrative order that ethically marginalizes Palestinian suffering while legitimizing Israeli violence through language, framing, and omission. The “ugly” story under examination is the result of long-standing ideological institutions that favor some lives over others rather than an unintentional consequence of subpar reporting.

This research challenges the idea that Palestine exists beyond identifiable patterns of colonial dominance by placing current media discourse within the historical context of settler colonialism. Rather, it shows how long-standing colonial tactics of erasure, demonization, and moral inversion are reflected in the vocabulary used to characterize Palestinians, especially when it comes to death, resistance, and infancy. The unchilding of Palestinian youth, the criminalization of resistance, and the selective use of empathy all point to a media environment that is actively involved in maintaining injustice.

According to Ilan Pappé (2006, p. 19), the only way to stop toxic narratives from continuing is to methodically dismantle them. By demonstrating how Western media discourse functions as power as well as representation, this study advances that endeavor. In order to rehumanize Palestinians and bring ethical clarity back to conversations about violence, accountability, and justice, it is imperative to acknowledge this role.

In the end, decolonizing media narratives is more than just a scholarly endeavor. It is a moral

requirement. Injustice will continue to exist under the pretense of neutrality as long as language obscures agency, normalizes dispossession, and makes some lives ungrievable. Therefore, it is crucial to refute the “ugly” narrative, not just for Palestine but for any international system that professes to respect human dignity while permitting some people to continue to exist outside of its borders.

References

- Alaqad, Plestia. “The UN Called It Genocide in Gaza. Will Western Journalists Dare To?” *Objective Journalism*, Sept. 2025.
- Barker, C., & Kennedy, P. T. (Eds.). (1996). *To make another world: Studies in protest and collective action*. Avebury.
- Barkho, L. (2008). The BBC’s discursive strategy and practices vis-à-vis the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. *Journalism Studies*, 9(2), 278–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701848156>
- Barkho, L. (2011). The role of internal guidelines in shaping news narratives: Ethnographic insights into the discursive rhetoric of Middle East reporting by the BBC and Al Jazeera English. *Critical Discourse Studies*, 8(4), 297–309. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405904.2011.601630>
- Buch Segal, L. (2016). *No place for grief: Martyrs, prisoners, and mourning in contemporary Palestine*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chomsky, N. (2015). *On Palestine*. Haymarket Books.
- Dabashi, H. (2011). *Brown skin, white masks*. Pluto Press.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analyzing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- Fowler, S. L. (2015). *Ideographs and American mass media: Understanding the narrative on the Israel–Palestine conflict and its influence on publics* (Master’s thesis, Illinois State University).
- El Akkad, Omar. *One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This*. Penguin Random House, 2025.

- Pappé, I. (2006). The 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine. *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 36(1), 6–20. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2006.36.1.6>
- Pappé, I. (2010). *Out of the frame: The struggle for academic freedom in Israel*. Pluto Press.
- Pappé, I. (2015). *The idea of Israel: A history of power and knowledge*. Verso.
- Peteet, J. (2005). Words as interventions: Naming in the Palestine–Israel conflict. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1), 153–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0143659042000322964>
- Peter, A., & Chilwa, I. (2022). Making a case for war: CNN and the representations of humanitarianism, Gadhafi, and NATO in the 2011 bombing of Libya. In I. Chilwa (Ed.), *Discourse, media, and conflict* (pp. 119–139). Cambridge University Press.
- Said, E. W., & Mohr, J. (2008). *After the last sky: Palestinian lives* (Updated ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Sanbar, E. (2001). Out of place, out of time. *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 16(1), 87–94.
(Original argument drawn from *Palestine 1948: L'Expulsion* [1984])
- Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2019). *Incarcerated childhood and the politics of unchilding*. Cambridge University Press.
- Weiner, M. F. (2023). Palestinian erasure and dehumanization in introductory sociology texts. *Critical Sociology*, 49(6), 991–1008. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205221132839>
- White, H. (1980). The value of narrativity in the representation of reality. *Critical Inquiry*, 7(1), 5–27. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448086>
- Yaghi, A. (2019). Voices against erasure, loss, and dehumanization: The year in Palestine. *Biography*, 42(1), 103–110. <https://doi.org/10.1353/bio.2019.0016>