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Metaphorical Framing of the Disenfranchised Grief: A Study of Post-APS Narratives Using *Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

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Abstract

This paper evaluates post-attack linguistic discourses relating to the 2014 Peshawar's Army Public School (APS) event in Pakistan using *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* as its analytical framework. The paper evaluates language techniques which included metaphorical expressions and euphemistic storytelling to dampen public distress and convert individual mourning into national patriotic self-sacrifice, while controlling prevailing collective memories. The study utilizes official statements alongside media reports and commemorative events alongside public responses to describe how victims received martyrdom status through rhetorical ascension to patriotic resilience. Furthermore, it interrogates how military operations were metaphorically cast as cleansing campaigns, shifting the narrative from grief and accountability to unity and vengeance. Through psycholinguistic techniques that minimize grief along with official denial victim families suffered two parallel consequences: difficulty expressing grief and long-term denial of national trauma. Through qualitative textual analysis that analyzes media texts with political statements and public memorialization the research shows how language works as an ideological management instrument after national tragedies.

Keywords: Euphemized Trauma, Metaphorical framing, Post-APS discourse, Language politics, Media discourse, Critical Discourse Analysis, Silencing of Trauma.

Introduction

On December 16, 2014, Pakistan witnessed one of the most harrowing acts of violence in its modern history—the terrorist attack on the Army Public School (APS) in Peshawar. The APS massacre is perhaps a watershed in the national psyche with casualties over 140, mostly school children. But with the passage of time, the popular conversation about this tragedy has not moved to discuss grief, or justice, or reckoning; it has quietly disintegrated into euphemism, abstraction, and silence. Public discourse has more and more relied on symbolic framing, portraying the deceased as martyrs, the attack as a test of national resolve, and the aftermath as a moment of national unity, thereby sacrificing the specificity of the victims' suffering. Though this kind of framing can be psychologically comforting, it serves as a means of camouflaging the lived experiences of those victimized and of those who survived into collective generalizations that suppress



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the traumatic grasping at reality.

Here, language becomes a powerful tool, not just for remembering but for reinterpreting how trauma has been seen. In this way, as Richie (2003)¹ notes, metaphorical narratives are often used as a part of political discourse for reframing serious issues in ways that reduce their threat. In his analysis of Tony Blair's rhetoric, Richie points out how framing intra-party disagreements as a domestic dispute—“some of you throw a bit of crockery”—trivialized dissent and shifted the emotional tone from serious critique to humorous anecdote (4). That metaphorical framing shifts the way we receive events and responsibilities. Similarly, in the case of the APS discourse, a similar linguistic strategy seems to be at play: the trauma is linguistically reframed not in terms of an open wound, but as a noble sacrifice that omits its disturbing political implications.

Such linguistic and media strategies have been critically examined in more recent studies to consider where and in what manner they are being used. In one of the studies about the euphemistic headlines across leading Pakistani newspapers, Fayyaz et al. (2023)² contend that euphemisms are frequently used as a means of softening the depiction of harsh realities as well as to subtly mold public opinion. Their study categorizes euphemisms into semantic strategies including shortening and borrowing and explains the way in which what they refer to as euphemizing strategies perform modalizing and evaluative functions. In the case of the APS attack such euphemistic choices help to distance suffering, allowing trauma to be mentioned but not faced.

Atiqe ur Rehman and Hussain (2020)³, meanwhile, seek to understand how media is involved in the securitization of terrorism in Pakistan and refer to the APS tragedy as being a turning point. They conduct a comparative discourse analysis of newspapers to demonstrate how media narratives changed from grief and accountability to justifications of military operations and national security measures after APS. By changing this framing from a site of loss to one of strategy and purpose, this transformation also exposes the ideological work of the media in suppressing alternative critical narratives.

This is further supported by Ali, Saleem, and Ahmad (2022)⁴, who researched newspaper editorials and columnists from 2014 to 2019 to evaluate how the English and Urdu press framed counterterrorism narratives following the APS attack. What their findings indicate is a dominant trend of nationalistic and supportive tones towards state and military efforts and very little occasion or space for victims' stories to enter the debate. This continued framing shows how media aligning with official narratives can serve to erase trauma at an institutional level, silencing the voices of survivors and grieving families.

Metaphors are of crucial importance in forming human cognition and, by that token, defining how people perceive and react to practical questions, like in politics or security. According to Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980),

¹ Ritchie, L. D. (2013). Metaphors and framing effects. In *Metaphor* (pp. 106–120). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

² Fayyaz, A., Abdulaziz, M., & Urooj, I. (2023). Role of euphemisms: An analysis of English language newspapers' headlines. *Journal of Communication and Cultural Trends*, 5(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.32350/jcct.51.01>

³ Rehman, A., & Hussain, N. (2020). Role of media in securitisation of terrorism: A case study of Pakistan. *Strategic Studies*, 40(3), 122–140. <https://doi.org/10.53532/ss.040.03.0069>

⁴ Ali, E., Saleem, N., & Ahmad, H. (2022). Framing of counter-terrorism activities in the leading Pakistani English and Urdu newspapers: Post Army Public School Peshawar attack (2014–2019). *Journal of Development and Social Sciences*, 3(III), 478–493. [https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022\(3-III\)27](https://doi.org/10.47205/jdss.2022(3-III)27)



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abstract concepts can be understood by a process of a metaphorical mapping from familiar domains. This is not, however, just a rhetorical cognitive process, but one that is deeply ingrained in thought and decision making. Structural, ontological, and orientational are the types of metaphors represented by CMT, which differ significantly in their impact on political narratives, especially regarding counterterrorism discourse. These metaphorical constructions are important for shaping public perception, legitimizing policy decisions, and setting the terms of national security in any state.

Through the lens of *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* (CMT), this study examines how rhetorical strategies reconstruct silence about trauma, namely that of Army Public School (APS) attack. In their arguments, Lakoff and Johnson state that metaphorical expression in language conveys the conceptual metaphor underlying, in which the vehicle is experienced as the metaphor topic: “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.... The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (3,4)⁵. Not seen as merely an adornment of literature, metaphor is fundamental to human cognition; not only do we use metaphor to speak, but we also perceive, remember, and act using metaphor.

As Lakoff (2004)⁶ notes:

Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world...the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome of our actions.... You can't see or hear frames. They are part of [our] cognitive unconscious—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access, but know by their consequences: the way we reason and what counts as common sense. We also know frames through language. All words are defined in relation to conceptual frames. When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain (XI).

For example, the victims of APS are framed as martyrs, which converts the personal tragedy into a nationalistic sacrifice. Similarly, military responses are often metaphorically cast as cleansing operation, invoking imagery of purification rather than retaliation or violence. In these metaphors, grief, complicity and moral reckoning are displaced by patriotic pride and the collective purpose of all as one.

Since MT accounts for how abstract and painful realities, like trauma, grief, and injustice, are translated into more manageable and ideologically convenient terms, it is a particularly apt lens with which to view rhetorical shifts. On this basis, euphemisms can be construed as metaphoric distortions; linguistic strategies that minimize the urgency of emotional response and the ethical discomfort of the hearer or reader. As Lakoff explains, “metaphorical concepts... structure our present reality” (145), meaning that the repeated metaphorical coding of trauma as glory or sacrifice doesn't just reflect national ideology—it embeds and reinforces it within the cultural imagination.

This research aims at exploring how the trauma of Army Public School attack was managed, softened, and reframed by the state and media discourse in Pakistan. It

⁵ Ritchie, L. D. (2013). Conceptual metaphors. In *Metaphor* (pp. 68–87). chapter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁶ Lakoff, G. (2004). *Don't think of an elephant*. White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green.



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explores how euphemistic language and metaphorical structures were adopted to portray the narrative from one of personal grief and horror to a national one of victimhood, unity and ideological purpose. Central to this inquiry is an exploration of how the framing of victims as “martyrs” functioned both as a mode of comfort and as a mechanism of concealment—effectively erasing the specificity of individual suffering and transforming private grief into collective symbolism. It also explores how far this long-term silencing and oversimplification of this trauma mirrors a broader practice of strategic denial within national discourse. Guided by George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the study critically analyzes how metaphors such as “sacrifice,” “battle,” or “purification” operate to normalize loss, neutralize emotional complexity, and delegitimize dissenting or unresolved grief. The research unpacks these discursive choices to reveal how language is used as a political apparatus for shaping memory discourse, managing traumatic events, and constructing ideology following a national tragedy.

Research Methodology

This research employs critical discourse analysis to study the usage of language metaphors and euphemistic narratives which appeared in the public and media and official discourses after the 2014 APS Peshawar attack through an interpretive qualitative research approach. The study incorporated purposive sampling to gather textual and visual materials such as official statements and broadcasted memorial events and YouTube videos alongside televised interviews from news outlets and newspapers which covered national headlines. The analysis included integration of statements and quotations from grieving families along with political figures who commented on the discourse. This analysis utilized scholarly articles together with research papers and theoretical works to provide support while relying on George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory to establish the metaphorical framing of grief trauma and national solidarity. The investigation examines how metaphoric language helped minimize trauma while forming social memories.

Discussion

Traumatic events, by their very nature, often elude precise articulation. The APS attack was an atrocity that defied comprehension, leaving survivors and the broader community grappling with emotions that words could scarcely encapsulate. In such contexts, language frequently falls short, leading to the adoption of softened expressions that aim to provide solace but may inadvertently dilute the gravity of the experience. The attack was an unspeakable tragedy—something so violent and so horrific that the language could not hold the full weight of the happening. What official discourse did following the attack, however, was to employ euphemisms to soften, simplify, and sanitize the raw trauma of that pain. Thus, the dominant narrative that was used did not explicitly say how terrorists entered a school and slaughtered innocent children; instead, it used abstract, passive, and euphemistic language.

The term “national tragedy”⁷ was widely used in official statements and news reports. While this phrase acknowledges the event’s significance, it also

⁷ APP. (2021, December 16). *APS attack a great national tragedy*. Daily Times.



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generalizes and neutralizes it. A “tragedy” can refer to a natural disaster or an accident—something unfortunate but beyond human control. The use of this metaphor removed the calculated brutality from the attack and put it apart from its position concerning accountability. A sanitized phrase was placed instead that diminished the psychological trauma of the event: the reality, that a group of gunmen deliberately executed children in a place of learning. The metaphorical framing of the APS attack sought to reduce the psychological burden of the atrocity through linguistic strategies of deflecting attention away from the horrific details of the massacre and onto general concepts of national unity and resilience. For instance, an article published in *Daily Times* framed the attack in the following terms:

The APS attack was a great national tragedy. The losses of the parents and the families of the ‘shohada’ were irreparable, but the nation stood with the affected, and Pakistan never lost sight of its national resolve to wipe out foreign-sponsored terrorism to prevent and guard against such a heinous crime against a citizen (*Daily Times, para 1*).

The discourse around APS made this shift from the immediate horror of mass assault to a more nebulous story of national unity and anti-terrorism resolve. The article does not start with the brutal reality of the massacre, the fact that armed militants stormed a school and murdered children in their classrooms, but sets the event within a communal, national loss. The focus on “national resolve” and the assertion that Pakistan remains determined to combat “foreign-sponsored terrorism” subtly redirects attention away from the immediate trauma of the victims and toward the state’s counterterrorism policies.

One of the most powerful, yet painful metaphorical expressions of trauma that emerged in the after-math of the attack was the term “martyrs”. The state and media quickly bought the tragedy into the narrative of martyrdom, framing the children as shaheeds (martyrs) for the sake of the nation, however, the grieving families did not. Their children had not died in sacrifice, but rather in injustice. This tension is evident in the words of a grieving mother, who, while sobbing on national television, expressed her agony:

‘I sent my child with my own hands to the hall where they were slaughtered’ (*Dunya News, 2015*).

The metaphor of “slaughter” evokes a stark contrast to the sanitized and heroic framing of martyrdom. The word itself makes suggestive meanings of helplessness, brutality, massacre and rejects the official euphemization of the attack. The language used by the mother contrasts sharply with how the state portrayed the victims as martyrs who laid down their lives for a cause; her words take the ideological rhetoric of martyrhood away and brings the reality of murdered children back to the foreground.

Lakoff’s *Conceptual Metaphor Theory* explains this contrast and contends how perceived reality is always rooted in language. The metaphor of martyrdom (DEATH AS SACRIFICE) was used in official discourse, in order to make sense of an incredible tragedy. By calling the children “martyrs,” their deaths were integrated into the larger nation-building narrative—a sacrifice for the country’s war on terror. Nonetheless, the mother’s words deny this appellative and instead evoke DEATH AS SLAUGHTER—a figure that strips signification and compels the listener to face the sheer horror of the occurrence. Unlike martyrdom, which



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suggests purpose, “slaughter” suggests helplessness and injustice. In this metaphor the victims are portrayed as passive which indicates their innocence and illustrates how they differed from the nationalist discourse that hinted such deaths were part of a grand plan.

The framing of APS victims metaphorically as martyrs did not simply respond to the grief; it altered how they were remembered. As stated previously, their deaths were folded into a bigger discourse around nation building via the metaphor of martyrdom: DEATH AS SACRIFICE. However, in doing so, their individual identities were erased, their lives, hopes and stories lost in the process, reduced to symbolic embodiments of a nation's sacrifice.

The most far-reaching consequence of this metaphorical framing, however, lies in the transformation of the victims from flesh and blood individuals into symbolic figures. All of them were young and they had futures for which they had potential. However, through the repeated use of terms like “martyrs,” these individual lives were generalized and collapsed into a singular, collective identity. They were elevated as symbols of national sacrifice, and their names, faces, and dreams disappeared into the background. In this way, the focus of the discourse was no longer centered on who they were as individual people, but on what they symbolized for the country—they were tools of unity, resistance, and redemption. This process also instrumentalized death. The metaphor of martyrdom redescribed the private grief as a public good. The children's deaths were no longer a tragedy to be mourned by their families alone: they entered the state's ideological machinery. Repeatedly, those victims were invoked in political speeches, memorial ceremonies, and other public commemorations that frequently had additional governmental or military purposes. This way, their loss was viewed as a type of noble sacrifice to the national cause. For the victims of the APS, mourning was permitted so long as it was in accordance with the dictates of the state-sanctioned narrative. Instead of mourning the children as casualties of preventable violence or systemic failure, they were reframed as symbols of patriotic virtue.

Furthermore, this metaphorical framing was central to the formation of a national myth. The APS tragedy was absorbed into Pakistan's larger narrative of the “war on terror,” becoming a pivotal moment in the country's ideological battle against extremism. Through framing, the APS attack was no longer an exceptional episode of unspeakable violence, it was constituted as a turning point in the nation's narrative of survival and sovereignty. This narrative subordinated the individual humanity of each child to a collective identity. The victims became permanent fixtures to a national story in mythic form and no longer personal memories or distinct lives that served the state's goals more than the truth of the victims.

Following the metaphorical framing of the APS victims as “martyrs,” and the erasure of their individuality through euphemized and symbolic language, a more insidious process took root—the long-term silencing of trauma. This silence was not a void, it was a carefully curated absence, a political, discursive, and institutional silencing of grief, pain, and dissent. In the immediate aftermath, the nation appeared to unite in grief, but it quickly became an instrument through which the language of mourning was appropriated, choreographed, and controlled.

The ritual of annual commemoration became central to the state's response in



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the years following the attack. National solidarity came to be represented in candlelight vigils, posters, television broadcasts and highly curated memorial events. But all these rituals were highly scripted. They repeat the same slogans: “The sacrifice of the APS children shall not go in vain,” or “standing as a wall of fortified steel against the coward terrorists” (*Dawn*, 2024). But the graphic violence, unbearable loss, and psychological devastation of families are meticulously avoided.

Silencing does not work through absence, but rather through the illusion of mourning already being done, of healing already happening. As the state launched the National Action Plan (NAP) immediately after the attack, a sense of decisive action was constructed. This made it look like justice had been served, thus there was no reason to tear open old wounds.

However, media coverage as well as state communications started to shift focus very quickly. The APS attack quickly morphed from something that was still mint fresh and brutally traumatic to something that was simply referenced in relation to military successes, policy achievements. The families who lived through the unimaginable loss are dealing with it, while the attack came to symbolize a checkpoint in Pakistan’s war on terror.

Despite the narratives of healing emanating from around the nation, many of the victims’ parents and siblings found themselves ensnared in a state of disenfranchised grief—defined here as grief that is unrecognized, unsupported, and possibly invalidated when compared to the narrative of the public. Instead, it was increasingly seen as a private matter, not to be considered as a national concern, as their personal loss experiences.

Another father, grieving, told *Dawn News* in 2019: “And we still don’t know the truth. They light candles every year, and post our children’s photos. Yet, nobody’s asking how we’re living, if we’re breathing.”⁸

These voices defy the authoritative metaphor of MARTYRDOM AS NATIONAL GLORY, instead establishing a rift between public narrative and private grief. Their testimonies further show how the once comforting metaphorical framing becomes a cage of identity dwelling on the victims, one that families cannot refuse.

And the final rules of this silencing are erasing what might have been. Every child lost in the attack had dreams, fears and futures. By labeling them “martyrs,” those futures were symbolically concluded. There was no room to imagine that Huzaifa would become a doctor, Mobeen would publish a book, or Haris would represent Pakistan on the cricket field. Instead, they were frozen in time, only the portraits of them draping in the national flag kept alive in our memory. This is what Lakoff would call a “metaphorical framing trap”, a cognitive structure that determines what can and cannot be thought (2). Once a victim becomes a martyr, the grief becomes historic, not current. Pain becomes performative, not political.

It is this long-term silencing of APS trauma that demonstrates how language, memory, and metaphor are less passive reflections of reality than they are active instruments of power. Although narratives of grief are desired by the state in the name of a closure, this closure comes in the throwing up of grief as patriotic unity, as the families of victims are consigned to periphery, their trauma spoken

⁸ Dawn. (2018, December 16). *Candlelight vigil held on eve of APS attack anniversary*. Retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/1451666>



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for, reframed and often dismissed. We are left with not a lack of memory, but a controlled memory, an image of the past that supports what is currently desired. The risk as Pakistan draws further away from 2014 is that the APS attack will not be forgotten, but that it will be remembered too easily, too cleanly, too symbolically—in ways that deny its horror, its injustice, and its ongoing impact.

Conclusion

The APS attack, while seared into the collective memory of Pakistan, has been subjected to a discursive transformation that distances it from the rawness of trauma. The discourse pertaining to APS has been transformed from the site of the personal loss and suffering to that of national endurance and moral transcendence through euphemistic language and metaphorical reframing. Collectively, martyrdom narratives, passive constructions, and conceptual metaphors play the role of obscuring the horror but of managing, containing, and eventually de-accelerating it. However, in this process, the identity of the victims is abstracted and not preserved; instead they are overwritten by symbols of unity, patriotism and strategic closure. By investigating the linguistic architecture surrounding the APS attack, it becomes clear how language can be simultaneously memorializing and marginalizing. Grief is not only the product of collective ownership but is institutionally regulated by constructing the event through sanitized metaphors and abstract tropes. The argument is how trauma is both politically digestible once framed as children as martyrs, sacrifice affect over ideology, and substitute their individual memory with national narrative. These rhetorical strategies not only protect the state from critique but also make certain types of grief illegible, most especially those that do not replicate state 'approved' idealized mourning.

This tension between memory and metaphor, pain and patriotic closure, is a symptom of a deeper crisis surrounding the narrativization of violence in post-conflict societies. The tools of language heal not the wounds of the past but bury them. Acknowledging the full spectrum of trauma that continues to resound beneath official silence is not only an ethical imperative, it is the only way to reclaim the voices buried beneath euphemism and abstraction.

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