

Arabian Gulf Journal of Humanities and Social Studies

ISSN: 3080-4086

Vol 4 - Issue 11 || Issued Date: 20-02-2026



Arabian Gulf Journal
Humanities and Social Studies

Rhetoric as Resistance: Comparative Narratives of Dehumanization and Liberation from African American and Palestinian Struggles

البلاغة بوصفها مقاومة: سرديات مقارنة لنزع الإنسانية والتحرر في نضالي الأمريكيين الأفارقة والفلسطينيين

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64355/agjhss4112>

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Abstract:

Language is a potent tool for constructing narratives and fantasies that sustain or fight systemic oppression. This paper examines the rhetorical strategies used to dehumanize African Americans and Palestinians, analyzing artifacts such as the Fugitive Slave Act and contemporary media coverage of Gaza. Hegemony and Symbolic Convergence Theories reveal how dominant groups craft fantasies—societal stability under slavery or military precision in conflict—to justify control and violence. Historical counter-narratives, like Frederick Douglass' Fourth of July speech, and contemporary works, such as Mahmoud Darwish's "Identity Card," disrupt these visions, reclaiming identity and agency. Using Cluster and Fantasy Theme Criticism, this study draws parallels between historical and modern rhetoric, exposing shared patterns of dehumanization and resistance. The analysis highlights the transformative potential of counter-narratives to challenge oppression and foster solidarity. Finally, the paper proposes strategies to amplify marginalized voices, promote media literacy, and build alliances for equity and justice across communities.

Keywords: Rhetorical strategies, Dehumanization, Counter-narratives, Hegemony, Symbolic convergence theory

المخلص

تُعدّ اللغة أداة قوية في بناء السرديات والتخيّلات التي تُسهّم في ترسيخ القمع البنيوي أو مقاومته. تبحث هذه الورقة في الاستراتيجيات البلاغية المستخدمة لنزع الإنسانية عن الأمريكيين الأفارقة والفلسطينيين، من خلال تحليل وثائق مثل قانون العبيد الهاربين والتغطية الإعلامية المعاصرة لقطاع غزة. تكشف نظريتنا الهيمنة والتقارب الرمزي كيف تصوغ الجماعات المهيمنة تخيّلات معينة—مثل الاستقرار المجتمعي في ظل العبودية أو الدقة العسكرية في سياق الصراع—لتبرير السيطرة والعنف. كما تعمل السرديات المضادة التاريخية، مثل خطاب فريدريك دوغلاس في الرابع من يوليو، والأعمال المعاصرة مثل قصيدة محمود درويش «بطاقة هوية»، على تفكيك هذه التصورات واستعادة الهوية والفاعلية. وباستخدام منهجي نقد التجمعات ونقد موضوعات الخيال، تُجري هذه الدراسة مقارنات بين الخطاب التاريخي والحديث، كاشفةً عن أنماط مشتركة من نزع الإنسانية والمقاومة. ويُبرز التحليل الإمكانيات التحويلية للسرديات المضادة في تحدي القمع وتعزيز التضامن. وأخيرًا، تقترح الورقة استراتيجيات لتضخيم أصوات الفئات المهمشة، وتعزيز الثقافة الإعلامية، وبناء تحالفات لتحقيق الإنصاف والعدالة بين المجتمعات.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاستراتيجيات البلاغية، نزع الإنسانية، السرديات المضادة، الهيمنة، نظرية التقارب الرمزي.

Introduction

Language, to me, is one of the most powerful tools for shaping societal narratives, justifying oppression, and maintaining systemic power imbalances. Throughout history, dominant groups have used rhetoric to construct and reinforce ideologies that marginalize and dehumanize others. For example, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 reduced African Americans to property and portrayed their pursuit of freedom as a societal threat (Campbell, 2012). Similarly, contemporary media coverage of Palestinians often employs ambiguous language, such as “misfire” or “collateral damage,” to obscure responsibility for violence and minimize their suffering (Greg Wehner, 2023). As I reflect on these historical and contemporary cases, I see how rhetoric serves as a tool for legitimizing systemic oppression and maintaining control.

In this paper, I explore these patterns through two key theoretical frameworks. First, Antonio Gramsci's concept of Hegemony explains how dominant groups sustain their power by shaping cultural norms, making societal hierarchies appear natural and inevitable (Gramsci, 2020). For example, the legal rhetoric of the Fugitive Slave Act framed the capture of enslaved individuals as a moral and legal duty, embedding slavery into the social fabric. In the modern context, hegemonic narratives portray Palestinian suffering as an unavoidable byproduct of military precision, reinforcing systemic control. Second, Symbolic Convergence Theory, developed by Robert Bales and Ernest G. Bormann, reveals how groups create shared fantasies, or rhetorical visions, to unite members and justify their actions (Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1985). These fantasies combine elements of the past, present, and future to create cohesive narratives, such as the fantasy of societal stability during slavery or the fantasy of precision warfare in modern military conflicts.

To analyze these fantasies and rhetorical strategies, I draw on two complementary methods: Kenneth Burke's Cluster Criticism and Bormann's Fantasy Theme Criticism. Cluster Criticism focuses on identifying recurring terms and symbols to uncover the values and ideologies embedded in texts (Rueckert, 1983). For example, terms like "fugitive," "marshal," and "citizen" in the Fugitive Slave Act cluster around ideas of control and societal order, dehumanizing African Americans in the process (Campbell, 2012). In the case of media coverage of Gaza, terms like "rocket," "misfire," and "intelligence" create a narrative that minimizes Palestinian humanity (Greg Wehner, 2023). Fantasy Theme Criticism, on the other hand, examines how groups construct shared fantasies to justify their actions and sustain group identity (Bormann, 2001). These fantasies, such as the notion of "lawful order" or "military precision," create rhetorical visions that normalize systemic violence and oppression.

As I work on this project, I focus on comparing rhetorical strategies used against African Americans and Palestinians. Historical examples like the Fugitive Slave Act, Frederick Douglass' speech "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" and the rhetoric of Jim Crow laws reveal how language has been weaponized to reduce African Americans to symbols of instability and danger. Similarly, contemporary artifacts, including Fox News' coverage of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion, Israeli Defense Minister statements during the 2023-2024 Gaza War, and Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, show how Palestinians are often dehumanized and framed as threats to societal stability. These patterns highlight the pervasive power of rhetoric to sustain systemic oppression across different historical and cultural contexts.

What gives me hope, however, is the resilience of counter-narratives. Figures like Frederick Douglass and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. used rhetoric to expose hypocrisy and demand justice, while poets like Mahmoud Darwish construct visions of resistance and survival. Douglass' rhetorical question, "What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence?" challenges the fantasy of American liberty and rehumanizes African Americans (Douglass, 1852). Similarly, Darwish's declaration in "Identity Card," "Write down: I am an Arab," asserts Palestinian identity and dignity in defiance of hegemonic narratives (Darwish, 1964). This study seeks to uncover the mechanisms of rhetorical oppression while amplifying counter-narratives that challenge dominant paradigms. By analyzing the rhetoric of control and resistance, it aims to deepen our understanding of how language shapes societal values and identities. Ultimately, the work aspires to dismantle hegemonic fantasies and promote alternative visions that foster justice, solidarity, and dignity for marginalized communities worldwide.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis of rhetorical strategies used to dehumanize marginalized groups in this paper relies on two primary theoretical frameworks: Antonio Gramsci's Hegemony and Robert Bales and Ernest G. Bormann's Symbolic Convergence Theory. These frameworks provide complementary insights into

how language shapes cultural norms, maintains systemic power imbalances, and fosters shared narratives that justify oppression. Together, they offer a foundation for understanding how dominant groups sustain control and how marginalized groups are portrayed and perceived.

Hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony explains how dominant groups maintain their power not solely through coercion but by shaping cultural norms and values, making their dominance appear natural, inevitable, and even desirable (Gramsci, 2020). Gramsci's work is particularly relevant to understanding how language and rhetoric reinforce social hierarchies. Through hegemonic control, power is embedded in everyday societal structures, from legal systems to media representations, creating narratives that justify and sustain inequality.

One example of hegemony in practice is the rhetoric of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. The Act framed the capture and return of enslaved African Americans as a moral and legal duty, embedding the institution of slavery into the societal fabric. Words like "marshal" and "citizen" positioned slavery as a collective obligation, portraying resistance to this system as a threat to societal order (Campbell, 2012). Similarly, in the modern context, hegemonic narratives in Western media often portray Palestinian suffering as collateral damage or a regrettable but inevitable consequence of military precision. For example, terms like "misfire" or "investigation," frequently used in media coverage of incidents like the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion, obscure agency and responsibility, minimizing the human cost of violence (Greg Wehner, 2023).

Hegemony also operates by naturalizing inequalities, making systemic oppression seem like the status quo. This is evident in how slavery was historically justified as essential to economic stability and social harmony, just as modern military actions are often framed as necessary for national security and geopolitical stability. By embedding these narratives into societal norms, hegemonic power ensures that resistance to these systems is marginalized or framed as illegitimate.

In analyzing African American history and the Palestinian struggle, I see how hegemonic rhetoric has been used to uphold systems of oppression across different times and places. Gramsci's theory helps contextualize these patterns, showing how language functions as a tool of control by embedding inequality into the very structures of society.

Symbolic Convergence Theory

Symbolic Convergence Theory (SCT), developed by Robert Bales and Ernest G. Bormann, explores how groups create shared narratives, or "fantasies," that foster unity and identity (Bales, 1970; Bormann, 1985). These fantasies are rhetorical constructs that provide groups with a common understanding of their past, a justification for their present actions, and a vision for their future. Through these fantasies, groups create a shared reality or rhetorical vision that shapes their beliefs and behaviors.

One key aspect of SCT is that these fantasies are not abstract; they are grounded in language and rhetoric that resonate emotionally with group members. For example, the rhetoric of the Fugitive Slave Act constructed a fantasy of societal stability and moral righteousness that relied on the subjugation of African Americans. Terms like "fugitive" and "service or labor" framed enslaved individuals as property, reducing their humanity and portraying their escape as a violation of the social order (Campbell, 2012).

Similarly, in contemporary contexts, SCT helps explain how media narratives create fantasies that reinforce dominant perspectives. For instance, Fox News' portrayal of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion uses terms like "rocket" and "misfire" to construct a fantasy of military precision and justifiable violence. This rhetorical vision absolves dominant groups of responsibility while dehumanizing Palestinians by reducing them to collateral victims rather than individuals with agency and humanity.

A critical insight of SCT is that these fantasies serve a dual purpose: they unite dominant groups by providing them with a shared vision of their role and responsibility, and they marginalize others by casting them as threats to that vision. In the case of slavery, the fantasy of a stable and prosperous society depended on the dehumanization of African Americans. In modern geopolitics, the fantasy of military precision legitimizes violence against Palestinians, portraying it as a necessary measure to maintain order and security.

What makes SCT particularly useful in this analysis is its focus on the emotional and symbolic dimensions of these narratives. By creating a cohesive rhetorical vision, dominant groups can make their perspectives seem universal and unchallengeable. This is why fantasies like "lawful order" in the Fugitive Slave Act and "precision warfare" in military rhetoric are so powerful—they provide a framework for understanding and justifying actions that would otherwise be morally indefensible.

The Intersection of Hegemony and Symbolic Convergence Theory

While Hegemony explains the structural mechanisms through which power is maintained, Symbolic Convergence Theory offers insights into the emotional and symbolic narratives that sustain these structures. Together, they highlight how language operates on both societal and group levels to perpetuate inequality. For example, the hegemonic framing of slavery as a societal necessity is reinforced by the rhetorical fantasy of stability and order created through SCT. Similarly, modern media narratives that absolve responsibility for violence against Palestinians combine hegemonic control over public discourse with shared fantasies that legitimize these actions.

These frameworks also emphasize the importance of counter-narratives in challenging dominant visions. Figures like Frederick Douglass and Mahmoud Darwish use rhetoric to disrupt hegemonic fantasies, offering alternative visions of justice, humanity, and resilience. Douglass' speech, "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?", dismantles the fantasy of American liberty by exposing its hypocrisy, while Darwish's "Identity Card" asserts Palestinian dignity and resistance against the fantasy of dehumanization imposed by occupation (Douglass, 1852; Darwish, 1964).

By applying Hegemony and Symbolic Convergence Theory to these cases, I aim to uncover how rhetoric sustains systemic oppression and explore how alternative narratives can challenge these entrenched systems.

Methodology

To analyze the rhetorical strategies employed in historical and contemporary artifacts, I rely on two primary methods: Cluster Criticism and Fantasy Theme Criticism. These methods are particularly effective for uncovering how language reflects and sustains power dynamics, constructs shared narratives, and legitimizes systemic oppression. Together, they provide a comprehensive approach to understanding the emotional, symbolic, and ideological dimensions of rhetoric.

Cluster Criticism

Kenneth Burke's Cluster Criticism is a method for identifying recurring terms and symbols within texts to uncover the underlying values, ideologies, and power structures they represent (Rueckert, 1983). This approach is based on the premise that the language we use reflects our attitudes, beliefs, and societal norms. By examining the patterns and relationships between key terms, Cluster Criticism reveals how language is employed to reinforce dominance and dehumanize marginalized groups.

In applying this method to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, I identify clusters of terms like "fugitive," "marshal," and "citizen." These terms collectively construct a rhetorical vision of legal authority and societal order. The word "fugitive," for instance, criminalizes the pursuit of freedom by enslaved African Americans, framing them as threats to the established social system. Similarly, the frequent references to "marshal" and "citizen" position the enforcement of slavery as a communal and patriotic duty, embedding the institution of slavery within the fabric of American identity (Campbell, 2012).

In a modern context, Cluster Criticism can be applied to Fox News' coverage of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion in Gaza. Terms like "rocket," "misfire," and "investigation" form a cluster that shifts focus away from the human cost of the incident and onto the technicalities of military operations. This language minimizes Palestinian suffering by framing the event as an unfortunate accident rather than an act of violence with clear responsibility. By analyzing these clusters, we can see how language is used to obscure agency, dehumanize victims, and legitimize the actions of dominant groups.

Cluster Criticism is particularly valuable for revealing the ideological underpinnings of rhetoric. Whether in the legal language of the Fugitive Slave Act or the ambiguous terminology of modern media, this method allows us to dissect how language constructs and sustains systemic power dynamics.

Fantasy Theme Criticism

Fantasy Theme Criticism, developed by Ernest G. Bormann and rooted in Symbolic Convergence Theory, examines how groups construct shared fantasies through rhetoric. These fantasies combine elements of the past, present, and future to create a unified vision that fosters group identity and justifies collective actions (Bales & Bormann, 1970; Bormann, 1972). This method highlights the emotional and symbolic dimensions of language, providing insights into how narratives shape societal values and public perception.

One of the most striking examples of rhetorical fantasies is the Fugitive Slave Act's construction of "lawful order." The Act created a fantasy in which societal stability and morality depended on the subjugation of African Americans. By portraying enslaved individuals as property and their escape as a breach of social harmony, this fantasy justified slavery as a necessary institution. The rhetorical vision of "lawful order" relied on a carefully crafted narrative that positioned the enforcement of slavery as a civic responsibility and a moral imperative (Campbell, 2012).

In the modern era, Fantasy Theme Criticism can be applied to the narrative of "precision warfare" in military rhetoric, particularly in the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Terms like "surgical strikes" and "collateral damage" contribute to a fantasy that portrays military operations as controlled, precise, and justified. This fantasy is evident in media coverage of events like the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion, where language frames violence as an unfortunate but necessary outcome of conflict. Such rhetoric dehumanizes Palestinians by reducing their suffering to an abstract consequence of military precision.

Fantasy Theme Criticism not only uncovers the content of these fantasies but also examines their function. These fantasies serve to unite dominant groups by creating a shared narrative that justifies their actions and marginalizes others. For instance, the fantasy of “lawful order” united proponents of slavery around the idea that their societal structure was morally and legally justifiable. Similarly, the fantasy of “precision warfare” reinforces the legitimacy of military actions while obscuring their human toll.

By examining how these fantasies are constructed and maintained, Fantasy Theme Criticism provides a deeper understanding of how rhetoric shapes group identity, fosters cohesion, and perpetuates systemic oppression.

Complementary Insights

While Cluster Criticism focuses on the recurring terms and symbols that reflect ideological structures, Fantasy Theme Criticism delves into the broader narratives and emotional dimensions of rhetoric. Together, these methods allow for a comprehensive analysis of how language operates on both a micro (word-level) and macro (narrative-level) scale. For example, the clusters of terms in the Fugitive Slave Act construct the fantasy of “lawful order,” while the clusters in Fox News’ coverage contribute to the fantasy of “precision warfare.”

These methods also highlight the role of counter-narratives. By analyzing figures like Frederick Douglass and Mahmoud Darwish, I can explore how their rhetoric disrupts hegemonic fantasies and constructs alternative visions of justice and dignity. Douglass’ speech, for instance, dismantles the fantasy of American liberty by exposing its hypocrisy, while Darwish’s poetry asserts Palestinian identity and resilience in defiance of dehumanizing narratives.

By applying Cluster Criticism and Fantasy Theme Criticism, I aim to uncover the mechanisms through which language sustains systemic oppression and to amplify the voices that challenge these narratives.

Artifacts for Analysis

This section presents the primary artifacts to be analyzed and critiqued using the theories and methodologies at hand. The selection includes speeches, letters, poetry, journalistic coverage, and legal frameworks that represent key moments in the history of rhetoric and social justice. Each artifact is quoted in detail to facilitate an in-depth engagement with the content.

Historical Context and Rhetorical Artifacts: African Americans

Fugitive Slave Act (Sections 5-7) (1850):

"That any person who shall knowingly and willingly obstruct, hinder, or prevent such claimant, his agent or attorney, or any person or persons lawfully assisting him, her, or them, from arresting such a fugitive from service or labor, either with or without process as aforesaid; or shall rescue, or attempt to rescue, such fugitive from service or labor, from the custody of such claimant, his or her agent or attorney, or other person or persons lawfully assisting as aforesaid; when so arrested, pursuant to the authority herein given and declared; or shall aid, abet, or assist such person, so owing service or labor as aforesaid, directly or indirectly, to escape from such claimant, his agent or attorney, or other person or persons legally authorized as aforesaid; or shall harbor or conceal such fugitive, so as to prevent the discovery and arrest of such person, after notice or knowledge of the fact that such person was a fugitive

from service or labor as aforesaid, shall, for either of said offences, be subject to a fine not exceeding one thousand dollars, and imprisonment not exceeding six months..."

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 reduced African Americans to property, presenting their recapture as a legal necessity and moral duty. Its language created a rhetorical vision of societal stability dependent on slavery, dehumanizing African Americans and portraying them as threats to social order.

Frederick Douglass, "What, To The Slave, Is The Fourth Of July" (1852)

"What have I, or those I represent, to do with your national independence? Are the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence, extended to us? ... This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony."

"Standing with God and the crushed and bleeding slave on this occasion, I will, in the name of humanity which is outraged, in the name of liberty which is fettered, in the name of the constitution and the Bible, which are disregarded and trampled upon, dare to call in question and to denounce, with all the emphasis I can command, everything that serves to perpetuate slavery—the great sin and shame of America!"

Douglass's speech juxtaposes the celebration of independence with the ongoing enslavement of millions, challenging the hypocrisy inherent in American society. His rhetoric appeals to moral, religious, and legal arguments, marking it as a powerful artifact for rhetorical and ethical analysis.

Jim Crow Laws and the "Separate but Equal" Rhetoric

The rhetoric of 'separate but equal' allowed the white majority to maintain economic and social dominance while projecting a veneer of fairness. This narrative not only upheld the hegemony of white supremacy but also marginalized African Americans by confining them to substandard schools, neighborhoods, and public facilities. The fantasy of equality within segregation was a critical element of the societal narrative that justified systemic racism (Morrison, 1992).

The language of Jim Crow laws reflects the constructed fantasy of racial equality while perpetuating systemic discrimination. The disconnect between the rhetorical claim of equality and its social reality makes this artifact essential for exploring hegemonic narratives.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963)

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

"You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. ... One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws."

"I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. ... Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will."

King's letter confronts systemic injustice through civil disobedience, urging action against laws and norms that sustain racial inequality. His appeal to justice and moral philosophy establishes a framework for analyzing civil rights rhetoric and action.

Contemporary Context and Rhetorical Artifacts: Palestinians in Gaza

Fox News Article on the Al-Ahli Hospital Explosion (2023):

Initial assessments suggest the explosion may have been caused by a misfired rocket, which absolves Israeli forces of responsibility while leaving the actual perpetrators undefined. This language reinforces the fantasy of 'precision warfare,' portraying military actions as controlled and justified. By emphasizing technicalities over human impact, the rhetoric dehumanizes Palestinians and shifts the narrative away from accountability. This contemporary artifact demonstrates how media language shapes public perception, employing ambiguity to obscure accountability and dehumanize affected populations. Its rhetoric provides a basis for analyzing the interplay of language, power, and responsibility.

Mahmoud Darwish, "Identity Card" (1964):

"I am an Arab... You stole my forefathers' vineyards / And land I used to till, / And you left us and all my grandchildren / Nothing but these rocks."

"Put it on record... If I were to become hungry / I shall eat the flesh of my usurper. / Beware, beware of my hunger / And of my anger!"

Darwish's poem encapsulates the Palestinian experience of displacement and resistance, utilizing vivid imagery and personal testimony. It serves as a poignant rhetorical artifact for exploring identity, power, and cultural resistance.

Human Rights Watch Report, "Israel's Crimes Against Humanity in Gaza" (2024)

"There is no plausible imperative military reason to justify Israel's mass displacement of nearly all of Gaza's population. Rather than ensuring civilians' security, military 'evacuation orders' have caused grave harm."

"The organized, violent displacement of Palestinians in Gaza, who are members of another ethnic group, amounts to ethnic cleansing."

This report offers a detailed account of systemic displacement, tying it to violations of international law. Its legal and ethical framing provides a critical foundation for analyzing the rhetoric of human rights violations and state power.

BBC News Coverage: Gaza "Soon Without Fuel, Medicine, and Food" (2023):

"No electricity, no food, no water, no gas—it's all closed," [Israel's Defense Minister said], adding that "we are fighting animals and are acting accordingly."

"The Gaza Power Plant is now the only source of electricity and could run out of fuel within days."

This news report highlights the humanitarian impact of military actions and political rhetoric. It serves as a basis for analyzing the dehumanization of Palestinians and the portrayal of humanitarian crises in global media.

The artifacts collected here, ranging from historical speeches to contemporary media and legal documents, will be analyzed through rhetorical, critical, and theoretical lenses to uncover the dynamics of power, identity, and resistance. They provide a robust foundation for understanding how language shapes perceptions and sustains or challenges systemic injustices.

Comparative Analysis: Dehumanization Across Contexts

The strategies employed to dehumanize African Americans and Palestinians are rooted in rhetorical frameworks that obscure systemic violence while justifying oppression. By exploring the shared symbols, language, and counter-narratives across these two contexts, we can uncover how language perpetuates hegemonic power while offering avenues for resistance.

Shared Use of Symbols and Fantasies: Threats to Societal Order

The Fugitive Slave Act (Sections 5-7) exemplifies how language was used to transform African Americans into threats against societal stability. Terms like “fugitive” and “marshal” portrayed enslaved individuals as criminals escaping lawful captivity. This framing reduced African Americans to property, where their pursuit of freedom was depicted as an act of rebellion. Moreover, phrases such as “it shall be the duty of the citizen” constructed a moral obligation to uphold the institution of slavery, portraying its enforcement as essential to preserving societal order (Campbell, 2012).

In the 2023-2024 Gaza War, similar strategies can be observed in Israeli government statements and Fox News’ coverage of the Al-Ahli Hospital explosion. Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant’s declaration that “we are fighting animals and are acting accordingly” exemplifies the rhetoric of dehumanization, equating Palestinians to subhuman entities unworthy of empathy or dignity. Meanwhile, Fox News’ coverage employs ambiguous language, such as “misfire” and “rocket,” to shift blame and obscure accountability. These terms reinforce a narrative of military precision and inevitability, portraying the widespread destruction in Gaza as an unfortunate byproduct of necessary security measures (Wehner, 2023).

In both contexts, the fantasies constructed by these symbols—societal stability under slavery and military precision in Gaza—serve to justify systemic violence. They obscure the humanity of the oppressed, reducing them to objects of control and instruments of conflict.

Language of Control: Legal and Institutional Mechanisms

The Jim Crow laws institutionalized segregation through rhetoric that masked the brutal realities of systemic racism. The phrase “separate but equal” symbolized an imagined societal harmony, disguising the economic and social inequities faced by African Americans. This rhetoric was a tool of control, legitimizing segregation as a benign compromise while reinforcing white supremacy (Morrison, 1992).

Similarly, in Gaza, the rhetoric surrounding Israeli-imposed blockades and “evacuation orders” serves to obscure the devastating humanitarian impact of these policies. A Human Rights Watch report on the 2023-2024 Gaza War highlighted how these orders caused “grave harm,” describing them as “organized, violent displacement” amounting to ethnic cleansing (Israel’s Crimes Against Humanity in Gaza | Human Rights Watch, 2024). By framing these actions as security measures, Israeli authorities

deflect criticism while perpetuating a state of crisis that dehumanizes Palestinians and denies them autonomy.

Both cases illustrate how institutional language and policies construct narratives of control, justifying systemic violence under the guise of legality and necessity.

Counter-Narratives: Resisting Dehumanization

Counter-narratives challenge the fantasies of control and offer alternative rhetorical visions that restore humanity to the oppressed. Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?" is a powerful example of this resistance. Douglass uses rhetorical questions and moral appeals to expose the hypocrisy of American values. By asserting, "This Fourth of July is yours, not mine," he reclaims the narrative, forcing his audience to confront the dissonance between the nation's ideals and its practices (Douglass, 1852).

Similarly, Mahmoud Darwish's "Identity Card" serves as a poetic counter-narrative to the dehumanization of Palestinians. Darwish's declaration, "Write down: I am an Arab," asserts his identity and demands recognition in the face of systemic erasure. His vivid imagery of displacement and resilience offers a stark contrast to the dehumanizing language of occupation, reframing Palestinians as agents of resistance rather than victims of circumstance (Darwish, 1964).

Media and Advocacy: Amplifying Resistance

Media and advocacy efforts play a critical role in countering hegemonic narratives. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" addresses systemic injustice through the lens of interconnectedness and moral responsibility. King's assertion that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" resonates across contexts, highlighting the universal implications of systemic oppression. His rhetorical appeals to justice, morality, and urgency provide a template for modern advocacy.

In Gaza, organizations like Human Rights Watch use reports such as "Israel's Crimes Against Humanity in Gaza" (2024) to amplify the voices of the oppressed and challenge dehumanizing narratives. By documenting the displacement and destruction in Gaza as ethnic cleansing, these reports expose the systemic nature of the violence and demand international accountability.

The role of media is equally significant. While outlets like Fox News often perpetuate hegemonic discourses, alternative platforms and independent journalists strive to humanize Palestinians by sharing personal stories and highlighting the human impact of the conflict. These efforts echo the moral and rhetorical strategies of King and Douglass, offering a lens of resistance that centers the humanity of the marginalized.

Language as a Double-Edged Sword

The comparative analysis of these artifacts reveals how language functions as both a tool of oppression and a means of resistance. Whether through the legal rhetoric of the Fugitive Slave Act and Jim Crow laws or the dehumanizing language of modern media and state policies, language has been weaponized to sustain systemic injustices. Yet, counter-narratives like those of Douglass, King, and Darwish remind us of language's transformative power to reclaim humanity and challenge hegemonic power.

By examining these parallels, we are reminded that the struggles of African Americans and Palestinians are not isolated but interconnected. Their shared histories of dehumanization and resistance underscore the importance of critical engagement with language and its role in shaping our perceptions of justice, humanity, and power.

Discussion: Symbolic Convergence and Rhetorical Vision

Fantasy and Postmemory

The fantasies created by dominant groups are inextricably linked to the concept of postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch, which describes how traumatic events and their narratives are inherited across generations. For African Americans, the language of slavery and segregation created fantasies of societal stability dependent on their oppression. Terms like “fugitive” and “marshal” from the Fugitive Slave Act shaped a vision of African Americans as dangerous property, an image reinforced through Jim Crow rhetoric. These dehumanizing narratives persist, leaving psychological and cultural scars that echo in modern systemic racism (Campbell, 2012; Morrison, 1992).

For Palestinians, the rhetoric of occupation and military precision functions similarly. Statements by the Israeli Minister like “we are fighting animals” or the use of terms such as “rocket misfire” perpetuate fantasies of control and precision, framing Palestinians as aggressors or collateral damage. These narratives deny Palestinians agency and humanity, influencing global perceptions of their struggle.

Yet, within both contexts, we find counter-narratives that resist these dominant fantasies. Frederick Douglass’ speech reframes African Americans as moral agents fighting systemic injustice, while Mahmoud Darwish’s “Identity Card” reclaims Palestinian identity through powerful imagery and defiance. These rhetorical visions of resistance challenge the dehumanization of their respective peoples, providing alternative frameworks that emphasize resilience and dignity.

Implications for Identity

The rhetorical artifacts analyzed throughout this paper profoundly shape the identities of African Americans and Palestinians. For African Americans, the language of slavery and segregation reduced them to commodities, denying them personhood. However, narratives from the Civil Rights Movement, such as Dr. King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail, reassert their humanity, calling for justice and equality. King’s poignant appeal—“injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”—situates their struggle within a universal framework of moral urgency (King Jr, 1964).

Similarly, Palestinians face ongoing efforts to erase their identity through occupation and systemic violence. Yet, figures like Darwish assert narratives of survival and defiance that counteract this erasure. Darwish’s declaration, “Write down: I am an Arab,” is more than a statement of identity—it is a rejection of dehumanization and a reaffirmation of personhood. These counter-narratives empower marginalized communities to reclaim their identities, transforming their experiences of oppression into sources of strength and agency (Darwish, 1964).

Dehumanizing rhetoric leaves deep psychological scars, fostering feelings of inferiority and marginalization. But counter-narratives provide a path toward healing and empowerment. As I reflect on these rhetorical visions, I recognize the transformative power of language to not only shape perceptions but also rebuild shattered identities.

Interconnected Struggles

Dr. King's assertion that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" resonates deeply when examining the interconnected struggles of African Americans and Palestinians. The rhetorical strategies used against these groups—whether through the language of slavery, segregation, or occupation—demonstrate a broader pattern of dehumanization that transcends time and geography. Recognizing these shared struggles is not just an academic exercise; it is a moral imperative that calls us to build global solidarity.

I see this interconnectedness as a reminder of our collective humanity. The fight against oppression is not isolated to one group or one place. It is a shared struggle that demands recognition and action from all of us.

Pathways to Justice: Language, Solidarity, and Action

The rhetorical artifacts and strategies analyzed throughout this paper underscore the profound influence of language in shaping perceptions, identities, and systems of power. They also highlight the potential of rhetoric as a tool for liberation and resistance. To dismantle hegemonic narratives and build a more equitable future, a multifaceted approach is required—one that amplifies marginalized voices, promotes media literacy, fosters cross-cultural solidarity, and leverages the critical role of allies.

Amplifying Marginalized Voices

Figures like Frederick Douglass and Mahmoud Darwish exemplify how personal storytelling can challenge dominant narratives and inspire resistance. Supporting African American and Palestinian authors, poets, and activists who craft these counter-narratives is essential. Today, platforms that amplify these voices—through literature, media, and public discourse—play a crucial role in reshaping perceptions and affirming the dignity of oppressed communities.

Promoting Media Literacy

Critical media literacy is vital in recognizing and dismantling biased language that perpetuates dehumanization. Texts like Fox News' coverage of Gaza demonstrate the need to educate audiences about rhetorical strategies that obscure accountability and perpetuate fantasies of control. Encouraging readers to engage critically with news sources and explore alternative narratives fosters a more informed and empathetic public, capable of challenging harmful stereotypes.

Fostering Cross-Cultural Solidarity

The struggles of African Americans and Palestinians reveal shared patterns of dehumanization and resistance. Highlighting these parallels—such as the Civil Rights Movement's quest for justice and Palestinian resistance against occupation—creates opportunities for dialogue and collaboration. By building connections between marginalized communities, we strengthen a unified front against systemic oppression. These shared experiences serve as powerful reminders of our interconnected humanity.

The Role of Allies

Allies have historically played a pivotal role in supporting marginalized groups. During slavery, white abolitionists advocated for the humanity of African Americans, while international solidarity

movements today amplify Palestinian voices, drawing attention to human rights violations and systemic injustices. Allies can:

- Advocate for responsible media representation.
- Support policies that promote equity and justice.
- Challenge dehumanizing narratives within their own communities.

Being an ally requires active engagement—speaking out against injustice, supporting marginalized voices, and, most importantly, listening to and learning from those directly affected. This responsibility extends to every individual committed to dismantling oppression and fostering equity.

Language as a Catalyst for Change

Reflecting on the rhetorical strategies explored in this paper, I am struck by the enduring power of language to both sustain systems of oppression and inspire movements for justice. From the Fugitive Slave Act to contemporary narratives surrounding Gaza, fantasies of societal stability and military precision reveal how language can be weaponized to dehumanize.

Yet, counter-narratives from figures like Douglass, King, and Darwish remind us that language also holds the power to liberate. These rhetorical visions challenge hegemonic power, amplify marginalized voices, and foster solidarity across struggles. They inspire action, urging us to reclaim language as a force for justice and dignity.

Language is more than a tool; it is a responsibility. It is up to all of us to use it in ways that affirm the humanity of all people. The journey toward justice begins with words, but it must culminate in action. By committing to these principles, we take meaningful steps toward a world where equity and dignity are not ideals, but realities.

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