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HEGEMONIC NARRATIVES AND THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF AMERICAN POWER: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF CLINT EASTWOOD'S AMERICAN SNIPER (2014)

Dr. Muhammad Umer Azim

Department of English, Government Graduate College Township, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: umerazim@gmail.com

Zaheer Hussain

Department of English, National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Lahore Campus, Pakistan

Email: zhussain@numl.edu.pk

Azhar Munir Bhatti

Department of English, Government Dyal Singh College, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: azharmunir18@hotmail.com

Abstract

Contemporary cinema functions as a potent ideological apparatus through which state power and national identity are discursively constructed and disseminated to global audiences. This study examines the discursive strategies employed in Clint Eastwood's American Sniper (2014) to construct and legitimize American hegemonic power within the context of the Iraq War. Drawing upon Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis, this research investigates how textual, discursive, and sociocultural dimensions interact to produce ideologically loaded representations of American military intervention. The analysis reveals that the film systematically deploys binary oppositions, visual spectacle, and narrative framing to position the United States as a civilizing force confronting barbaric adversaries, thereby naturalizing the Jacksonian philosophy of national security and preemptive military action. The findings demonstrate that cinematic discourse operates as a mechanism of soft power, encoding imperial narratives within entertainment formats that render ideological content imperceptible to mainstream audiences. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on media discourse and political ideology by illustrating how Hollywood war films function as instruments of cultural hegemony in the post-9/11 era.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis, Hegemony, American Sniper, Media Ideology, Jacksonian Philosophy, War Cinema, Soft Power*

Introduction

The relationship between discourse and power constitutes a foundational concern within critical social research, particularly in an era characterized by the pervasive influence of electronic media on public



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consciousness. Discourse, understood as the structured use of language, images, and symbols in social contexts, functions not merely as a neutral vehicle for communication but as an active force in constructing social realities, maintaining power asymmetries, and legitimizing political ideologies (Fairclough, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). As Baker and Ellece (2011) persuasively argue, discourses encompass meanings, reports, images, metaphors, narratives, and expressions that collectively produce specific types of social events, thereby shaping how individuals perceive and interpret their world. Chen (2016) further emphasizes that discourse is fundamentally socially shaped and constructed, emerging from and reinforcing particular configurations of power and knowledge within given historical conjunctures.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a theoretically grounded methodological framework for examining how language and visual representation function as instruments of ideological production and social control. Unlike conventional linguistic analysis that focuses primarily on formal properties of text, CDA investigates the dialectical relationship between discourse and society, seeking to uncover how textual practices contribute to the reproduction or transformation of dominant power structures (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 2001). Fairclough's (1992) seminal formulation identifies three interconnected dimensions of any discursive event: the text itself, comprising linguistic and visual elements; the discursive practice, involving processes of production, distribution, and consumption; and the sociocultural practice, encompassing the broader ideological and institutional context within which discourse operates. This tripartite framework enables researchers to move beyond surface-level description toward critical interpretation and explanation of how discourse functions within circuits of power.

The application of CDA to visual media, including cinema, represents a significant expansion of the analytical paradigm. Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) contend that discourse analysis must encompass not merely written and spoken language but also visual images, examining the specific features of visual symbols and the intricate connections between linguistic and imagistic modes of meaning-making. Cinema, as a multimodal form of public communication, constitutes a particularly rich site for ideological analysis because it combines narrative structure, visual spectacle, dialogue, sound design, and editing techniques to produce immersive ideological experiences (Trianton, 2013). McLuhan's (1997) observation that film constitutes a non-verbal form of experience akin to photography, yet incorporating elements of structured narrative, underscores the distinctive capacity of cinema to convey ideology through sensory engagement rather than explicit argumentation.

The present study focuses specifically on the Hollywood war film as a genre that has historically served to legitimize American military intervention and construct narratives of national exceptionalism. Films depicting the Second World War, the Vietnam conflict, and, more recently, the wars in Iraq and



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Afghanistan consistently position American military personnel as embodiments of courage, technological superiority, and moral righteousness, while representing adversaries through dehumanizing stereotypes that justify violent confrontation (Silliman, 2008). Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), based on the autobiographical account of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, represents a paradigmatic example of this discursive tradition. The film narrates Kyle's deployment to Iraq, where he recorded 160 confirmed kills, and constructs a compelling ideological narrative that positions American military intervention as a necessary response to existential threats posed by Iraqi insurgents.

This study addresses the following research question: How does the cinematic discourse of *American Sniper* (2014) construct and legitimize American hegemonic power through textual, discursive, and sociocultural strategies? By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, this research seeks to contribute to scholarly understanding of how contemporary war cinema functions as an instrument of soft power, encoding imperial narratives within commercially successful entertainment formats that reach millions of viewers worldwide.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis and Media Power

Fairclough's (2001) formulation of mass-media discourse as a site of hidden power relations provides the central theoretical orientation for this study. Unlike face-to-face communication where power dynamics may be relatively transparent, media discourse involves complex mediations between powerful institutional actors and dispersed audiences. The discourse producer exercises significant control over what is included or excluded, which perspectives are represented, and how events are framed, while the audience's capacity for counter-interpretation is constrained by the asymmetric distribution of symbolic resources (Fairclough, 2001). This mediated power operates implicitly, affecting viewers' cognitive frameworks and emotional dispositions without conscious awareness of ideological manipulation.

The concept of ideology, as elaborated by Raymond Williams and cited in Fiske (1990), encompasses three interconnected dimensions: belief systems associated with specific social groups; constructed systems of meaning that function to maintain dominant group control through the production of false consciousness among subordinate groups; and the general process of meaning production through which social realities are constituted. In the context of *American Sniper*, ideological analysis must attend to how the film constructs particular representations of Americans and Iraqis that serve to naturalize American military hegemony while obscuring the political and economic motivations underlying the Iraq War.



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Jacksonian Philosophy and American Foreign Policy

The Jacksonian tradition in American political thought, as articulated by Russell (2000), emphasizes national security and domestic well-being as the paramount objectives of foreign policy. Named after Andrew Jackson, the seventh President of the United States, this philosophy advocates for a robust military posture, unilateral action when national interests are threatened, and minimal tolerance for diplomatic constraints on American sovereignty. In the post-9/11 context, Jacksonian principles have been invoked to justify preemptive military strikes, regime change operations, and the global war on terror. The present study examines how *American Sniper* encodes Jacksonian assumptions within its narrative structure, presenting military intervention as an expression of patriotic duty rather than geopolitical strategy.

Cinema as an Instrument of Soft Power

The concept of soft power, as developed by Nye (2004), refers to the ability to achieve desired outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or material inducement. Cultural products, including cinema, constitute significant vectors of soft power because they disseminate values, norms, and narratives that shape international perceptions of national identity and political legitimacy. Hollywood war films, in particular, project images of American military virtue and technological superiority that resonate with global audiences, thereby contributing to the normalization of American hegemony within international consciousness. This study conceptualizes *American Sniper* as an exercise in soft power, examining how its entertainment value facilitates the transmission of ideological content that might otherwise encounter resistance if presented through explicit political discourse.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative critical discourse analysis as its methodological approach, utilizing Fairclough's (1997) three-dimensional framework to examine the film *American Sniper* (2014) as a complex discursive event. The analytical procedure involves systematic examination of the film at three interconnected levels: textual analysis, focusing on linguistic choices, visual composition, and narrative structure; discursive practice analysis, examining how the film is produced, distributed, and consumed within specific institutional contexts; and sociocultural practice analysis, situating the film within broader patterns of American military ideology and imperial discourse.

Data were collected through repeated viewing of the film, transcription of significant dialogue sequences, and detailed notation of visual elements including cinematography, mise-en-scène, and editing patterns. The analytical process followed the hermeneutic principles outlined by Mulyana (2001) and Muhadjir (2000), emphasizing comprehensive and contextualized interpretation of qualitative



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phenomena. Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) note that qualitative research addresses research objectives through holistic engagement with the subject matter, allowing emergent patterns to guide analytical focus rather than imposing predetermined categories. The researchers maintained reflexive journals throughout the analytical process, documenting interpretive decisions and potential biases to enhance the trustworthiness of findings.

Analysis and Discussion

Textual Analysis: Binary Constructions and Linguistic Strategies

The textual dimension of *American Sniper* reveals systematic deployment of binary oppositions that structure the film's ideological content. The protagonist, Chris Kyle, is constructed through a vocabulary of heroism, professionalism, and moral clarity. He is depicted as "the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history," a designation that transforms killing into a measurable achievement within a framework of military excellence. The film's opening sequence immediately establishes the moral parameters of the narrative: Kyle positioned on a rooftop observes a woman and child approaching an American convoy, discerns the threat of a concealed grenade, and makes the split-second decision to eliminate both targets. This scene functions textually to establish Kyle's perceptual acuity, his willingness to make difficult moral choices, and the existential threat posed by Iraqi civilians who may serve as combatants.

The linguistic register employed to describe American military personnel contrasts sharply with that applied to Iraqi characters. Kyle and his fellow SEALs are associated with terms denoting skill, courage, and protective intent. Kyle establishes rapport with local informants, demonstrates cultural knowledge sufficient to identify insurgent tactics, and exhibits unwavering commitment to his comrades' safety. Conversely, Iraqi characters are consistently described through dehumanizing terminology. Kyle refers to Iraqis as "savages," a lexical choice that positions them outside the boundaries of civilized humanity and thereby legitimates violent elimination without moral qualm. The insurgent leader known as "the Butcher" is depicted as barbarically cruel, punishing alleged collaborators by drilling into their skulls, while ordinary Iraqis are represented as motivated by greed, bargaining for intelligence information in exchange for substantial sums of American money.

The film's dialogue reinforces these textual hierarchies through asymmetrical representation. American characters engage in complex emotional discourse, articulating fears, loyalties, and moral reflections. Kyle's conversations with his wife Taya dramatize the psychological costs of military service, humanizing him through vulnerability. Iraqi characters, by contrast, are granted minimal dialogue, and when they do speak, their utterances serve primarily to confirm their antagonistic status. The Iraqi sniper



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Mustafa functions as a silent, implacable threat, his lack of verbal expression rendering him mysterious and menacing rather than comprehensible as a human actor with motivations and relationships.

Discursive Practice: Narrative Framing and Spectacle

At the level of discursive practice, *American Sniper* operates within established conventions of the Hollywood war film while adapting these conventions to the specific ideological requirements of the Iraq War context. The film's production by a major studio (Warner Bros.), distribution through global theatrical and digital platforms, and marketing as entertainment rather than propaganda, constitute significant dimensions of its discursive functioning. Audiences encounter the film within commercial cinema contexts, where expectations of entertainment and emotional engagement may override critical awareness of ideological content.

The narrative structure follows classical Hollywood conventions of protagonist-driven storytelling, with Kyle's perspective providing the exclusive narrative focalization. This monofocal structure prevents alternative viewpoints from achieving representational parity; the Iraqi experience of invasion, occupation, and insurgency remains outside the narrative frame except as it impinges upon American military operations. The film's temporal organization, alternating between Kyle's four deployments to Iraq and his increasingly strained domestic life in Texas, creates a rhythm of departure and return that emphasizes sacrifice and duty while minimizing the temporal and spatial continuity of Iraqi suffering.

Visual spectacle constitutes a crucial dimension of the film's discursive practice. Eastwood's direction emphasizes the technological superiority of American military equipment: soldiers equipped with advanced communication systems linked to satellite networks, bulletproof armored vehicles patrolling Iraqi streets, and precision weaponry enabling lethal engagement at extreme distances. These visual elements function as demonstrations of American power that inspire awe and confidence in the audience. The contrast between American and Iraqi living conditions is rendered through stark visual differentiation: American bases appear clean, well-organized, and equipped with recreational and communication facilities, while Iraqi residences are depicted as dark, dilapidated, and claustrophobic. This visual dichotomy naturalizes assumptions about civilizational hierarchy, positioning American military presence as bringing order to chaotic environments.

The climactic confrontation between Kyle and Mustafa follows the conventional structure of protagonist-antagonist conflict, with the American sniper ultimately prevailing through superior tactical intelligence. Significantly, the character of Mustafa has no basis in Kyle's autobiography, indicating that this narrative element was constructed specifically to provide cinematic satisfaction through the elimination of a worthy adversary. This fabrication reveals the extent to which the film prioritizes



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narrative conventions over historical accuracy in its discursive construction of American military prowess.

Sociocultural Practice: Imperial Ideology and the Civilizing Mission

The sociocultural dimension of analysis situates American Sniper within longer historical trajectories of imperial discourse and contemporary geopolitical configurations. The film's representation of American military intervention as a civilizing mission directed at liberating Iraqis from terrorist oppression echoes colonial ideologies that positioned European powers as bearers of enlightenment to benighted populations (Said, 1978; Silliman, 2008). The characterization of Iraqis as "savages" requiring external intervention to establish democratic governance and capitalist development reproduces the rhetoric of the white man's burden in updated form, substituting counterterrorism for Christianization while maintaining the fundamental structure of civilizational hierarchy.

The Jacksonian philosophy identified by Russell (2000) provides the ideological substructure for the film's narrative logic. Kyle's repeated deployments are motivated not by abstract geopolitical considerations but by the concrete imperative of protecting American lives from threats emanating from an unstable world. This framing displaces analysis of the Iraq War's origins in American foreign policy decisions, resource interests, and neoconservative ideology, replacing causal complexity with a simplified narrative of defensive response to aggression. The film's release in 2014, during the escalation of the Islamic State insurgency, lent renewed plausibility to this narrative framework, allowing audiences to interpret Kyle's actions as prescient anticipation of later threats rather than participation in a misguided military adventure.

The character of Chris Kyle functions as what Gramsci (1971) would recognize as an organic intellectual of American militarism, embodying and articulating the values and assumptions of a particular social bloc. His representation draws upon deep cultural archetypes of the American frontier hero, the skilled marksman defending civilization against wilderness, updated for the context of urban counterinsurgency warfare. The film's phenomenal commercial success, grossing over \$547 million worldwide, indicates the resonance of these ideological constructions with mass audiences, suggesting that American Sniper successfully activated and reinforced prevailing assumptions about American exceptionalism and military virtue.

Conclusion

This critical discourse analysis of American Sniper (2014) has demonstrated that the film operates as a sophisticated instrument of ideological production, constructing American hegemonic power through interconnected textual, discursive, and sociocultural strategies. At the textual level, the film deploys



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binary oppositions, asymmetrical dialogue, and dehumanizing vocabulary to position American military personnel as civilized heroes confronting barbaric adversaries. At the level of discursive practice, narrative focalization, visual spectacle, and generic conventions work to naturalize American military intervention while excluding alternative perspectives. At the sociocultural level, the film activates Jacksonian assumptions about national security and reproduces colonial discourses of civilizational hierarchy within the contemporary context of the global war on terror.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for understanding the role of cinema in contemporary geopolitics. American Sniper exemplifies how entertainment media can function as an instrument of soft power, encoding imperial narratives within formats that reach global audiences without the explicit political markings of state propaganda. The film's capacity to render ideological content imperceptible through emotional engagement and visual pleasure constitutes a particularly effective mode of ideological transmission, as audiences may absorb and internalize assumptions about American military virtue without conscious critical examination.

Future research might productively extend this analytical framework to examine other contemporary war films, investigating whether the discursive strategies identified in American Sniper constitute a broader pattern within Hollywood's representation of American military intervention. Additionally, reception studies examining how diverse audiences interpret and negotiate the film's ideological content would contribute to understanding the variable effects of cinematic discourse across different cultural and political contexts. The continued production and consumption of films that legitimize military violence underscore the ongoing relevance of critical discourse analysis as a tool for interrogating the relationship between media, power, and ideology in the twenty-first century.

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