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The United States in the Language of Sign & Codes: Identification of Visual-Verbal Symbolic Techniques Used in Pakistani Political Cartoons

Abstract

Political cartoon is a humorous way of communication that can convey a harsh meaning in a witty manner but its drawing is not as simple as it seems. Rather it is a multifaceted assembly of signs, codes and symbols to create a meaning. This paper aims at identifying the groups of signs and symbolic techniques to construct the image of the United States in the political cartoons of Pakistan. Therefore, political cartooning from three English mainstream newspapers of Pakistan the Nation, The News and the Dawn is selected from 1991 to 2013. Though the scope of this paper is neither to discuss the Pakistan-US relations nor the foreign policies of Pakistan. Rather, this paper intends to highlight various techniques adopted by the selected Pakistani political cartoonists with the reference to the United States under the light of Barthes' model of Semiotics. It concludes that political cartooning in Pakistan involves the complex process of gathering various signs and symbols in a single drawing to create a desirable message. With special reference to the U.S., Pakistani political cartoonists mostly emphasized on the physical body structures to depict power, control and monopoly. Zoomorphism and assigning different controversial roles in the political cartoons are other commonly used techniques in political cartooning of Pakistan.

Keywords: *Sign, Visual & Verbal Techniques, Political cartoon, Pakistan, Foreign nation. United States.*

1.0. Introduction

Popular discourses assumes that political cartoons are not interpreted only as 'laughing matters' and 'joking chuckles' rather political cartoons involve a complex process of encoding the desired messages to target a subject (Ashfaq, 2014 ; Diamond, 2002). Therefore, there is no subject too sensitive and too outrageous for political cartooning. Political cartoons are not meant to fulfil the notion of impartiality and neutrality. As American editorial cartoonist, Doug Marlette argued that "the fundamentals of cartooning are distortions, hyperbole and subjectivity" (as cited in Buell & Mauss, 1988, p. 847). Based on these assumptions, it has been observed that political cartoonists use different symbolic

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techniques, metaphorical devices and strategies in their drawings to construct a significant image of an individual or a nation.

The basic unit to construct a meaning in any political cartoon is a sign. Therefore it is pertinent to describe the significance of sign and symbol for political cartooning. Sign can be an expression, entity, occasion, subject, trait whose occurrence and existence classifies or expresses the prevalence and happening of something else. For example, red is often perceived as love. Sign also refers to a gesture or any act. For instance, thumbs up denotes to the appreciation given to someone. According to Fiske (1990), "a sign in something physical, perceivable by our senses; it refers to something other than itself; and it depends upon a recognition by its users that it is a sign" (p.41). Similarly, Abraham (2009) also emphasized that 'it is through signs that we signify, make meaningful or make known our mental concepts of the real world. Every message consists of signs of one or more kind" (p. 129).

Sign is arbitrary and subjective. It may be meaningful for someone somewhere; it may be meaningless for someone else somewhere else. (Fiske, 1990). Different scholars define sign in several ways. Peirce (1931) named it 'interpretant' while Ogden and Richards (1923) termed it 'referent' (as cited in Fiske, 1990). Interpretant is a perception that a reader makes in his mind. Peirce (1958) classified sign in to three categories i.e. icon, index and symbol. Peirce (1958) argued that:

Every sign is determined by its object, either first, by partaking in the character of the object, when I call the sign as *icon*; secondly, by being really and in its individual existence connected with the individual object, when I call the sign an i*ndex*; thirdly, by more or less approximately certainty that it will be interpreted as denoting the object in consequence of a habit….when I call the sign as *symbol.* (as cited in Fiske, 1990, p.47)

1. Icon closely resembles with the original entity. Photograph of any person, maps, and male and female signs on the doors of public toilets are common examples of icon. Icons can be verbal as well that is called Onomatopoeia. For example, the voices of animals e.g. 'bow-wow' for dogs and zoom for plane are verbal icons.

2. Index is "a sign with a direct existential connection with its object" (Fiske, 1990, p.47) For example, smoke is an index of fire and sneeze is an index of head cold.

3.   Symbol is associated with the original object in the system of rules, customs, agreements and conventions of a society. It may be depended upon the pre-existing accepted knowledge of the society. For instance, dove is the symbol of peace. Abraham (2009) defined symbol in the following way:

Symbol is a sign whose relation with its object is conventional and cultural. Symbols are arbitrary in their conventional sense: their meanings are not derived from any relations to an external object, except to the extent that they are conventionally associated with certain objects in a given context of use. (p.131)

Before specifically looking in to the political cartooning for identifying the symbols and signs, it is indispensable to deliberate that how different symbols and signs combine together to create a desirable meaning. Therefore, Barthes discussed signs as codes which are recognized and accepted by people through culture, language, historical values, norms and customs. Berger (2005) added that "these codes or "secret structure" in peoples' minds, affect the ways that individuals interpret the signs and symbols they find in the media and the ways they live" (p.30). Similarly, Chandler (1994) also emphasized that "every text is a system of signs organized according to codes and sub codes which reflect certain values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices". Danesi (1994) also emphasized that a text can be understood "as a kind of "macro-code", consisting of the numerous codes which a group of individuals habitually use to interpret reality" (p.18). Therefore, a number of different symbols and signs combine together in the unique form of codes to create a meaning. The system of combining signs and the understanding of the codes are entirely dependent on cultural history. Eco (1976) argued

Codes and sub codes are applied to the messages [read 'text'] in the light of a general framework of cultural references, which constitutes the receiver's patrimony of knowledge: his ideological, ethical, religious standpoints, his psychological attitudes, his tastes and his value systems, etc. (p.115)

According to Berger (2005), there are four types of codes:

1. Metonymic code: this deals with groups of signs that force people to make perceptions and connotations. For example a cartoon depicts a bed room with broken furniture and dirty and torn curtains refers to the poverty of residents.

2. Analogical code: this deals with the combination of symbols and signs that force people to make contrasts in their minds. For example, the green and white color dress with a motif of moon and star refers to the symbolic illustration of Pakistani flag or Pakistani man.

3. Displaced code: this refers to the transformation of one sign in to another. For example, passing train and the sudden falling curtain are displaced codes to convey the meanings of sexual relationships in movies.

4. Condensed code: this deals with the group of numerous signs to make a unique and complex sign. Advertisements and music videos are commonly used examples of condensed codes.

Considering political cartooning, Davies (2009) added that political cartoon is not only a combination of symbols and signs, rather it is itself a unique sign. The basic technique for political cartooning is the gathering and combining simple objects as signs to make a bigger and complex concept to convey a serious message in a humorous manner. According to Johnson (2009), political cartoon depends on "common signs and symbols to act as a catalyst for uncovering the richness of cultural and political life, depicting the assumptions and prejudices" (p.12). According to Diamond (2002),

A political cartoon is a political symbol that includes text, imagery and one of the following types of symbols: 1) symbols of the political community; 2) symbols associated with regime norms, structures and roles; and 3) situational symbols relating to current authorities, nongovernmental political actors, and policies and policy issues". (p. 252)

In addition, Gamson and Stuart (1992) also argued that "political cartoons offer a number of different condensing symbols that suggest the core frame of the issue" (p.60). Similarly, Gamson and Modigliani (1989) also emphasized that the combination of these signs transform political cartoons to "interpretive packages" that offer explicit meanings to the target. According to them, there are different techniques, strategies and devices including catchphrases, idiomatic verbal and visual expressions, metaphors, allegories and exemplars that create an interpretive message in the form of a political cartoon. According to Palmer (2011), "these symbolic devices provide a "shorthand" way of suggesting an underlying storyline or message" (p. 63).

Signs are always entirely rooted in to culture of any society and perceived accordingly by the society. Therefore, political cartoonists prefer those entities, pictures, and illustration to create a meaning that already prevail and are accepted in political, historical social and cultural settings of a society with the shared meaning of understating in public (Palmer, 2011). For example, in the United States, the Statue of Liberty and the American eagle are used in political cartoons to signify their nationalism because these symbols already exist and are perceived culturally in their society (Caswell, 2004).

While considering the significance of the combination of signs and symbols to create a desirable image in political cartooning, the intent of this paper is to examine different visual and verbal techniques that political cartoonists of Pakistan use to construct the images of foreign nations. The major focus of this paper to unveil the image of the Unites States that is constructed by the political cartoonists through the combination of different visual and verbal signs and symbols.

2.0. Method

This paper aims at identifying the groups of signs and symbolic techniques used in image building of the United States in Pakistani political cartoons. Therefore, political cartoons of three highest circulated English mainstream newspapers of Pakistan *the Nation* drawn by Maxim, *The News* by Shahtoon & Khalid Hussain and *Dawn* by Feica are selected from 1991 to 2013. These three newspapers are also selected because of their renowned and national and international well reputed political cartoonists of Pakistan. This time period is selected because of the several reasons

1.   The different situations of ups downs in Pakistan-United States relations.

2.   Cold war was ended and the United States changed its situational and realist approach towards Pakistan once again

3.   The interference of the United States in the issue Nuclear proliferation of Pakistan and India

4. The incident of 9/11 and Pakistan's decision to become an ally of the United States in war against terrorism

5. The multiple democratic political regimes of Pakistan Muslim League and Pakistan People's Party in Pakistan and their different foreign policies towards United States

6. Military regime and the favorable strategies of the U.S. toward the military dictator

Though the scope of this paper is neither to discuss the Pakistan-U.S. relations nor the foreign policies of Pakistan according to political regimes. Rather, this paper intends to highlight various techniques adopted by the selected political cartoonists of Pakistan with the reference to the United States. 321 political cartoons were found where both the U.S. and Pakistan were portrayed in any form together (politicians, flags, nations etc.).

Akande (2002) argued that "semiotic refers to the tradition of scholarship in which the meaning, experience and knowledge is communicated through signs and symbols" (p. 32). Tsakona (2009) also added that semiotics is a methodical and theoretical umbrella to understand the signifying system. Therefore, in this paper, Barthes' model of semiotic analysis is employed as methodological and theoretical framework to analyze the cartoons because Semiotics is a science of signs and symbols.

3.0. Identification of Visual Metaphorical and Symbolic Techniques in Pakistani Political Cartoons with Reference to the United Stated

It was found that both visual and verbal and most of the times the combination of visual and verbal symbolic techniques are used in political cartoons of Pakistan to depict foreign nations. Especially with the reference to the depiction of the United States, the following visual signs and symbols are predominantly used:

1. Pakistani and the US politicians' resembling caricatures.
2. Various famous cartoon characters like Uncle Sam
3. Zoomorphism and Non-human biological forms including animals and plants
4. Natural forms including air, clouds, sun, water and soil etc.
5. Material objects like scissor, knife, balloons, planes etc.
6. Cultural forms including cultural entities, regional traditions and festivals, cultural and indigenous sports etc.
7. Social situations with local and native social roles and stories.
8. Psychological situations including fantasies, dreams, mental pictures, dialogues and gestures.

### 3.1. Physical Body Structures of Pakistan-US Signifiers

One of the basic visual techniques used by political cartoonists is focusing upon the physical body structures. To depict the power of the target character in the cartoon, the size of the body structures and the long and short heights are drawn because according to Butera (2008), "the association of power with height is a socially constructed phenomenon, therefore, taller bodies are institutionally and

discursively imbued with power" (p. 2). Butera (2008) also added that "by using the Barthes's concept of myth, within the mythology of tallness, the tall body functions as a signifier of a constellation of traits: wealth, leadership, and power" (p. 11). Therefore, in the case of the depiction of the United States, political cartoonists construct the image of powerful versus powerless by drawing the gigantic versus tiny body structures and tall versus short heights where the signifiers of the United States are depicted with giant bodies and tall heights while the Pakistani signifiers are portrayed with tiny and feeble body sizes and short heights. In the realm of socio-cultural context of Pakistan, Tall height and big body sizes are perceived as power, authority, and masculinity in Pakistan. In addition to body sizes, facial expressions and body gestures also created meanings. Some of the examples are the following

In cartoon 1, Maxim portrayed George H. W. Bush as a tall, gigantic and muscular 'strong' man while represented Nawaz Sharif with short height and tiny body. This cartoons was drawn when after the Cold War, the United States changed the policy to have close ties with Pakistan and reduced the US aid under the Pressler amendments. Similarly, in cartoon 2, Maxim again depicted the US president smiling Bill Clinton giant while portrayed Nawaz Sharif as small with worried facial expressions. This cartoon was published under the context of the meeting of Nawaz Sharif and Bill Clinton in Washington DC on December 1, 1998. It was the time when the United States offered Pakistan to deliver F-16 jetfighters and refund USD470 million with condition to stop all Pakistan nuclear plans and cut all the links with freedom fighters in Afghanistan ("Pakistan nuclear chronology", 2011). Cartoon 3 in the *News* was also published with the same offers and conditions but the time period was different. This cartoon depicts Uncle Sam as giant man with angry and dominating facial expressions and body gestures and Nawaz Sharif as a small kid.
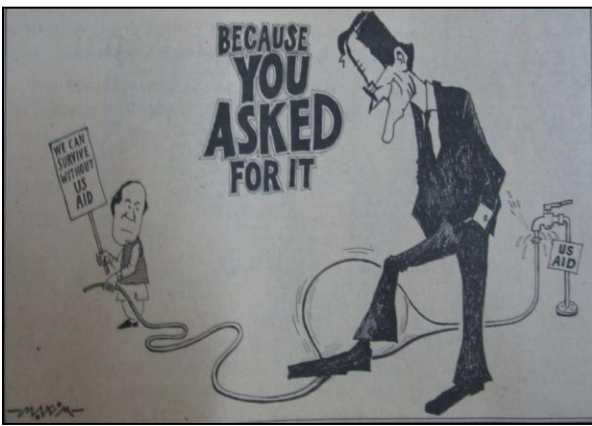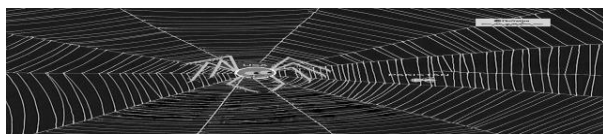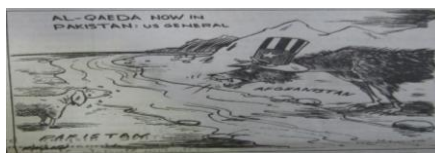
Cartoon 1. Published on May (*The Nation*)
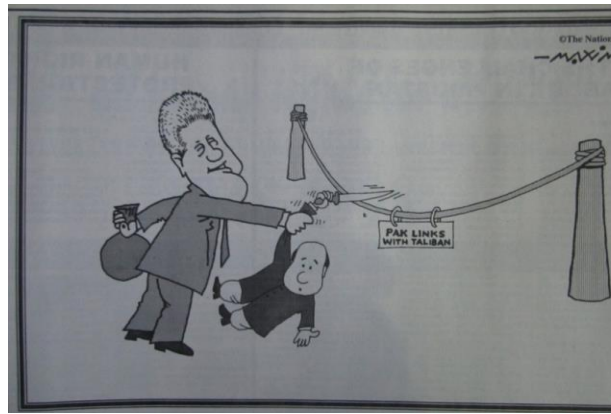
Cartoon 2. Published on December 8, 1998 *(The Nation)*
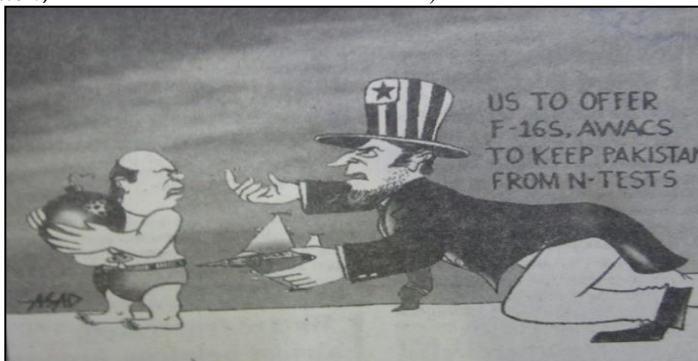
Zoomorphism & Animal Predators

Zoomorphism is a commonly used technique to draw political cartoons in which cartoonists resemble the characteristics of their target with animals and their characteristics**.** This technique is usually known as 'animalization', 'dehumanization' or 'zoomorphism' (Tunc, 2002) where political cartoonists, through the process of hybridization, combine distinctive signs by using the metaphors of animals to categorize the features in a person or a country. Therefore, 'Uncle Sam' and president of the United States are predominantly portrayed as 'animals' and various 'filthy creatures'**.** It was found that most of the Pakistani political cartoonists use those animals as metaphors for the representation of the United States that are known as predators. Few examples are the following:

Cartoon 5. Published on June 10, 2002 (*The News*)

Cartoon 4. Published on September 19, 2003 (*The News*)

Cartoon 6. Published on August 27, 2012 *(The Nation)*

For instance in the cartoon 4 published by *the News*, the depiction of Uncle Sam was as a happy snake which is astringing a Pakistani man who is very scared. 'Snake' is a frightening' animal and is perceived as a symbol of 'death'. This snake frightening Pakistani man refers to the aftermaths of 9/11 when Pakistan became the ally of the United States in war against terrorism. In cartoon 5 published in *the News,* another metaphor of predator 'wolf' and Pakistan as a small and innocent sheep were depicted. Wolf is perceived as a cunning hunter that can lie and deceive others to hunt them. In fairy tales, most of the times, the wolf is symbolized as 'the epitome of evil'. This cartoon depicts the United States' invasion of Afghanistan and killing innocent people there to target Al-Qaeda militant. This cartoon was published when on May 25, 2002, the U.S. General, John Keane emphasized on the presence of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan after Afghanistan (O' Neil, 2002). In the cartoon, the sheep (Pakistan) is depicted as the next hunt of the wolf (the United States).

Similarly, in cartoon 6 published by *the Nation*, where the United States was portrayed as a 'spider' who is residing in its parlor. There is another small fly labeled as 'Pakistan' has stuck in to the spider's parlor. This cartoon refers to the poem "the spider and the fly" that was written by Mary Howitt in 1829. In the poem, the spider was signified as a deceptive friend who gives false hope to the fly for its hunt.

3.2. Assigning Roles

Assigning controversial roles accordingly to construct a strong message is another strategy to depict foreign nations in Pakistan. In such cartoons, cartoonists draw a situation where the US signifiers are assigned different negative roles who are playing with Pakistani signifiers. In such situations, Pakistani signifiers are usually depicted in positive or passive roles. Some of the following situations with the reference to the U.S. in Pakistani political cartoons are identified.

3.2.1. "Compare & Contrast Situations"

Another set of signs that are commonly used by the political cartoonists for depicting the foreign nations and their relationships by representing their signifiers in the 'compare and contrast situations". For instance, while depicting the United States, political cartoonists of Pakistan draw a comparison between the approach of the United States towards other nations and Pakistan. Political cartoonists portray the characters of the United States (Uncle Sam, the US Presidents and politicians, etc.) in the roles that are biased, unjust and partial according to their own interests with Pakistan and other nations. Few examples are the following
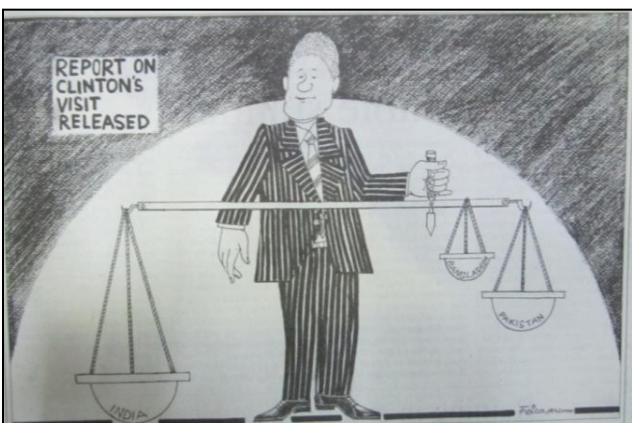
Cartoon 7. Published on April 2(

Cartoon 8. Published on February 1, 1992 (*The News)*
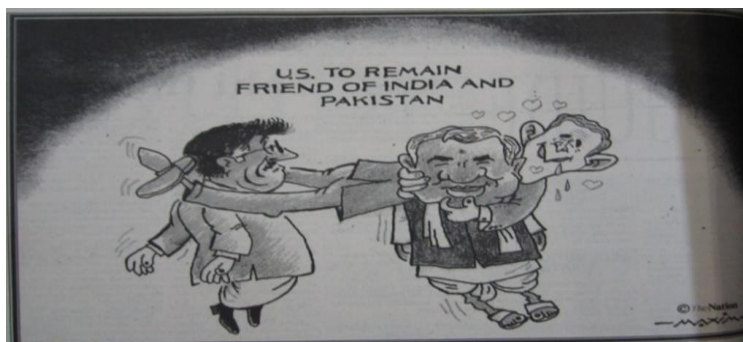
Cartoon 9. Published on February 01, 2000 *(The Nation)*

In cartoon 7 by Feica in *Dawn*, Bill Clinton holding a measuring scale to balance three pans of Pakistan, India and Bangladesh but Indian pan is heavier than all. This cartoon refers to the visit of Bill Clinton to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh but during his visit how his emphasis on improving India-U.S. relationship created an imbalance in the U.S. with Pakistan and Bangladesh, was depicted in this cartoon with the heavier pan of India as compared to Pakistan and Bangladesh.. Similarly, in cartoon 8, George W. H. Bush is represented in t*he News* as a 'unfair guardian/mother' who is giving food to Narasimha Rao (Indian prime Minister and Yitzhak (Israeli Prime Minister) but Nawaz Sharif is the neglected child who is waiting for her mother to give some food in his plate. 'Neglecting one child' symbolizes the 'unfairness of the United States towards Pakistan. In another cartoon (8) by Maxim in the *Nation* repeated the same symbolic expression where George W. Bush was depicted in a role of an unfair friend/lover who is holding Vajpayee's face with love but he is crossing his legs around the neck of President General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan. Holding someone with legs and feet signifies disrespect in Pakistani culture.

3.2.2.   Situation of 'Manipulation and Untrustworthiness'

Another set of the symbolic and metaphorical expressions that are commonly used in Pakistani political cartoons of Pakistan is image building of foreign country as a manipulator and untrustworthy while dealing with the commitments and promises. For example, Pakistani political cartoonists use the metaphor of 'an untrustworthy boyfriend/husband' who can deceive his lover/spouse at any point. The situation of manipulation, lie, deception, dishonest etc. are drawn by using one of the common symbol of portraying the main signifiers of the United States as double faced. Someone being double faced refers to dishonest and manipulator in his dealings and commitments. Therefore, the most commonly used sign of being double faced for the US is used by the political cartoonists of Pakistan. Few examples are the following:

 For instance, Cartoon 10 depicts Bill Clinton sitting with a lady in Indian dress 'Sari' with whose face resembles with Indian Prime Minister Vajpayee. Clinton is depicted as hugging her with love. Clinton says that "Vaj Ba'ee Jee I keep on changing my sweet hearts'. Vaj Ba'ee replies that "me too darling". Behind both of them, Pakistani lady in Pakistani dress Shalwar kameez is looking at them in a state of shock. "Ba'ee" is the Indian cultural name for a lady who involves in the business of prostitution. This refers to the deceptive behavior of the United States who is cheating on Pakistan while keeping illegal relations with India. This cartoon was published after the Cold war .Pakistan was not expecting the US ties with its historical rival India because of being very close to the US against Soviet Union but soon after changing the national interest of the US, it changed its ties, relationships and friendships as per the national requirements.

Similarly, Cartoon 11 is another example of deceptive behavior of Uncle Sam who is calling both Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers and assuring both of them for his love at the same time.   The example of another symbol of being double faced is cartoon 12 where two faced and two sided George W. Bush is depicted to deal with Indian Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh with one side and face and General Pervez Musharraf of Pakistani President with another side and face. He is

happy with the same body gestures and situations towards the both sides. This cartoons was published to depict George W. Bush's visit to Pakistan and India in March 2006. On one side, George W. Bush assured Pakistan for its support on nuclear issue as an ally of the United States in war against terrorism but on the other side, he assured India as well for his support in its nuclear program also. In addition, it was found that the depiction of being two faced state and two faced presidents always remained a constant and common metaphor used in Pakistani political cartoons regarding the different foreign affairs of Pakistan and the United States especially while dealing with the historical rival, India.

Cartoon 10. Published on Februar   *Cartoon 11.* Published on November 30, 2001 *(The Nation)*

4.0. Verbal Metaphorical and Symbolic Techniques Used in Pakistani Political cartoons with Reference to the United Stated

It has been found that a number of verbal signs in Pakistani political cartoons are used to represent the United States. Some of the techniques are the following.

1. Onomatopoeic expression with arbitrary meanings like aww!!!! Ouch.! wow!! Uhh!!! Etc to depict the state of expression.

2. Verbal Balloon speeches, captions, idioms, punch lines, tags, titles and labels etc. according to historical, contextual, cultural and historical situation of the depiction.

Verbal symbolic expressions are usually used to support the theme of the visual symbolic expression. There are several examples with reference to the United States in Pakistani political cartoons but two of the most prototypical example are the following:

Cartoon 14 is one of the example that shows how the verbal balloon supports the visual sign. In this cartoon, Feica portrayed 'Uncle Sam' as an inactive, uncertain and pretender in Kashmir issue between India and Pakistan. President Pervez Musharraf and Atal Bihari Vajpayee are portrayed as are not interested to build the bridge and going to opposite sides. In the cartoon, there is broken bridge between both of their sides but in bridge a part is missing where Uncle Sam is standing down exactly under that missing place. He saysthat 'I am not disappointed'. The missing portion of the ladder is Uncle Sam himself who is supposed to play his part as a mediator to build that bridge. He pretends as he is hopeful but in reality, he is a passive mediator.

Similarly, in cartoon 14, visual metaphor of 'Malshi' and verbal symbols of onomatopoeic expressions are combined together and supporting each other to create a meaning. In Pakistani feudal culture, 'Malish' is a kind of special massage given by a male massager or 'malishi'. People lay inversely on cots and male massagers do massage very hard with oil that sometimes makes them scream ouch…!!! Uhhh… Ahhh… but instead of these onomatopoeic expressions like 'uh' 'ah' uttering from their mouths, Interior Minister of Pakistan, Rehman Malik screams "this is our war' this is our war'. This cartoon was published during the drone attacks of the U.S. in the Northern parts of Pakistan and making Pakistani realize that this is Pakistan's war.

5.0. Conclusion

Relying on this complex system of codes and under the light of semiotic theory, it was found that political cartooning relies on the multifaceted structure of the galaxy of different signs and symbols. They are 'culturally and historically embedded in the society that convey meanings, knowledge and understanding of the target subject in the language of signs, symbols and system of codes. It was

concluded that Pakistani political cartoons built the images of the United States through three semiotic means i.e. the visual, the verbal and the visual-verbal. It is concluded that political cartoons visibly involve the multifaceted patterns of symbols, signs and codes that act as a facilitator for enlightening the abundance of culture, history and politics of society embedded in to the pre-dispositions and biases.

 Thus, this paper emphasize upon the idea that Pakistani political cartoons are explicit kind of semiotic domain. It is concluded that Pakistani political cartoonists represented the U.S. by the clusters of visual and verbal metaphorical devices. Most of the times, cartoonists use the metaphors of animals and their qualities as predators are used. For depicting the superpower, one of the common techniques is to focus on their body structures while presenting them with giant and huge bodies to signify the image of power, control and monopoly. Assigning controversial roles in the comparison of Pakistan in weak, passive and positive roles is another technique to depict a foreign nation.

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