

Intertextuality in Political Cartoons: An Analysis of Political Cartoons in the Selected Newspaper

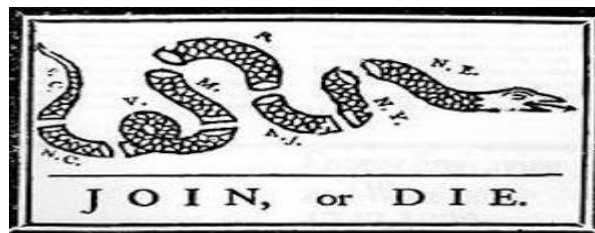
¹Isra Irshad

Abstract

Intertextuality enhances the message of political cartoons by relying on the audience's existing knowledge of the intertextual reference, allowing for multi-layered humor. *The present study analyzes the presence of intertextual references in the political cartoons in the daily Jang Newspaper. Political cartoons serve as a barometer for the political atmosphere of a country, but understanding a political cartoon requires more than just the visual information available in a cartoon; it also requires the references that it makes to other texts from the contemporary political situation. Six political cartoons of two famous cartoonists i.e. Khaliq Khan and Jawed Iqbal are selected for the study. The researchers have used intertextual and semiotic analysis as a theoretical and methodological framework to analyze the data. The analysis shows that intertextual references do indeed serve as an important means of constructing and interpreting a particular text. A text contains several ideologies, and a cartoonist takes these ideologies as intertextual references in the construction of a particular political discourse.*

1. Introduction

Political cartoons serve academic as well as satirical functions in the political scenario of a country. They may, at times, be plain funny, meant only to ridicule a certain political phenomenon or a political decision, or they may be blatantly satirical, making a bland comment about a certain political decision of national or international importance (Lawate, 2012). Although cartoons are generally considered to be a very small part of a newspaper, at times the cartoons and the cartoonists themselves may become the center of attention. The infamous cartoons of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) by the Jyllands-Posten, not only sparked controversy around the world for their desecration of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) but also created a political crisis too big for the Danish government to handle (Jensen, 2006). Charlie Hebdo also created a similar crisis in France which ultimately resulted in the murder of the editor of the newspaper (Wilsher, 2015). Benjamin Franklin's cartoon of a snake with severed parts is considered to be one of the first and most powerful political cartoons in American political history.



Cartoon by Benjamin Franklin

¹Department of English, University of Gujrat

Franklin used this cartoon to gather support for his political plan of unification of the colonies as a means of survival. Similarly, James Gillray's cartoon titled *The Plumb pudding in danger*, hailed as one of the greatest cartoons ever, is a biting satire on the greed of the French and British rulers in accumulating the resources of the whole world.



Plumb pudding in danger by James Gillray

However, understanding a political cartoon can be problematic without the relevant knowledge of contemporary political conditions. Therefore, the role of a political cartoonist goes well beyond merely drawing the lines on a paper; he/she directs the attention of the readers toward important and sensitive contemporary political issues which at times may be controversial. He/she conveys several new messages in a subtle and at times humorous way with the help of intertextual references and ideologies in a text (cartoon). He/she has the potential to represent different intertextual references and different conflicting ideologies in a text. Intertextual references, therefore, play a very important role in the construction of political cartoons. El Refaie (2003) also states that "political cartoons often draw on a range of intertextual resources—such as historical events, literary allusions, and cultural stereotypes—to create meanings that are concise yet deeply loaded" (78). These intertextual resources help develop new ideologies in the society.

The term intertextuality was coined by Kristeva while introducing the work of Bakhtin to the French-speaking world. According to Allen (2002), the term intertextuality was introduced in the 1960s- an era of transition from structuralism to poststructuralism. So, intertextuality as an area of study falls under the poststructuralist paradigm. The poststructuralist theories, while negating the concept of stable meanings, emphasized the fluid and non-objective nature of meaning which is a complex construct and can be interpreted in terms of a text and all other texts to which it refers. It is a transition from the concept of independent text towards the network of textual relations. The text, therefore, becomes intertext. Intertextuality, therefore, refers to the potential of the texts which intentionally or unintentionally carry "references and influences, echoes and allusion, style and norms and even sometimes revision of themes and contexts from various numerous centers" (Mishra, 2012, p. 1).

This research aims to analyze how intertextual references are used in a single text, and how different ideologies are used as intertextual references in any text. It tries to answer the following two questions: 1. How intertextuality is used in political cartoons? 2.

How hidden ideologies of different social and political groups are used as intertextual references in any text?

2. Literature Review

A text includes any unit that gives meaning, ranging from oral to written discourse, and it also includes visual representations, cartoons, sculptures, graphics, and so on. It is a segment of language or symbols that creates meaning (INTASC as cited in Mahiri, 2004). It was traditionally considered to be only a piece of language; however, the interpretation of text in the modern age has changed to include other forms of expression. Abushihab (2010) believes that a text is no longer considered merely a grammatical unit with a passive reader. Now, a reader needs to activate his/her previous knowledge which is already stored in his/her mind for a better understanding of the text. According to Beaugrande and Dressler (1981), the production and reception of a particular text is based on the extent of knowledge its participants (writer and reader) have of the other texts. Therefore, understanding a text without knowing other texts becomes very difficult.

Intertextuality is one of the seven standards of textuality. It establishes the unity of the text by establishing the relationship of a particular text with previous texts. Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) posit that intertextuality plays an important role in creating different types of texts e.g. critical reviews, parodies, reports, etc. The writer continually consults the prior texts, and in the same way, the reader also requires familiarity with those earlier texts later on. According to Worton (1991), the theory of intertextuality suggests that a text cannot exist as a self-sufficient whole, and more importantly, it does not function as a closed system. Instead of having the structure of presence, it has traces of otherness. The structures of intertextual representations are implicit as well as explicit, and these structures range from highly particular to highly general.

Intertextuality can only work if the reader has memory or background knowledge of other texts/events. This allows him to communicate and understand a particular discourse. This aligns with recent feminist translation studies which highlight how intertextual meaning and identity are reshaped through cultural and ideological frameworks (Irshad & Yasmin, 2022; Irshad & Yasmin, 2023). Semiotically also, a text exists in relation to other texts. According to Allen (2002), a text lacks an independent meaning; it rather has textual relations inside the text, and the job of a reader is to trace these relations. Thus, the process of reading is the process of moving between the texts. Semiotically also a text exists in relation to other texts.

Werner (2004) has described intertextuality as the borrowing or quoting of texts (whether written or spoken) from previous texts by the cartoonists; whereas, Figueroa & Garate (2006) describe intertextuality as how the viewer interprets a cartoon in the light of previous texts. Cartoons have performed important roles in different ages. They serve as a way to criticize society for its wrongdoings. Cartoonists often use humor or irony to draw attention to the shortcomings or problems within a social or political system (Jimoh, 2011). They use humor to draw the attention of the reader towards important social and political issues. Their importance can be gauged from the fact that they are featured in the editorial pages of the newspaper. They reflect the sociopolitical climate of the society humorously. They are a powerful means of developing new ideologies in the society. Analyzing a political cartoon requires us to have an understanding of the intertextual reference that the cartoonist has used in the cartoon.

There are several research works examining the role of intertextuality in political or editorial cartoons. El Refaie (2003) highlighted how political cartoons employed intertextual references to construct ideological narratives—such as critiques of authority or ideologies associated with specific political movements. Also, Pinar (2020) analyzed Steve Bell's political cartoons by focusing on how visual metaphors, metonymies, and intertextual references served as rhetorical strategies to depict political candidates and issues. Alsadi and Howard (2021) also discussed how cartoons used allusion and parody to convey messages effectively. No study was found which analyzed the phenomenon of intertextuality in political cartoons in the Pakistani context. Thus, the present study examines the use of intertextuality in political cartoons published in a prominent Urdu newspaper, *Jang*.

3. Methodology

The study uses qualitative research design to explore the phenomenon of intertextuality in political cartoons. The data for the present study comprises six political cartoons of two cartoonists, Khaliq Khan and Jawed Iqbal, featured in the prominent Urdu-language newspaper *Jang*. The following criteria are chosen for the selection of cartoons.

- Cartoons that deal with significant political events, figures, or controversies.
- Cartoons that demonstrate strong use of intertextual references

Thus, the purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that the chosen cartoons were rich in intertextual content. The following steps are employed to analyze each cartoon.

- **Description of the context:** The visual elements of the cartoons are described and the summary of the political context in which the cartoons are published is given.
- **Identification of Intertextual Elements:** Intertextual references employed in the cartoons are analyzed.
- **Interpretation and discussion on the cartoons:** It would be highlighted how these references contribute to the cartoon's political message.

4. Data Analysis

Example No. 1

Cartoon No.1 is composed of various intertextual references that help the reader in understanding the cartoon. It demands the reader to have an understanding of the various texts of which it is composed in order to fully understand the cartoon.



Cartoon No.1 (Jawed Iqbal, Daily Jang Lahore, 2nd June, Saturday 2012)

The cartoon shows the Finance Minister giving a *qulfi* (ice candy) named “perks” to the traders, pensioners, and government employees who all seem to be very happy. However, the members of the opposition parties are shown shouting at the Finance Minister. The cartoon is based on intertextual references to the other stories published in the daily Jang on 2nd June 2012 which collectively contributed to the construction of the meaning of the above cartoon. The news items that this cartoon is referring to are:

- 1) Budget presented in the National Assembly, dated 2nd June 2012.
- 2) Opposition raises slogans against the budget.
- 3) Meagre benefits are given to the traders, pensioners and government officials.

It was reported in the newspaper that it was so noisy during the budget speech that it was difficult to hear anyone. As the Finance Minister started the budget speech, the members of PML (N), came in front of the speaker’s dice and raised slogans against the budget. They held placards, and raised slogans of “Ghilani go”, “we do not accept your methods” etc. (page. 1, Daily Jang Lahore, 2nd June 2012). The cartoon shows that a *qulfi* (ice candy) has been given to pensioners, government servants, and traders. The whole meaning of the cartoon will be lost without understanding the connotations of *qulfi* in the Pakistani context. Its connotations are similar to those of the word “lollipop” in English. The lollipop was in the form of a “20% increase in pay and pensions” and a reduction of excise duty on cement. The cartoon shows that those who have been given the lollipop are very happy with that. So, to understand a text (cartoon in this case), other texts need to be understood which function as intertextual references.

Example No. 2

The cartoon no.2 shows the interior minister of the time, Mr. Rahman Malik sweating standing between two boats named as “Pakistani nationality” and “British nationality”.



Cartoon No. 2 (Khaliq Khan, Daily Jang, June 1, 2012)

The cartoon is visually very simple and refers to Mr. Rahman Malik’s dual nationality case, however, it refers to a number of related news items in those days. The following intertextual references contribute to the construction of the discourse in this cartoon:

- 1) Rehman Malik’s dual nationality
- 2) “SC rejects Rehman Malik’s testimonials regarding his dual nationality”

The cartoon refers to a very famous issue of those days –the dual nationality of Mr. Rahman Malik. The Constitution forbids those having dual nationality from being members of the parliament and from having public offices. The headline of the newspapers across the country on 30th May 2012, was that the Supreme Court rejected Mr. Rahman Malik’s documents regarding his dual nationality. The court advised Mr. Rahman Malik to submit his documents by June 4 or his membership of Senate will be suspended.

Thus, we find ideologies of different groups in the society, e.g. ideologies of Supreme Court and constitution of Pakistan regarding the issue of holding of dual Nationality etc., ideology of Supreme Court in case of Rahman Malik is very obvious; representing a threat to Mr. Rahman Malik’s membership. These ideologies are used as intertextual references for the construction of a particular discourse.

Example No.3

The cartoon no.3 is a classic example of intertextual text carrying various intertextual references. It shows that understanding of this text (requires) requires an understanding of various other texts (contemporary political issues).



Cartoon No. 3 (Jawed Iqbal, The Daily Jang Lahore, 31st May 2012)

The cartoon shows a very well-dressed Prime Minister of Pakistan in 2012 standing in front of his wardrobe filled with expensive suits, and The Finance Minister advising him to wear a torn-down suit instead because they have to meet members of the IMF to solicit more loans for Pakistan. The comprehension of the cartoon is difficult without knowing the following intertextual references:

- Prime Minister Gilani purchased three coats worth Rs.8 million during UK visits (The News Tribe, 25 May, 2012).
- Pakistan may seek more IMF loan to clear debt (Daily Times, 30 May, 2012).

These two news items function as intertextual references to explain how the cartoonist is satirizing the Prime Minister of a country dependent on IMF loans spending money on his attire. The Finance Minister’s suggestion for wearing a torn-out coat means the IMF may refuse to give them fresh loans if the PM wears expensive suits during the meetings suggesting that they are not a poor country. So, to get more loans, the PM needs to present himself as a poor representative of a poor nation. Understanding the true impact of this cartoon requires the reader to have background knowledge of the events that it is referring to as intertextual references.

Example No.4

Cartoon No. 4 is also intertextual. It shows that the text (cartoon) cannot be interpreted on its own. The interpretation of the particular text requires an understanding of other texts to which it refers.



Cartoon No. 4 (Khaliq khan, Jang Newspaper, 25 May 2012)

The cartoon shows a visibly embarrassed Prime Minister Mr. Yousaf Raza Gillani sitting in his office and an orderly informing him about a large number of people interested in establishing a modern institute gathered outside. To understand this cartoon the reader needs to know the following statement made by the PM:

- “Prime Minister’s house would be converted into state of the art institution after the fiscal budget this year” (Daily Times, 24 May, 2012)

The cartoon shows that the PM’s statement has sparked a lot of interest among the people for setting up a state of the art institute in the PM house. In this cartoon, the intertextual reference has been used in a humorous way. The expressions of the PM on his orderly’s information show that the PM has been caught in his own words and now he does not seem to be in a mood of honouring his promise.

Example No. 5

The following cartoon no.5 is also an example of intertextual text. In the cartoon below, two crocodiles named “rental power” and “thermal power” are feasting on commission and corruption in the National Resources Restaurant while a skeleton named “hydel power” is sitting with an empty plate.



Cartoon No. 5 (Jawed Iqbal, Daily Jang Lahore 27 May, 2012)

Depiction of thermal power and rental power as crocodiles with plates full of “commission” and “corruption” refers to the corruption and kickbacks rampant in the production of thermal and rental power in Pakistan. The intertextual reference that is working behind this cartoon is the following news item:

- Hydel power cheap but more corruption and commission in thermal power – WAPDA (Daily Jang 26 May, 2012)

The text (cartoon) presents a scenario regarding the corruption in the production of rental and thermal electricity. In the news about the corruption, the Daily Jang further elaborates:

“According to a research conducted by Water and Power Development Authority, there is a capacity of electricity production of one hundred thousand Megawatts through the hydel sector, but this is being ignored due to the commission and corruption linked with thermal and rental power.... During last two decades, a lot of commission has been given to produce electricity through thermal power, and the amount of electricity produced through hydel sources is continuously decreasing” (Jung, 26th May, 2012).

The cartoon can be better understood when the intertextual references are understood and the relevant ideologies are also elaborated.

Example No.6

The cartoon below can also be understood if the intertextual references in it are also understood. The cartoon shows Pakistan’s Interior Minister, Rahman Malik, using a telescope looking at the globe. The description is a statement of Mr. Malik that the Baloch leaders living abroad are being monitored.



Cartoon No. 7 (Khaliq Khan, Daily Jang 5 March 2012)

The real meaning of the cartoon can not be deciphered unless the following intertextual references are known:

- “Only 48 people are missing from Balochistan and the figure of 6,000 such people is highly exaggerated”.
- “The government is closely monitoring anti-state activities of Baloch leaders living abroad”.

The cartoonist has represented the statement of Mr. Malik in a humorous way because monitoring the activities of people all across the world is not possible even if you have a large telescope. The cartoon can also be interpreted to mock the government's inability to check the Baloch leaders fomenting rebellion in Pakistan from abroad. The very idea of the Interior Minister sitting with a telescope making such outlandish claims seems ridiculous and the ridicule is the ultimate objective of this cartoon.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The first research question examines how intertextuality is utilized in political cartoons. The second research question deals with how hidden ideologies of different social and political groups are used as intertextual references in any text. The results highlight that intertextual references are very vital sources of information for constructing political cartoons. These cartoons contain several ideologies which are combined by the cartoonist to make the text an intertext. Some ideologies are easy to comprehend whereas others are subtle and difficult to expose. That is why some intertextual references are quite explicit and some are implicit, as noted by Worton (1991). To understand and interpret any text, one must have an awareness of the socio-cultural practice in which a text (cartoon) has been constructed. To combine different intertextual references, the cartoonist humorously constructs new ideologies (see the analysis of cartoon no.2 where the ideologies of groups like the Supreme Court and the Constitution of Pakistan, particularly in the Rahman Malik case, are used as intertextual references to shape a specific discourse). Political cartoons often conceal patriarchal, nationalist, or class-based ideologies within humour and satire, reflecting deep-rooted power structures in society. Recent studies have also shown how media representations reinforce or challenge such hegemonies, particularly in gendered contexts (Akram & Yasmin, 2023). Thus, the study aligns with El Refaie (2003) who also highlighted how political cartoons employed intertextual references to construct ideological narratives. Similarly, Safdar and Yasmin (2021) examined how gendered subjectivity in Pakistani fiction navigates and disrupts dominant binaries, showing how texts—like cartoons—serve as sites for ideological negotiation. The present study also aligns with the research of Alsadi and Howard (2021) who have highlighted how cartoons use allusion and parody to convey intertextual messages effectively. The above analysis of the cartoons suggests that the cartoons can be best understood only when their intertextual references are clearly understood.

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