REPRESENTATION OF VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR IN ADELINA LISAO’S ABUSE CASE IN MALAYSIAN ONLINE NEWS ARTICLES

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the representation of victim and perpetrator as social actors and its argumentation strategies from Malaysian online news articles surrounding the tragic case of Adelina Lisao, an Indonesian domestic worker who lost her life in Malaysia due to abuse by her employer. Employing a qualitative research approach, the data is systematically collected with keywords to identify relevant news articles pertinent to the case: “Adelina Lisao” and “Ambika Shan”. This research utilises the Social Actor’s Network (SAN) and the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, specifically the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), to examine 39 online news articles about the case from the most popular Malaysian news website in 2023, Malaysiakini. The findings revealed that Adelina Lisao was mostly represented as a passive receiver of the abuse, while Ambika Shan’s role as a perpetrator was mostly backgrounded. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how social actors are portrayed on online websites and the argumentation strategies within the context of domestic worker abuse cases in Malaysia. Thus, it acknowledges the importance of language in online news discourse in shaping public perceptions, particularly regarding domestic workers in Malaysia as evidenced by the representation of victim-perpetrator dynamics in such cases.

Keywords: Discourse-Historical approach, Domestic workers, Media representation, Social actors

Introduction

In February 2018, the tragic case of Adelina Lisao, a 21-year-old Indonesian domestic worker, made national headlines as she was allegedly starved and tortured to death by her employer, Ambika Shan, in Bukit Mertajam, Malaysia. Adelina’s distressing situation was dissolved when she was rescued by Tenaganita, a non-governmental organisation dedicated to protecting migrant workers in Malaysia. For over a month, she had endured inhumane conditions, including being forced to sleep outside of the house with a Rottweiler, the employer’s pet dog (Walton, 2019).

Sadly, Adelina’s ordeal led to her demise due to organ failure, attributed to acute malnutrition and untreated infected wounds (Barker, 2018). It was the impact of her story that
exposed the grim reality of migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, who at times are exploited and abused. As well as being a tragic incident, her case reflects a broader issue highlighted by a recent study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2022.

The abovementioned ILO study based on interviews with 1,201 domestic workers in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand found that 29% of surveyed domestic workers in Malaysia lived in conditions that met the ILO’s statistical definition of forced labour. These conditions include, among others, the inability to quit their job, being compelled to stay longer than agreed, and working without overtime compensation (International Labour Organization, 2023).

It is apparent that Adelina’s case reflects the challenges highlighted in the ILO study, but Ambika Shan, the employer responsible for Adelina Lisao’s death, was acquitted of murder charges by the Penang High Court in April 2019. This ruling has left an indelible impression on activists and supporters, highlighting a systemic failure to hold the perpetrator accountable. Ultimately, it illustrates the apparent problem of migrant worker exploitation, leaving Adelina’s memory as a symbol of a broader issue. While previous research has explored the repression and legal protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (Putra, 2019; Omar & Ahmad, 2019; Kemala & Kusandarini, 2020; Nasrullah et al., 2023), a significant research gap exists in understanding how Adelina Lisao is portrayed in media narratives, prompting a need for a comprehensive analysis.

Media representation, as described by Fürsich, 2010, revolves around establishing stereotypical portrayals of social groups through various media platforms (Fursich, 2010). It is a powerful tool for constructing perceptions of a particular group or society, potentially swaying public opinion on social and political inequalities. It further suggests that the reflection of reality in media is not entirely true but rather creates a new version of reality that holds significant sway in shaping public perception.

In media studies, there is a growing interest in the exploration of CDA, which explores the interaction between language and society, exploring social realities such as inequalities and discrimination embedded in language use (Mikinori, 2008). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) refers to a method of examining discourse through the lens of critical perspective. As perceived by CDA scholars, language is a manifestation of social practices inherently dominated by hidden power dynamics and ideologies (Johnson & McLean, 2020). Hence, it serves as a valuable tool to recognise the potential influence that linguistic devices and discursive practices found in the representation of social actors in online news articles.

To comprehend the dynamics of media representation, it is important to dive into the realm of social actors. McAdams (2013) defines social actors as individuals, groups, organisations or institutions that engage in purposeful action driven by internalised expectations about how others will interpret it. The Social Actor Network (SAN) framework, developed by Van Leeuwen (2008), offers a comprehensive lens through which to examine the representations of participants within social practices in certain discourses. This framework encompasses exclusion and inclusion strategies to determine how social actors are strategically positioned in media narratives.

The integration of the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and Social Actors Analysis (SAA) as one of the methods of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Wodak and Meyer (2009) provides an extensive framework for comprehending discourses, especially concerning social actors in analysing the case of Adelina Lisao. The Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) introduces five distinct discursive strategies, which are nomination, predication, argumentation, perspectivation and intensification/mitigation. For this study, the focus will be on the analysis of argumentation to understand the roles of social actors in conveying the discourse.

By Carvalho (2008), social actors can shape meaning in discourse through language discursive strategies. Within the context of this study, it can offer critical insights into how media narratives can influence public perception towards migrant workers and influence the dis-
course surrounding them. To achieve this purpose, this study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To explore the representation of Adelina Lisao as a victim and Ambika Shan as a perpetrator in Malaysian online news articles.
2. To explore argumentation as a discursive strategy to support the representation of social actors in Malaysian online news articles.

Accordingly, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. A) How is Adelina Lisao represented as a victim of domestic abuse in Malaysian online news articles?
   B) How is Ambika Shan represented as a perpetrator in Malaysian online news articles?
2. How do Malaysian online news articles use argumentation strategies to represent the social actors of victims and perpetrators?

Having established the foundation with the Social Actor’s Network (SAN) framework, this study integrates the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA), particularly into the argumentation strategy to explore how this interplay is strategically presented in the construction of meaning in media discourse. By focusing on these specific elements, the study seeks to understand how the social actors are strategically represented in the online news articles, as well as how they are framed in the media context of Adelina Lisao’s case.

Methods
Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design in pursuit of understanding the dynamics of social phenomena and language nuances in online news articles (Bhandari, 2020). The qualitative method is chosen as the preferred methodology due to its compatibility in exploring the meanings individuals attach to their experiences and underlying patterns of representation (Ospina, 2004). Thus, it is ideal to examine complex social phenomena as it enables an in-depth examination of the contexts, perspectives and interpretations that may not be adequately captured in quantitative methods. It is important to note that qualitative research offers the flexibility to analyse the varied expressions found in online news articles, where language nuances play a decisive role.

Data Sample

The primary data of this study was sourced from Malaysiakini, a prominent and widely visited online news portal in recent years (Malaysiakini, 2018). Unlike other traditional media outlets that are subjected to Malaysian government regulation, Malaysiakini offers its journalists and editors the freedom to uphold ethical journalism standards (Malaysiakini, n.d.). While it may not be listed as one of the primary news sources in Malaysia, Malaysiakini has earned its place as the most popular online portal in the country, making it highly reliable for the data source of this research.

Data Collection and Coding

This research employed a qualitative approach, selecting comprehensive news articles from Malaysiakini based on the vigorous criteria: (1) articles were chosen for their direct relevance to the Adelina Lisao case and (2) articles containing specific keywords related to the case, namely “Adelina Lisao” as the victim and “Ambika Shan” as the perpetrator. The data collection involved several steps: (1) gathering 39 online news articles covering Adelina Lisao’s case from February 2018 to March 2023, (2) refining data by specifying relevant criteria, and (3) organising the news chronologically to facilitate subsequent analysis of media representation and the identification of argumentation strategies employed throughout the progression of the case.

Following the data collection, a meticulous and systematic analysis is undertaken: (1) a comprehensive double reading of the entire dataset to ensure deeper understanding, (2) deconstructing the dataset into sentences, (3) coding the data based on the involved social actors involved their actions, (4) identifying variation strategies of the data, (5) presenting findings based on emerging themes, (6) incorporating a reliability analysis, and (7) concluding the study.

It is essential to note that the coding process was conducted manually, reflecting a
consistent and hands-on approach to content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005). To enhance the coding process reliability, two independent coders were actively involved. This collaborative approach ensured the consistency and accuracy of the coding scheme, as any differences in interpretations were discussed and resolved through an accord between the coders. Consequently, this methodology heightened the reliability of the qualitative analysis thus contributing to the overall trustworthiness of the findings.

**Data Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach used to critically describe, interpret, and explain how language is used to create meaning and shape social realities (Mullet, 2018). Accordingly, this approach aligns with the critical objectives of CDA to analyse not only linguistic examinations, but also to uncover power structures, ideologies, and social inequalities embedded in discourse (Fairclough, 1992). Essentially, CDA aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how language functions beyond surface-level communication. Moreover, it goes beyond the conventional analyses of language to explore the subtle ways in which language choices contribute to the reinforcement or subversion of societal norms and beliefs.

In this study, a comprehensive data analysis approach is employed by emerging two essential methods within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) and Social Actor Analysis (SAA). The Discourse-Historical Approach, as described by Wodak and Meyer (2009), primarily focuses on the linguistic dimension of media discourse. The linguistic analysis enables a deep exploration of the evolution of media discourse, providing insights into how language choices have evolved. Within the framework of DHA, extensive use of argumentative strategies is applied to show how specific viewpoints are propagated, challenged, or justified within the media discourse. Essentially, this approach helps to dissect the linguistic patterns and argumentation techniques employed in Malaysian newspaper outlets.

Complementing DHA, Social Actors Analysis (SAA) introduces a sociocultural dimension to the analysis of media representation. SAA dives into the roles and identities of social actors within discourse, exposing how these identities are constructed and contribute to the overall meaning of the discourse. For instance, SAA enables the discernment of patterns of exclusion and inclusion of various social actors in media narratives. This dual approach surpasses linguistic analysis to highlight the societal and cultural implications of how social actors, particularly the victim and perpetrator, are depicted in Adelina Lisao’s case.

**Result and Discussion**

**Representation of Adelina Lisao as a Victim of Domestic Abuse**

Adelina Lisao is depicted as a victim, drawing attention to her suffering and the injustices she endured. The inclusion by passivation method places her at the centre of the narrative, emphasising the severe abuse she sustained. This narrative can be seen in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article No.</th>
<th>Title of the Article</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Article 11</td>
<td>COMMENT</td>
<td>So what if domestic worker Adelina’s ‘killer’ is convicted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News Article 14</td>
<td>Don’t treat us like slaves - domestic workers groups tell M’sian employers</td>
<td>Adelina, who is an Indonesian domestic worker, had suffered beatings and was left to sleep on her employers’ car porch. She was rescued through an intervention by Bukit Mertajam MP Steven Sim on Feb 10, 2018.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Within these excerpts, the language used emphasises Adelina Lisao’s role as a passive recipient of the abuse. The use of verbs of “suc-cumbed to her wounds”, “had suffered beat-ings”, “was left to sleep on her employer’s car porch” and “was rescued” deliberately highlight her vulnerability and helplessness as an abused domestic worker. In other words, the focus of her passive role in the narrative contributes to the marginalisation of these workers, and the verbs serve to emphasise the gravity of the abuse she endured, thus collectively suggesting challenges faced by domestic workers in such situations.

**Representation of Ambika Shan as a Perpe-trator**

In contrast, Ambika Shan is effectively backgrounded within the narratives. The focus predominantly centres on her legal proceed-ings related to the murder trial, thus diminishing her role as a perpetrator on the case. The excerpt Newspaper Article 9 clearly illustrates the backgrounding of Ambika Shan as a perpetrator:

**Table 2. Ambika Shan’s role as a perpetrator**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Article 9</td>
<td>Federal Court upholds ac-quittal of Indonesian maid Adelina’s employer</td>
<td>The Federal Court today dismissed the prosecution’s appeal against the acquittal of S Ambika who was previously charged with the murder of Indonesian maid Adelina Lisao in 2018. The Penang High Court initially decided to acquit Ambika on murder charges on April 18, 2019 after the prosecution asked for a discharge not amounting to an acquittal (DNAA).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of legal terms such as “acquittal”, “appeal process” and “discharge not amounting to an acquittal (DNAA)” suggest her representation as an individual undergoing legal proceeding. Notably, the context revolves around the charges against her rather than her potential involvement in Adelina Lisao’s abuse.

**The Argumentation Strategy to Represent the Social Actors of Victims and Perpetrators**

The investigation involves an exploration of topoi, identifying the elements that contribute to the formulation of arguments, whether in support or opposition to specific statements. This exploration is aimed to understand the argumentation strategy employed that shapes the narratives of Adelina Lisao as a victim and Ambika Shan as a perpetrator in the online news articles.

**Topoi of Abuse**

The account of Adelina’s death provides a detailed overview of her injuries and the circumstances leading to her demise. These details are strategically placed to foster empathy and invoke deep concern from the readers, thus amplifying the narrative of abuse and victimisation. The excerpt from News Article 2 has capture the severity of the situation:

**Table 3. Topoi of Abuse**

<table>
<thead>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Article 2</td>
<td>Family to sue employ-ers over domestic worker Adelina’s death</td>
<td>Adelina, who was reportedly made to sleep outside the house with a dog, had burn marks on her body, bruises on her head and face and infected wounds on her hands and legs, rights group Amnesty International said.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The depiction of Adelina Lisao predominantly places her in the role of a victim subjected to abuse by her employer. The excerpt highlights the gravity of her mistreatment by offering a detailed account of her injuries, thus fortifying the argument concerning her role as a victim. Furthermore, the mentioning of clinical terms such as “succumbing to septicaemia”, “secondary to cellulitis”, and “infected skin lesions” further add the credibility of Adelina Lisao’s abuse. These clinical terms offer a clear understanding of the health complications experienced by her, which indicates that the Topoi of Abuse is justified.

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<tr>
<td>News Article 2</td>
<td>Family to sue employers over domestic worker Adelina’s death</td>
<td>Her death was due to septicaemia, secondary to cellulitis from injuries related to infected skin lesions arising from untreated burns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4. Topoi of Justice in Adelina Lisao’s victimhood**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Article 2</td>
<td>Family to sue employers over domestic worker Adelina’s death</td>
<td>Meanwhile, defence lawyer Anbananthan told Malaysiakini that there was no coroner’s report and the cause of death was identified based on the hospital case notes that he received at the eleventh hour.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"The whole world thought the victim (Adelina) died from torture and was abused by the employer."

"But I found out that Adelina made a self-declaration to the doctor that the injuries were self-inflicted."

“She (Adelina) said she was given a chemical to clean the toilet and while cleaning, the liquid splashed on her,” said Anbananthan, adding that Adelina admitted it was due to her negligence in handling the liquid.

Her death was due to septicaemia, secondary to cellulitis from injuries related to infected skin lesions arising from untreated burns

This revelation introduces concerns about the fairness and justice of the initial perceptions surrounding Adelina’s death, particularly within the Topoi of Justice. The narrative shift is evident in the use of descriptors such as “self-inflicted injuries”, “due to her negligence”, and “Adelina made self-declaration”, presenting the possibility of transforming the image of Adelina Lisao from a victim of abuse to a negligent maid.

Despite the consistent backgrounding of Ambika Shan’s role as a perpetrator, the Topoi of Justice highlighted her role as the perpetrator through a quote from the Executive Director of an NGO dedicated to rescuing individuals from abuse. This is evident from the excerpt in News Article 9:
Table 5. Topoi of Justice in Ambika Shan’s perpetration

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<tr>
<td>News Article 9</td>
<td>Federal Court upholds acquittal of Indonesian maid Adelina’s employer</td>
<td>“The Malaysian prosecution has failed, and unfortunately, this means we continue to cultivate a culture of impunity for perpetrators among employers of domestic workers,” said Tenaganita Executive Director Glorene A Das to Malaysiakini. This quote expresses disappointment with the perceived failure of the Malaysian prosecution system in handling cases like Adelina Lisao’s. The reference to a “culture of impunity for perpetrators” implies a broader societal problem where wrongdoers, exemplified by Ambika Shan in this context, might escape accountability due to the prevailing cultural norms mentioned in the excerpt. The narrative regarding Ambika Shan centres around legal justification as she was consistently asserted of insufficient evidence to secure a murder conviction against her. This strategic emphasis frames Ambika Shan’s role within a legal context, supporting her acquittal while minimising her potential stigma as an abusive employer.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Topoi of Definition

Within the news online articles, there are many instances where Ambika Shan is defined as an employer rather than a defendant of the case. The example can be seen in the excerpt from News Article 27:

Table 6. Topoi of Definition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Excerpt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>News Article 27</td>
<td>Where is the justice for abused maid Adelina?</td>
<td>“The Malaysian prosecution has failed, and unfortunately, this means we continue to cultivate a culture of impunity for perpetrators among employers of domestic workers,” said Tenaganita Executive Director Glorene A Das to Malaysiakini. The reporting on Ambika Shan as an employer may influence the narrative around her role as a perpetrator. The deliberate choice of the term “employer” instead of “defendant” or “suspect” not only neutrally identifies her but also reflects broader societal dynamics and stereotypes related to employer-employee relationships. The Topoi of Definition emphasises the various ways employers are perceived, ranging from those who may treat domestic workers as family or sources of emotional support, to those who may exploit the system to harm their employees (Pramberger, 2021). Thus, the linguistic preference of “employer” may align with societal norms that generally view this role more positively, potentially downplaying Ambika Shan’s representation as a perpetrator.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

The analysis of online news articles surrounding the Adelina Lisao case reveals linguistic choices and topoi employed strategically to shape distinctive narratives surrounding the social actors involved. This analysis underscores the importance of the role played by media and language in constructing and framing these narratives, which are significant influences on public understanding of complex issues. The insights gained from such studies can be beneficial in promoting responsible reporting among media practitioners in their future endeavours.

In a broader sense, this study significantly contributes to the enhancement of discourse analysis and media studies by advocating for responsible reporting and challenging harmful stereotypes. Hence, this study may encourage...
the development of more accurate and inclusive media practices. Such media practices can improve media literacy among the public, thereby contributing to a more informed, inclusive, and accessible public discourse.

As a potential avenue for future research, a comparative study could be conducted between Indonesian and Malaysian online news articles that portray the same case. This effort may reveal any potential differences or disparities in how victims and perpetrators are depicted in news articles from both countries. In turn, researchers are better able to understand the cross-cultural dynamics of media representation and its impact on public opinion and policy formation.

References


