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Policing Palestinian Speech: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Institutional Neutrality and Censorship in *Discipline*

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Abstract
This paper is a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of the novel Discipline (2025) by Randa Abdel-Fattah, in which the concepts of institutional neutrality and professionalism are used to police Palestinian speech. Based on the Three-Dimensional Model of Fairclough (1995), the study focuses on the dialectical interdependence between institutional language and social power in the fictitious contexts of Western journalism and academia. The discursive practices, textual features, and even social structures are systematically explored to examine how certain linguistic practices, including (the rinsing of vocabulary, the use of the passive voice, and the implementation of two-sided framing practices) marginalize Palestinian voices and produce a calculated silence about the bombardment of Gaza. The findings indicate that institutional gatekeepers weaponize the rhetoric of objectivity to delegitimize lived experiences of oppression, framing them as biased or non-collegial. Through the fictionalization of these discursive struggles, Discipline reveals the ideological hegemony of the so-called white-centric gaze and institutional pressure on the Palestinian subjects to moderate their testimony. Ultimately, the study highlights the role of contemporary literature in documenting the linguistic mechanisms of censorship and providing a counter-discourse to institutional silencing in the Western public sphere.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, Palestinian Literature, Institutional Censorship, Neutrality, Randa Abdel-Fattah.

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1. Introduction

Literature has been known to serve as a place where political conflicts are narrated, contested, and given social meaning in language. It occurs particularly when communities experience marginalization, contested legitimacy and surveillance. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a useful tool for analyzing how power operates through discourse. CDA is concerned with the reproduction and reinforcement of language, or subversion of dominance in institutions and in daily life interaction (Fairclough, 1992). CDA does not see discourse as simply words on a page but views it as a social practice. Which further defines what can be said and what not, who can speak and why, and whose opinions are regarded as plausible or deviant and why (Fairclough, 1995).

Over the last few years, Palestinian voices have been increasingly scrutinized in public institutions. Debates and discussions about what are considered as "acceptable language" frequently revolve around concepts such as civility, security, neutrality, and professionalism. These controversies have chilling effects like reducing the range of sayable, framing dissent as risk, and reclassifying moral claims as bias, thereby making discourse itself a technology of control. In a series of public statements, Abdel-Fattah has claimed that the media discourse and institutional reactions can form a symbiotic cycle that limits Palestinian voices and shapes academic freedom, linking the media discourse with the institutional practice of dealing with Palestinian voices (Middle East Eye, 2024). This renders questions of discourse, censorship, and institutional voice particularly pressing for analysis. It includes the domain of political communication and literary representation, where such struggles are dramatized and made legible and visible. Randa Abdel-Fattah is an Australian Palestinian Egyptian author and scholar whose writing is about race, Islamophobia, youth politics, and Palestine. She has also written several award-winning books and dedicated the *Discipline* to

Palestinian scholars and journalists who died in Gaza. She connects the issues of the novel with the silence of the institutions in the real world. The novel is centered on two main Palestinian protagonists in Sydney: Hannah, a junior journalist at The Chronicle, and Jamal, a PhD student at Joseph Banks University (JBU). The narrative unfolds during Ramadan 2021 as Israel's bombardment of Gaza intensifies, triggering a media storm around a Palestinian high school student, Nabil, who is arrested for an institutional protest. Through these characters, the novel explores the burden of representation and the institutional pressures to remain silent or "moderate" one's voice to fit a white-centric gaze.

Despite growing scholarship on Palestinian representation in contemporary writing, a more focused CDA-oriented engagement, with how institutional discourse is fictionalized as censorship, gatekeeping, and voice control, remains comparatively limited. This study, therefore, positions *Discipline* as a case through which to examine how the policing of Palestinian speech is represented at the level of discourse; how institutional voice is constructed as authoritative, reasonable, and professional; while Palestinian voice is framed as excessive, dangerous, or illegible. Using CDA to analyze the modern Palestinian diasporic novel's setting in the nexus of media and academia, this research will help elucidate the discursive processes of censorship and legitimacy creation, as well as how resistence can be articulated or re-routed within institutional discourse.

1.1. Research Objectives

1) To identify and interpret the censorship and speech policing practised in *Discipline* with focus on academic arena and media.
2) To explore how the discursive strategies of neutrality and professionalism form a legitimate institutional voice while suppressing palestinian voices.

1.2. Research Questions

1) What is the role of *Discipline* in terms of censorship and policing of Palestinian speech in the media and the academic arena?
2) How are discursive strategies of neutrality and professionalism used to form institution voice legitimate and silence the voice of Palestinians in the novel?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a Research Tool

Critical Discourse Analysis offers an elaborate model of exploring how power dynamics and ideological hegemonies are incorporated into the linguistic forms (Fairclough, 1995; 2010). This is an effective method for revealing the implicit meanings of institutional and media discourse, which sustains social hierarchies and reinforces controls (van Dijk, 2015). CDA is no longer concerned with aesthetic appreciation in the context of literary analysis but examines the text as the arena of social practice and political struggle and fight (Fairclough, 1992; 1995; Janks, 1997).

2.2. The Ideology of Neutrality and Objectivity

The ideas of neutrality and objectivity, as means of exclusion, are frequently invoked in Western institutional discourse to legitimize the voices of the marginalized (Baroud, 2022; Dalla Negra, 2023). This false neutrality creates an artificial moral equivalence between the occupier and the occupied, which essentially hides state violence from critical evaluation (Baroud, 2022). In the media and academia, they are often weaponized these standards to silent Palestinian voices by purporting them as biased or too involved (Dalla Negra, 2023; Orient XXI, 2023).

2.3. Institutional Policing of Palestinian Speech

The recent scholarship highlights the increasing control over speech on the Palestinian cause through administrative codes and the civility norms applied by

various institutions, such as universities and media corporations (Abdel-Fattah, 2024; Orient XXI, 2023). This policing usually includes designating pro-Palestinian advocacy as a threat to social cohesion or as radicalism (Milkweed Editions, 2025; University of Queensland Press, 2025). This discursive regulation is the process of creating ideological dominance and an image of the status quo in the interests of the strong (Dergipark, 2025).

2.4. Literary Representation as a Counter-Narrative

Contemporary fiction has become an imperative domain in response to the challenge posed by the so-called official discourses created by the mainstream media and political institutions (Mustafah, 2025; Satrapi, 2007). Through formal experimentation and narrative voice writers expose the human aspect of displacement and institutional silence that the news and reporting tend to hide (Mustafah, 2025; Satrapi, 2007; University of Queensland Press, 2025). Through the fictionalization of these struggles, literature captures the strength of marginalized people and ensures that their history is not washed away by political gatekeepers (Mustafah, 2025; Satrapi, 2007).

2.5. Media Gatekeeping and Narrative Framing

The choice of words and headlines, as well as the content of news in newsrooms, is an influential form of gatekeeping that shapes perception towards international crises (Fairclough, 1995; Orient XXI, 2023). When discussing Palestine, the media discourse often resorts to the passive voice to represent Palestinian suffering and uses the active voice to justify the actions of state security (Baroud, 2022; Orient XXI, 2023). This systematized framing is a discursive technology of governance that restricts the sayability of the Palestinian struggle in the Western public sphere (Dergipark, 2025; Orient XXI, 2023).

2.6. Resistance and Subjectivity in Palestinian Fiction

Palestinian authors use literature as a vociferous call to action, regaining control by crafting complex heroes who navigate institutional forces (Milkweed Editions, 2025; University of Queensland Press, 2025). Such writings tend to dramatize the burden of representation and psychological costs of institutional censorship on the Palestinian subject (Abdel-Fattah, 2025; University of Queensland Press, 2025). Such literature challenges the colonial stance of Western press and academic discourse by foregrounding Palestinian voices (Abdel-Fattah, 2025; Orient XXI, 2023).

2.7. Theoretical Framework

This research uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) by Norman Fairclough (1992, 1995) as a primary theoretical framework. This method recognizes discourse as a type of social practice that is representative and constitutive of social structures and social relations of power. The framework by Fairclough (1995) is especially appropriate for the analysis of *Discipline*, as it is specific to the dialectical relation between language use and the institutional contexts of media and academia.

The paper applies Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model to interpret the text on three related levels:

- **Textual Dimension (Description):** This level examines the linguistic features of the novel, including vocabulary, metaphors, transitivity (who acts against whom), and modality (expressions of certainty or obligation).
- **Discursive Practice (Interpretation**): It is a dimension that examines the production and consumption of texts within institutions such as newsrooms and universities. It pays attention to what it calls

intertextuality, or how media or scholarly discourses appropriate political and legal discourses to control speech.

- **Social Practice (Explanation):** This level examines the larger ideological and political frameworks, such as hegemony and institutional gatekeeping, that render some Palestinian narratives unsayable and others legitimate, neutral, or professional.

3. Methodology

This paper is qualitative, descriptive, and analytical in nature. It examines the dialectical interaction between language and institutional power (Janks, 1997). The main methodology employed in the study is the Three-Dimensional Model of Norman Fairclough (Fairclough, 1995), which serves as the fundamental structure for discourse analysis as a social practice. Purposive sampling was used to collect data, focusing on key textual extracts that represent institutional interactions, gatekeeping, and the regulation of marginalized voices. To analyze them, these extracts were systematically coded at the textual, discursive, and social levels to examine formal linguistic characteristics, text-production processes, and large-scale ideological formations (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 2015). Lastly, thematic analysis was used to synthesize the results and describe how certain discursive practices reproduce macro-level social inequalities and institutional power (van Dijk, 2015).

4. Discussion and Analysis

4.1. The Textual Dimension: The Linguistic Construction of Neutrality and Erasure

On the textual level, the model by Fairclough is concerned with the formal features of the text, including vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure, to show how they expose reality and place the subject matter in an appropriate context. The text of the novel *Discipline* provides a detailed account of the process of the rinsing of

Palestinian language in the institutional environment, specifically in the newsroom of The Chronicle. The main character, Hannah, notes a systematic linguistic shift in which her reporting is edited to conform to a Western-centered grammar of neutrality. She mentions that her, factual vocabulary is actively sanitized: "Occupied in scare quotes. Israeli mob violence by Israelis in east Jerusalem changed to clashes. Apartheid deleted" (Fattah, 2025, p. 70). This textual erasure is not just a style; it is a discursive strategy that Fairclough identifies to ensure ideological hegemony by eliminating the terms that designate state violence.

Another point raised in the novel is the ideological use of the passive voice to conceal agency. Hannah also finds that there is a pattern of media coverage where the deaths of Palestinians cannot be seen as the result of military violence, but as a spontaneous event. "Reports often use the phrase 'palestanian died' instead of 'were killed'". Hannah speaks of the phenomenon of neutralization of aggression, which is introduced into the media as a professional norm but is a discursive technology that defends the status quo. When Hannah continues to use her original wording, her editor, John, appeals to the institutional "responsibility to be objective and impartial", arguing that her use of human rights terminology is an "explicit ideological position". (Fattah, 2025, p. 84).

Moreover, the text explains the application of institutional expert talk in labelling and delegitimizing Palestinian identity. The student Nabil is the core of a media campaign constructed on a certain vocabulary of suspicion, namely, "hotbeds of junior jihadis", "radicalization", and "terrorism bogeyman." (Fattah, 2025, pp. 21, 25). These labels are not a description of what is neutral, but rather a term "imbued with suspicion and panic," and it turns the Palestinian body and uniform into a "dangerous sensory data" (Fattah, 2025, p. 22). By analyzing these textual features, the novel demonstrates how institutions use the seemingly

common-sense language of professionalism to render the Palestinian narrative unsayable.

4.2. The Discursive Practice: Institutional Gatekeeping and the Regulation of Voice

Fairclough's second dimension, Discursive Practice, bridges the gap between the micro-level text and the macro-level social structure by focusing on the processes of text production, distribution, and consumption. In *Discipline*, the novel provides a rich and detailed look at how media and academic gatekeepers, interpret and vet Palestinian narratives to ensure they conform to institutional standards of neutrality and civility. Hannah's experience at The Chronicle newsroom is a central site for this analysis, as her reporting is systematically "rinsed" through an editorial process she describes as "hostile editing"

The novel highlights the discursive practice of two-siding: the witness, where Palestinian testimony is only deemed credible if it is balanced against an Israeli counter-perspective. Hannah's senior colleague, Peter, insists on this practice, even in the context of a story about a Palestinian family in Gaza whose building was bombed. He argues that the story would be "more balanced" if it included an "Israeli perspective," (Fattah, 2025, p. 64) a framing Hannah rejects as a "false moral equivalence" that "two-sides a nuclear, US-armed occupier and an occupied refugee population." (Fattah, 2025, p. 181). This practice functions as a discursive technology that "defangs" the Palestinian narrative, reducing a lived experience of oppression to a mere "opinion" or "clash" that requires institutional vetting (Fattah, 2025, p. 84).

In the academic setting of Joseph Banks University (JBU), Jamal's voice is similarly regulated through discursive practices of institutional management. Dean Barnaby uses the language of collegiality, professionalism, and confidential complaints to warn Jamal about his public advocacy, telling him, "You should be

careful and comment in a personal capacity" (Fattah, 2025, p. 187). This discursive move separates Jamal's Palestinian identity from his academic persona, treating his political stance as a risk to the university's social cohesion. The novel also illustrates the intertextuality of this policing, as academic expert talk provided by figures like Jason McCabe is used to provide the expert legitimacy for media-driven moral panic about Islamic schools and radicalization, for instance "While police have not yet charged the protesters, according to ANU Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and deradicalization expert Jason McCabe advocating… According to the Social Cohesion Policy Institute, 'There is a serious threat to vulnerable Muslim teenagers of being recruited to extremist causes." (Fattah, 2025, p. 16).

Furthermore, the novel explores the burden of representation as a discursive practice where the Palestinian subject is forced to navigate a white-centric gaze that demands they be moderate, reasonable, and unbiased "My God, white supremacy is fecking genius." (Fattah, 2025, p. 158). Hannah reflects on the institutional pressure to "leave her identity at home" and keep the "God-awful complex mess of the Middle fucking East" out of the newsroom (Fattah, 2025, p. 62). When she pushes back against this silencing, her editor, John, uses the institutional responsibility to remain objective "Your responsibility is to remain objective and impartial." to dismiss her concerns as identity politics "…he just didn't register her dissent or critique in intellectual terms. It was, to him, all identity politics." (Fattah, 2025, pp. 83, 81). Through these detailed discursive practices, *Discipline* demonstrates how institutional power is not just about what is banned, but about how Palestinian voices are disciplined through the seemingly neutral procedures of the Western press and academy.

4.3. The Social Practice: Hegemony, Ideology, and the Colonial Status Quo

Fairclough's third dimension, Social Practice, examines the relationship between discursive events and the broader social and political structures in which they are embedded. In *Discipline*, the linguistic and institutional policing of Hannah and Jamal is not presented as a series of isolated incidents, but as a systematic effort to maintain a colonial and white-centric hegemony within the Western social fabric An unflinching dive into the fractures of our social fabric " She had started at The Chronicle as a cadet, straight out of uni, five years ago." (Fattah, 2025, p. 21). The novel situates these discursive struggles against the backdrop of the "Unity Intifada" and the May 2021 Gaza bombardment, framing the institutional demand for neutrality as a political tool that serves to uphold the status quo by silencing the moral weight of the Palestinian struggle "There was a fire of disruption and protests, a 'unity intifada' they were calling it, that had spread across Palestine... Palestinians fighting back against Israeli settlers who were chanting 'Death to Arabs'... and fighting back against Israeli forces who were attacking them for demonstrating against Jewish settler groups evicting and confiscating their homes" (Fattah, 2025, p. 20).

The novel explicitly critiques the ideology of hegemonic neutrality as a form of social control. Hannah identifies this when she reflects on how her colleagues expect her to "leave her identity at home" and treat the Palestinian cause as a "God-awful complex mess" that is better left out of professional spaces (Fattah, 2025, p. 62). This social practice enforces a "calculated silence" where being "professional" is equated with being silent about Gaza (Fattah, 2025, p. 2). The novel argues that this "white-centric gaze" creates a "burden of representation" that forces Palestinian subjects to navigate their careers while in a state of "survivors guilt" and "survivors relief," living in the "diaspora of a murderous empire" (Fattah, 2025, pp. 31, 181, 51).

Furthermore, the novel explores how institutional power and state surveillance are legitimized through academic and media discourse. This is evident in the "media storm" "He paused at a headline. Terror in Our Schools: Year 12 Al-Bayinnah College student arrested. He opened the link." Around the student Nabil, where "counter-terrorism experts" and "deradicalization experts" like Jason McCabe provide the intellectual framework for a "witch-hunt" against Islamic schools "According to the Social Cohesion Policy Institute, 'There is a serious threat to vulnerable Muslim teenagers of being recruited to extremist causes." (Fattah, 2025, pp. 15,16). The novel shows how this "expert talk" "According to ANU Professor of Middle Eastern Studies and deradicalization expert Jason McCabe, advocating support of a terrorist organization is an offence under Australia's terror laws... According to the Social Cohesion Policy Institute, 'There is a serious threat to vulnerable Muslim teenagers of being recruited to extremist causes" circulates between media and government to justify the policing of the witness "school space had been transformed into dangerous sensory data" and the suppression of dissent as risk (Fattah, 2025, pp. 16,22). By connecting these micro-level linguistic choices to macro-level social practices, *Discipline* demonstrates that the "*Discipline*" mentioned in the title is a form of ideological regulation designed to protect Western institutional authority and render the Palestinian struggle unsayable.

Ultimately, through this third dimension, the study reveals that the novel's discourse reflects a broader social structure that views Palestinian identity as inherently too political or too invested "Alternatively, he might decide that being Palestinian, Arab and Muslim meant she was too 'invested'" (Fattah, 2025, p. 65) for the neutral public sphere. This social practice ensures that the "cold violence of occupation" remains hidden behind a "corporate model" of media and an

academic system that prioritizes "social cohesion" over human rights and historical truth (Fattah, 2025, pp. 63,22,57).

4.4. Findings

Through the analysis, it is found that *Discipline* (2025) portrays the concept of institutional neutrality as a selective discursive technology of policing Palestinian speech and identity. On the textual level, the novel records a methodical washing out of words in which words like "Apartheid" and "Occupied" are erased or put in scare quotations to render state-sponsored murders harmless. So, this is how it would be. 'Occupied' in scare quotes. The Israeli mob violence in East Jerusalem was renamed as clashes (Fattah, 2025, p. 70). Discursively, the novel shows how media gatekeepers produce their own false moral equivalence through the process of two-siding, a process that restorative historic experiences of oppression in the form of an opinion that needs institutional redress, for instance, "You do not get to two sid es of a nuclear, US armed occupier and an occupied refugee population! You do not arrive at identifying the colonizer and the colonized!" (Fattah, 2025, p. 181). Moreover, the study finds that academic institutions apply codes of conduct and civility to silence the voices of the Palestinian people, and that their support is biased and poses a threat to social cohesion "You should be careful and comment in a personal capacity." (Fattah, 2025, p. 187). These results prove the point that it is the professional construction that make the Palestinian narratives unsayable, which creates the impression of institutional voice as authoritative and objective, "And yet, it often occurred to her that the industry phrase – cover a story – connoted concealing, obscuring, shielding." (Fattah, 2025, p. 22).

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Discipline* functions as a sophisticated critique of how Western media and academic institutions maintain ideological hegemony through discourse. By applying Fairclough's (1995) Three-

Dimensional Model, the research demonstrates that the "Discipline" described in the novel is a form of ideological regulation designed to protect the status quo of a "white-centric gaze" "She had started at The Chronicle as a cadet, straight out of uni, five years ago." (Fattah, 2025, p. 21). The novel shows that censorship is not only achieved through overt bans but also through the subtle linguistic regulation of acceptable versus radical speech "Your responsibility is to remain objective and impartial." "'You're aware of our social media policy?' Hannah." (Fattah, 2025, pp.81,82). Ultimately, the novel suggests that for Palestinian subjects, professionalism often acts as a disciplinary tool that demands the erasure of their identity and the silencing of their witness to the ongoing bombardment of Gaza as described in the novel in these words: "She was a shrivelled prune today, multitasking trauma and banality in a state of disassociation" survivors guilt and survivors relief, living in the "diaspora of a murderous empire" (Fattah, 2025, pp. 59, 51). To conclude the study in few words, the role of contemporary literature is successful in not only documenting the linguistic mechanisms of censorship but also providing a counter-discourse to institutional silence in the Western public sphere.

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