ISLAMOPHOBIA IN ONLINE DISCOURSE: AN ANALYSIS OF INTERACTIONS ON FACEBOOK POSTS FOLLOWING THE EASTER BOMBINGS 2019 IN SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

The Easter bombings in 2019 in Sri Lanka three churches and four hotels killed at least 259 people, including 45 foreign nationals, and wounded hundreds more, and was consequential in catalysing the peak of Islamophobia against Sri Lankan Muslims. The primary sources used to convey these social antipathies were social media. However, despite the increased importance of social media in the (re)production of discursive power in society, there is very little research conducted to investigate how language and online discourse played a role in inciting hatred and violence post-Easter bombings. Therefore, this study employs thematic analysis to critically examine the social media discourse from April 2019 to December 2020, primarily on interactions in Facebook news articles for Islamophobic discourse following the Easter bombing incident on 21st April 2019, in Sri Lanka. The research examines how language and linguistic strategies have been employed to express anti-Muslim sentiment and anti-Islam rhetoric, amplifying the existing religious and racial stereotypes and prejudice, thus presenting Muslims and Islam negatively. The study shows that the usages of anti-Muslim and anti-Islam words appeared multiple times in comments and were employed frequently, confirming the existence of Islamophobic discourse among interactors. The social climate of these attributes and associated terms are rather hostile, full of profanities, racial slurs, and stereotypes targeted at the Muslim community to hurt and provoke them. The most common themes in these interactions were Muslims and Islam. They were presented as 'others' who do not belong with the 'Sinhalese majority'. Islam has been described as a religion which propagates violence and extremism. Verbal abuse and threats were employed to intimidate Muslims and non-Muslims who do not engage in Islamophobic rhetoric, fuelling stronger polarising effects among communities in the country. A close analysis of the language used in these interactions shows how various linguistic strategies are employed to construct negative images of Muslims and Islam, which are strikingly similar to the previous research conducted in other parts of the world, indicating that it is a growing trend that needs to be addressed immediately at a global level. The recent declaration of International Day for Combat Islamophobia by the United Nations to commemorate the Christchurch killings in New Zealand in, 2019 could be seen as a step in the right direction.

Key words: *Islamophobia, social media, Facebook, language, Easter bombings, Sri Lanka*

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1. INTRODUCTION

On Easter Sunday, 21st April 2019, a series of coordinated explosive devices went off at popular hotels and historical churches across Sri Lanka, killing more than 300 and wounding thousands more. Sri Lanka is not new to the tragic history of religious and ethnic extremism. It was barely recovering from three decades of civil war and ten years of reform and reconciliation when this tragic incident occurred. Although it was unknown who was behind this gruesome act at the time of the blast, soon after releasing photos and videos through their official chain, the Islamic State (ISIS) claimed the attacks. While the entire nation was shocked at the tragic incident and the lives lost, this claim of ISIS unleashed massive public outrage and hatred toward the Muslim community, calling them traitors and terrorists, amplifying the previously existing racial and religious prejudice. Therefore, it is not wrong to state that this event set off the already existing Islamophobic sentiment in the country, spiralling out of control with the use of online platforms such as social media, prompting online discourses centred around cyber-Islamophobia. This discourse targeted the Muslim community and Islam, causing retaliatory violence in some parts of the country in May 2019.

2. ISLAMOPHOBIA IN SRI LANKA

Islamophobia is not a new concept for Sri Lankans. Previous research, such as (McGilvary, 2016 as cited in Ivarsson, 2019), highlights that anti-Muslim sentiments have existed since independence but were eclipsed by the LTTE conflict. Moreover, Jayasinha and de Mel (2021) point out that post-war 2009 saw a surge in anti-Muslim sentiments in the country, followed by a series of waves of anti-Muslim riots and attacks upon Muslims. Amarasingam and Rizwie (2020,p2), in their Strategic Communications Project Report funded by the United Nations, state, "The role of social media in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka, which often spurred on this kind of communal violence, is not new." They further prove their point by cataloguing the violence and mob attacks in 2013, which were based on bizarre conspiracy theories floating on Facebook pages and WhatsApp groups about the Muslim community and their 'secret plots' to sterilise the Sinhalese population. The infamous case about Dr. Shaffi attests to the length some extremist groups tried to insight fear and violence, provoking Islamophobia among ordinary people. Jayasinha & de Mel (2021), in their research, state that Sri Lanka is experiencing social polarisation in both dimensions: ethnic and religious. They state that Sri Lanka has experienced instances where inflammatory content on social media has resulted in widespread ethnoreligious violence, to the extent that it was used as a

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weapon to propagate hate speech and disinformation that resulted in widespread violence in the country.

3.   LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1   What is Islamophobia?

"Islamophobia" is a neologism or a concept that refers to the discriminatory attitudes toward Muslims and Islam by a certain section of society. The most common manifestation of these exclusionary tendencies comes from hate speech. However, Islamophobia has become a contested concept in the public space (Allen, 2010) with no properly accepted definition. The Runnymede Trust report was the first source to posit a firm definition of Islamophobia, stating that islamophobia is the shorthand way of referring to dread or hatred of Islam – and, therefore, to fear or dislike all or most Muslims. According to Aguilera-.Carnerero & Azeez (2016), it is a type of hate speech that covers irrational hostility towards Muslims and Islam. Marcel Maussen (2006), states that "'islamophobia' groups together all kinds of different forms of discourse, speech, and acts by suggesting that they all emanate from an identical ideological core, which is a 'fear' or a 'phobia' of Islam.".

Therefore, the lack of a standard definition and shared understanding makes accounting for the anti-Muslim sentiments challenging. Nonetheless, as Javier Rosón Lorente (2010cited in Cervi, Tejedor

& Gracia 2021) sagaciously points out, no matter what we call it, there are acts and attitudes against the Islamic and Muslim communities. Hence, it is understood that, in general, the discrimination and exploitation of Muslims and Islam in all spheres of life are considered to constitute Islamophobia.

3.2   Origin of Islamophobia and Its Development

Islamophobia, an ongoing and rapidly developing phenomenon, has caused many concerns due to its rapid proliferation in different parts of the world and is much debated across the globe. However, Islamophobia has existed in Western countries for a very long time (Borddbar et al., 2020, as cited by Sufi & Yasmin, 2022), where an imaginary Islam that has been shaped over many centuries (Arjana, 2015, as cited in Bazian, 2018,). The most popular view is that it has its origin in Britain and began gaining significant popularity in the early 1990s, indicating discrimination against the resident Muslim population (Allen, 2010) in British society. However, only after the publication of the highly influential report entitled Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All: Report of the Runnymede Trust Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia in 1997 was the first British non-Muslim acknowledgement of Islamophobia significantly influence the way in which Islamophobia was understood and ensured that Islamophobia was afforded public and political recognition (Allen, 2010). Furthermore, the report acted

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as a catalyst in the establishment of the Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia, a Commission that was integral in shaping the definition and conceptualisation of Islamophobia in the public space (Allen, 2010).

However, since the tragic event of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Islamophobia has intensified and become a serious problem (Sufi & Yasmin, 2022). The use of the term "Islamophobia" and hatred for Muslims in various guises have become more rampant (Mohideen & Mohideen, 2008), increasing the use of Islamophobia and demonisation of Islam and Muslims (Bazian, 2018)..

3.3 The representation of Islam in mass media

The mass media has the power to The mass media has the power to influence minds (Yasmin et al., 2018, 2019, as cited in Sufi & Yasmin, 2022). Mainstream media play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of stereotypes, influencing public opinions regarding different groups and minorities (Cervi et al., 2021), thus promoting hatred against Muslims across the world. Past studies indicate that Western societies heavily rely on mass media, mainly television, as their primary source of information about Islam and Muslims.

Their representation in the mass media predominantly shapes the Western public's view of Islam and Muslims (Rane et al., 2014). As a result, "in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attack, the sustained intensity of media coverage of Islam and Muslims not only resulted in universal awareness of the religion and its adherents but also made the media version of Islam and media-generated Muslims widely known" (Rane et al., 2014, p.1). This resulted in worsening the existing situation by "portraying undesirable, stereotypical, one-sided images of Muslims and Islam, thereby shaping public opinion against Muslims and Islam, causing fear, anxiety, and unrest among the common people. Subsequently, all these negative developments towards Muslims, such as prejudice, racism, and conflict in society, and being the constant target of hatred and discrimination in the West, led to an unhealthy environment and disturbed the peace in many European countries" (Sufi & Yasmin, 2022, p. 2).

3.4 Mass media to social media

In a globalised world where the Internet plays a predominant role in the daily lives of millions, religion in cyberspace enjoys a significant and rapidly increasing presence (Carnerero & Azeez, 2016). This allowed the "media generated Western public opinion toward Muslims and Islam to exist fear and prejudice; thus, being the constant target of hatred and prejudice in the West" (Sufi & Yasmin, 2022, p.2) passed on to netizens, making it seemed "normal and natural" to them. Therefore, with the

introduction of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+, and so on, which is seen as the "gateway to the world", and subsequently moving beyond its original purpose of just linking friends to give Internet users access to a level of communication that was previously not possible, it enabled the transfer of the existing western public's hatred, and prejudiced opinions on Muslims and Islam to reach a wider audience.

3.5　Social media and the spread of misinformation

The role of social media in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories in Sri Lanka, which often spurred communal violence, is not new (Amarasingam & Rizwie, 2020). Ivarsson's (2018) statement further proves that anti-Muslim engagements were manifested and evoked through social media discourse and information found online rather than anything experienced by themselves. Most netizens who interact on these platforms seem to be young adults; as Hattotuwa (2018) notes, the scope, speed, and scale have increased and widened with the greater adoption of social media by millennials, and Facebook is the primary news source for 18 to 20- year-old respondents in Sri Lanka. He further states that Facebook pages in Sri Lanka are openly partial to and anchored around promoting an exclusive Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. The affordance of social media allows for content to be seen by geographically dispersed audiences, and results in a wider reach of these contents to incite communal violence (Hattotuwa, 2018), which could be the root cause of misinformation on social media.

3.6　Social polarisation in social media

Studies on the interplay between social polarisation and social media indicate that social media has the potential to exacerbate prevailing social issues (Jayasinha & de Mel. 2021). As mentioned by Jayasinha and de Mel (2021), Sri Lanka is experiencing social polarisation in both dimensions: ethnic and religious. It explains that Sri Lanka has experienced instances where inflammatory content on social media has resulted in widespread ethnoreligious violence, to the extent that it was used as a weapon to propagate hate speech and disinformation that resulted in widespread violence in the country.

Hasangani's (2019) findings show that the current algorithmic curation on social media decides our online experience, placing the users in a 'filter bubble' and, thus, depriving the likelihood of encountering ideologically cross-cutting news content. Since our perception of reality shapes opinions and ideas, the presence of customisability technology not only prompts the increased ideologically driven selective exposure with similar content and further increases social media consumption, but it also causes users to assume these contents are "familiar, true, and normal", resulting in ideological

polarisation. These proprietary algorithms could lead to serious problems if not tackled appropriately; as the Justice for All report (2020, p.1) states,

"Islamophobia drives popular support for extreme and destructive social policies, magnified by grassroots social media and incendiary speeches by leadership. Thus, Burman Buddhist Supremacist ideology, Han Chauvinism, and the Hindutva movement all serve as tools for elites to manage diverse populations through fear and mutual mistrust."

Ivarsson's (2018) findings further prove this statement, which states that extremist nationalists are using these platforms to impose their ideas as a 'threat to the Sinhalese' by bombarding the netizens with Islamophobic content. Amarasingam & Rizwie's (2020) report equally notes this trend that "citizens use social media to gather and interpret information, thus playing a particularly harmful role in amplifying anti-Muslim sentiment and causing retaliatory violence in the country"(p.2).

Furthermore, Garner and Selod,2015, as stated in Sufi & Yasmin 2022) emphasised in their investigation on the racialisation of Muslims through Islamophobia and asserted that racism was fluid and not restricted to time and place. "Regardless of physical appearance, country of origin and economic situation"(p.7), all Muslims were perceived as a homogenous group, as a single race and demonised in

Islamophobic discourse, furthering the effects of polarization.

3.7 Language and representation in social media

Language is a vehicle for expressing concepts and reality. However, due to linguistic diversity in Language, as proposed by Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis in 1929, there is no single way for language to describe reality. Therefore, communication and discourse are considered means of interaction between individuals who construct multiple realities. Moreover, the above theory further states that language and thought are intertwined so that language may determine the human perception of reality and affect their behaviour (Liu, 2010 as cited by Kachur 2021).

As Moscovici and Duveen (2000), as cited in Tor̈nberg & Tor̈nberg 2016,

p.134) point out, "Social media shares many traits and functions often ascribed to traditional mass media. One such is framing issues and events and thus shaping people's perceptions of reality and social and political issues". Additionally, in such a background, the rapid increase in Internet access and the accelerated use of social media by young Sri Lankans (Weerasendera, 2014, as cited in Ivarsson, 2019) make a deadly combination since these young interactors might not be able to discern the subjectivity of these share contents and to infer the hidden meanings, thereby "social media platforms have increasingly

become a playground for misinformation" (Amarasingam & Rizwie, 2020,p.2), thus enabling hate speeches like islamophobia to thrive in these conditions.

Thus, previous studies prove that, Post-Easter bombings, there was a spike in cyber islamophobia in online discourse. These spiteful contents stereotyping and generalising certain sections of society and people by way of hate speech often cause irreparable harm to the targeted community and the whole society. Hence, focusing on the referred literature, this case study will focus on how languages function to spread anti-Muslim feelings toward Muslims and Islam, giving rise to Islamophobic sentiments, primarily on comments on news articles posted on Facebook following the Easter attacks of April 2019.

4. OBJECTIVE

This study aims to investigate, gain awareness, and give stakeholders insights into how language operates and contributes to online discourses to amplify the existing Islamophobic sentiment in the country.

5. RESEARCH QUESTION

How do languages function to spread negative feelings toward Muslims and Islam by giving rise to Islamophobic sentiments among netizens, primarily through Facebook?

To find answers to the question proposed, the following sub-categories were employed.

a) What hostile and negative words and attributes are associated with Muslims and Islam?

b) To what purpose were these attributes and associated words employed?

c) How has language been used to express these existing religious and racial prejudices?

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1 Sample

The sample comprises online news articles from the Facebook platform database of five news publishers, Daily Mirror, Newswire, News 1st Digital, BBC News Sinhala, and Ada Derana, for Islamophobic online discourse. Extracted articles were selected based on three criteria.

- Published date. From 21st April 2019 to December 2020.

- The language. English, Sinhala, and Romanized Sinhala were extracted.

- The number of interactions. The highest number of interactions with Islamophobic discourse

6.2 Data collection

Data was collected manually by taking screenshots from each news publisher's Facebook pages. The initial search from the database yielded 3,466 comments and was

screened for eligibility to be considered Islamophobic. When screening for eligible comments, it was noted that the initial corpus had comments that could be categorised as follows.

1. Sympathies for the lives lost due to the bombings.

2. Angry due to the failure of the Sri Lankan government

3. Hatred towards Muslims and Islam (Islamophobia) due to the incident in the form of hate speech.

A significant number of comments were posted under the third category expressing Islamophobic discourse. These comments were extracted for further analysis.

The comments selected for further analysis comprise 292 comments, as mentioned in Table 1, along with their distribution across publishers. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP).

Table 1: Distribution of the number of comments across publishers

Publishers	Total Comments	Selected Comments
Daily Mirror		
Article 1	367	38
Article 2	124	23
Newswire		
Article 1	43	14
Article 2	513	39
News 1st Digital		
Article 1	38	9
Article 2	637	47
BBC News Sinhala	967	52
Article 1	250	29
Article 2		
Ada Derana		
Article 1	310	24
Article 2	217	17
Total	**3,466**	**292**

6.3   Research design

Following the guidelines for the chosen database, Thematic analysis was adopted for the research based on the selected comments to identify common themes – topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. They were further analysed based on two categories to get answers to the research question.

1. **Uses of hostile and negative words and attributes associated with**

    a. Muslims
    b. Islam

All the negative words and attributes used to describe Muslims and Islam were picked up from the selected comments. They were analysed based on types of attributes and associated and evaluated under each category.

2. To what purpose were these attributes and associated words employed?

Selected comments were highlighted and codified based on words,

meanings, and interpretations using descriptive and interpretive codes.

Codified data presented a distinguished pattern of word choices used to express Islamophobic sentiments, which fell into either category above-mentioned, Muslims or Islam. Therefore, they were systematically categorised and grouped according to the choice of attributes or associated words and themes, as illustrated in Figure 1.
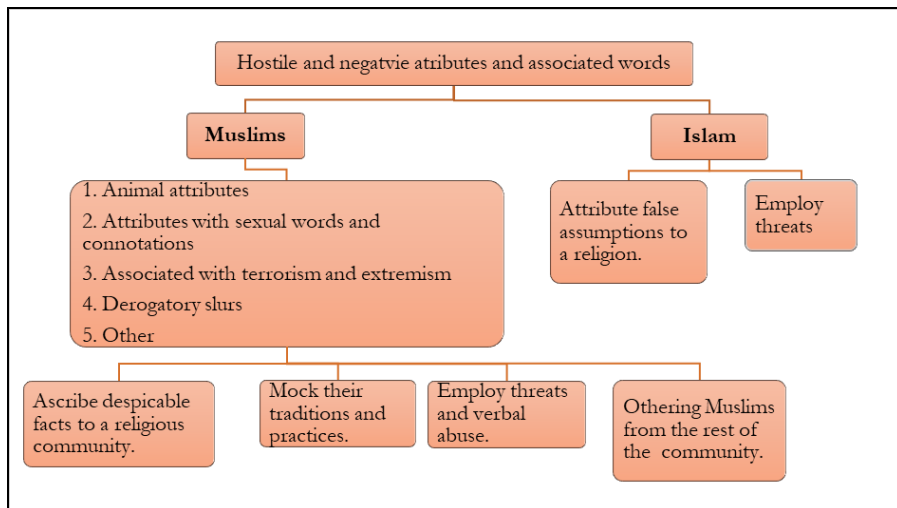

Figure 1: Distribution of themes in the dataset

Established themes in the dataset are;

a)   Attribute false assumptions to a religion.

b)   Ascribe despicable facts to a religious community.

c)   Mock their traditions and practices.

d)   Employ verbal threats and abuse.

e)   Othering Muslims from the rest of the community..

These themes were classified inductively, noting the patterns in the dataset and establishing a theoretical framework to analyse hate speech.

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How has language been used to express these existing religious and racial prejudices?

After classifying the dataset using the above five themes, they were further analysed and interpreted based on the language and linguistic strategies employed to construct these negative images, giving rise to Islamophobic online discourse.

7.   FINDINGS

The study will focus on how network users employ language and linguistic techniques to express their negative sentiments towards Muslims and Islam, reflecting the underlying themes discovered in online interactions.

Islamophobia will be discussed as anti-Muslim and anti-Islam separately and finally evaluated to reach conclusions.

7.1   Anti- Muslim Islamophobic discourse

7.1.2   Anti-Muslim-associated words and attributes.

Anti-Muslim words using negative attributes or associated words with

Muslims existed in all three languages: English, Sinhala, and Romanized Sinhala. Some of these are known and considered "normal" terms, while others were new and innovative insults.

The dataset was classified into different categories based on the choice of words they employed. They are;

i.   Animal attributes

ii.   Attributes with sexual words and connotations

iii.   Associated with terrorism and extremism

iv.   Racial and derogatory slurs

v.   Other

Table 2 shows the total distribution of these anti-Muslim words across each language and the number of times they were repeated under each category.

Table 2:   Distribution of anti-Muslim words

Type of attributes or associated words	English	Sinhala	Romanized Sinhala	Total
Animal attributes	3	45	34	82
Attributes with sexual words and connotations	5	67	59	131
Associated with terrorism and extremism	8	21	8	37
Derogatory slurs	-	20	28	48
Other	-	53	43	96
Total	**13**	**196**	**174**	**394**

It shows that from the 292 comments selected for analysis, the number of negative attributes and associated words amounted to a staggering 394 anti-Muslim words. It was noted that these attributes were used for multiple purposes to indicate a pattern. They were employed for;

i.   To ascribe despicable facts to a religious community.

ii.   To mock their traditions and practices.

iii.   To employ verbal threats and abuse.

iv.   To Othering Muslims from the rest of the community..

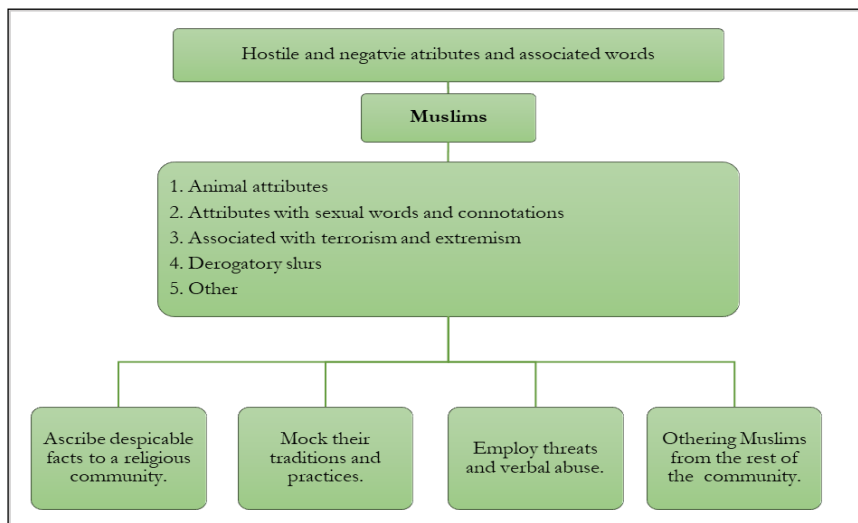Thus emerges a pattern illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2: Anti-Muslim themes

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When Islamophobic discourse in the dataset synchronised into themes, it was noted that some comments fell into more than one category, showing the complexity of these discourses, having layers of meaning and interpretations. Table 3 shows the frequency of these themes that appeared in the selected dataset.

Table 3:   Islamophobic discourse

Themes	No of times
Attribute false assumptions and ridicule Islam	29
Ascribe despicable facts to the Muslim community	56
Mock their traditions and practices	26
Employ threats and verbal abuse	74
Othering Muslims from the rest of the community	107
Total	**292**

The emerging theme from the dataset was portraying Muslims as the "other", occurring 107 times. Next was the employment of threats and verbal abuse, which was found 74 times. These two themes occupy 61% of the data, as shown in Figure 3.
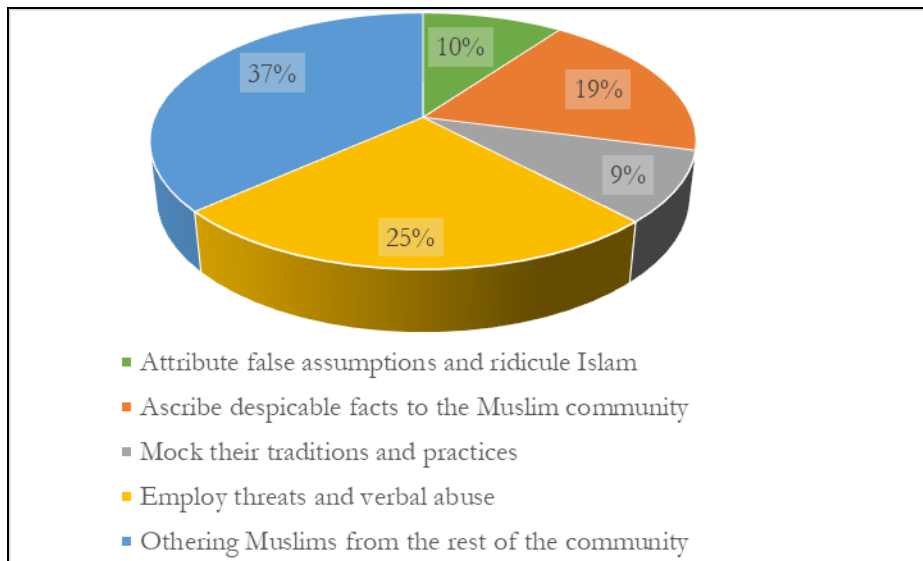

Figure 3: Distribution of themes within the dataset

7.1.2.1 **Animal attributes used to express anti-Muslim sentiments**

Using animal attributes to express anti-Muslim sentiments in online interactions shows that they use a wide range of attributes considered "common and normal" and a few new additions. Table 4 shows the range of animal attributes used in these interactions.

Table 4: Animal attributes

Sinhala		**Romanised Sinhala**		**English**	
බල්ලා (dog)	18	Balla (dog)	12	Dogs	3
ඌරෝ (pig)	20	Ura (pig)	9		
ගොන්නෝ (cow)	3	Harak (cow)	2		
කබරයා (crocodile)	1	Gonna (cow)	5		
වල්ඌරෝ (wild boar)	3	Walura (wild boar)	3		
		Buruwa (donkey)	3		
Total	**45**		**34**		**3**

A total of 82 words were found in this category. The most commonly used terms were pigs and dogs; animals considered to be prohibited and disliked mostly by Muslims. Association of these choices of words, therefore intentional, to intensify the expressed insult, thereby objectifying them.

Interestingly, in English, only "Dogs" were considered in this category, for instance, "Bloody Dogs", as the following comment displays, although pigs were the highest in Sinhala.

Arresst all these bloody dogs immediately and finish

Moreover, only a small percentage of comments were made in English that fell under Islamophobic interactions, as illustrated in Figure 4.
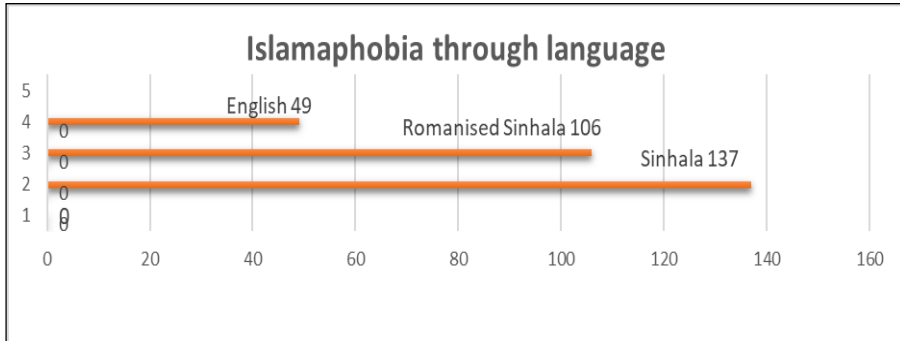
Figure 4: Islamophobia Through Language

These interactions show that derogatory terms have more layers of meaning behind them when analysed in the context in which they are being used. The use of "ඔය" and "මුන" in these interactions show how they employ the language to differentiate themselves and to "othering" Muslims from the rest. Additionally, using "සිංහරයෝ" to refer to themselves, effectively positioning the addresses below them as less worthy, they overtly showcase the power dynamics and ideology behind these interactions as seen in the following comment below1.
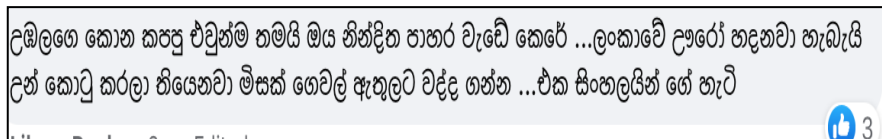
7.1.2.2 Attributes with sexually explicit words and connotations

Using sexually connotated anti-Muslim words was the highest attribute in the dataset, repeating 131 times, representing 33% of the total dataset. Table 5 shows the range of words used to address or describe Muslims with explicit sexual undertones.

Table 5: Sexual connotations

Sinhala		Romanised Sinhala		English	
හුත්තෝ (fuckers)	18	Huththi (fuckers)	11	Fuckers	4
පරයා (fucker)	7	Paraya (fucker)	4	Dickheads	1
පකයා (fucker)	7	pakaya (fucker)	5		
හුකපන් (fuck)	5	Sakkili (degenerate)	6		
පොන්නයෝ (gay)	14	ponnaya (gay)	14		
කැරියා (fucker)	11	Keriya (fucker)	15		
වේසි (bitch)	5	wesi (bitch)	4		
Total	**67**		**59**		**5**

When analysed, it was found that they often do not come in isolation. Either they appear with more profanities and slurs, for example;

i.   in Sinhala   "පොන්න තම්බියෝ", "සක්කිලි අවජාතක හුත්තිගේ බල්ලෝ",

         "කැරි පක සක්කිලි බල්ලා"

ii.   in Romanised Sinhala "Geri Thambi Hathta", "Sakkili Avajathaka Huttika Balla"

They were used in a sentence to amplify what was being said as a form of verbal intimidation, effectively positioning the addresses to a less advantageous and demining state with their choice of words. The majority of these derogatory and overtly sexual words were employed to ascribe despicable facts to Muslims, effectively distancing themselves from Muslims and thus "othering" them from the rest.

2.

Samakaami janakotasaklu. Thambiyek gewuna thana koheda pako saame tiyenne?

3.

උෟරි ගූ කාපන් හුත්තිගේ පුතා..... රට කැවා පකයෝ ටික එකතුවෙලා...

7.1.2.3 Racial and derogatory slurs, terrorism and extremism-associated words

Racial and derogatory slurs and words associated with terrorism

amounted to 48 and 37, respectively, making up 22% of the total dataset

Table 6: Racial slurs and terrorist associations

Sinhala		Romanised Sinhala		English	
තම්බියා (brother)	18	Thambiya (brother)	19	Terrorists	5
හම්බයා (Racial slur)	8	Hambaya (racial slur)	9	Traitors	3
අන්තවාදීන් (Extremist)	5	Thrasthawadi (terrorist)	5		
මරක්කලයා (Racial slur)	3	Minimaruwo (murders)	2		
තොරම්බල්කාර යෝ (Racial slur)	1	Kuran Anthawadin (quran extremist)	1		
ත්‍රස්තවාදීන් (terrorist)	6				
Total	41		36		8

Table 6 shows the range of words used to address Muslims using racial slurs and words associated with the semantic fields of terrorism or extremism. Muslims have been mostly addressed as "thambiya or hambaya" interchangeably in both Sinhala and Romanised Sinhala.

i.

තෝපි සේරම ඒකයි හම්බ හැත්තිකරේ.. පලයව් අපෙ රටෙන්.

ii.

Thambi okkoma me ratin elawala danna ona

Although "thambiya" means "little brother" in the Muslim community, it is a preferred colloquial term among the Sinhalese to address Muslims, initially used as a form of respect. However, the context in 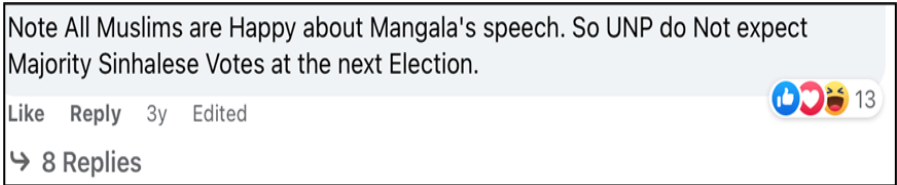which this term appears is nothing but racial, as the above examples indicate. These interactions were not made casually but with the explicit intention of using them as verbal abuse or a threat to make Muslims feel that they do not belong in this country. Wettimuny, (2020) states,

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that these terms are indeed racial slurs used to insult Muslims as she quotes;

"In the early twentieth century, 'Hambaya' was applied not only to Indian Moors but to Moors in general, arguing that 'hamba' 'operate as a synecdoche, a trope by which a part denotes the whole.' While the Sinhala press treated the 'marakkalayo' and 'hambayo' as two distinct groups in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, today, there is no discernible distinction between t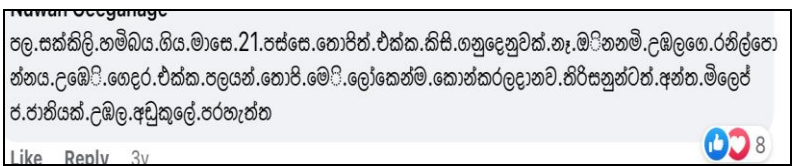he two. Ceylon Moors and Indian Moors are known collectively by the religious identity marker 'Muslim'; the word 'hambaya' is used today to insult Muslims in general." (pg4)

Another reason for this kind of word usage is to verbally intimidate Muslims that "the majority Sinhalese," a term reiterated throughout all the interactions, either through words or by implying, for example,

Note All Muslims are Happy about Mangala's speech. So UNP do Not expect Majority Sinhalese Votes at the next Election.

Like   Reply   3y   Edited   13

↳ 8 Replies

to showcase their power dynamics and ideologies subjugating minority communities. This type of powerplay and distancing method to 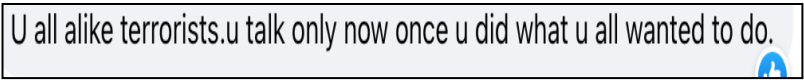"othering" discourse gained much attention and approval from users, as seen in the comment below, demonstrating these subjugations in action.
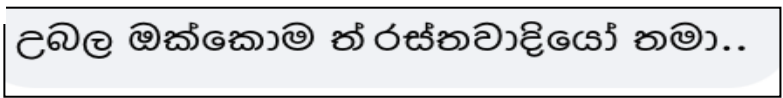

Nuwan Geeganage

පල.සක්කිලි.හම්බිය.ගිය.මාසෙ.21.පස්සෙ.තොපිත්.එක්ක.කිසි.ගනුදෙනුවක්.නෑ.ඔ�‌නනම්.උඔලගෙ.රනිල්පො න්නය.උඔ�‌.ගෙදර.එක්ක.පලයන්.තොපි.මෙ�‌.ලෝකෙන්ම.කොන්කරලදානව.තිරිසනුන්ටත්.අන්ත.මීලේජ් ර්.ජාතියක්.උඔල.අඩුකුලේ.පරහැත්ත

Like Reply 3y   8

In many interactions that associated Muslims with terrorism, they were either compared with terrorists, as shown in the example below.

i.

U all alike terrorists.u talk only now once u did what u all wanted to do.

ii

උඔල ඔක්කොම ත් රස්තවාදියෝ තමා..

Alternatively, generalise that "all Muslims are terrorists", reflecting the stereotypes that are very common in these types of discourses.

Trasthawadeen siyallama muslim nowana namuth muslim siyallooma trasthawadeen wee.

7.1.2.4 Other associated words and attributes

A considerable sum of the words did not fall into the above four classifiers and was taken onto one as others. These types of words accounted for 24% of the dataset. Even though these terms were not hostile, the context in which they appeared seems very negative. For example, mentions of "Muslims" have been associated with terrorism and traitors. The following examples show how these words appeared in the same interactions, showcasing the serotypes among Muslims and the rest of the world.

i.

Muslims are terrorist

ii

MUSLIMS BOMB CULTURE .
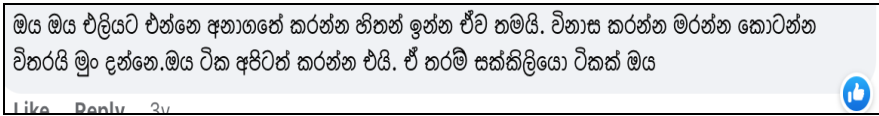
iii.

Muslim is worse than HIV and AIDS

iv.

Trasthawadeen siyallama muslim nowana namuth muslim siyallooma trasthawadeen wee.

They were mostly about theories circulating in social media at the time about Muslims. Some of these were calling them liars, cunning, untrustworthy, and traitors, and had a hidden agenda of converting the country to a Muslim majority. Examples of such interactions are

i.

ඔය ඔය එ්ලියට එන්නෙ අනාගතේ කරන්න හිතන් ඉන්න ඒව තමයි. විනාස කරන්න මරන්න කොටන්න විතරයි මුං දන්නෙ.ඔය ටික අපිටත් කරන්න එයි. ඒ තරම් සක්කිලියො ටිකක් ඔය

Like   Reply   3y

ii

Lazy Sinhalese still sleeping till Sri Lanka converts to Arabic names 🇱🇰 👍

iii.   .

ලංකාව අරාබියක් කරන්න බෑ , එහෙම කරන්න ගියොත් මක බෑ වෙනව.

These ideas, such as "conspiracy theories" to overtake the Sinhala majority and turn Sri Lanka into an Arab country, are so deep-seated that throughout the dataset, this idea is overtly expressed or covertly implied, indicating the level of misinformation circulating within the community.

Moreover, findings were made on how interactors used religious practices and customs to mock the Muslim community. They were mocked for the marked speech variation, as shown below

ෂරි ෂරි මුෂ්තාපා..අපිලා දන්නවා උම්බලා හොඳ මිනිෂ්ෂු..මේ පෙර චන්දේ තමා තිනවා ඉට පෂ්ෂෙ අපිලා උම්ලා ගැන බලාකන්නවා..DON'T WORRY..BRO..
Like   Reply   3y   👍 2

Here, it explicitly mocks the speech variations unique to the Muslim community. Using "us vs. we", a distancing tactic, thus intimidating them, covertly threatens the reader by using patronising statements like "will look after you" and "don't worry bro", showing the relationship and powerplay to the target audience.

When these findings were uploaded to a word cloud, the generated image, shown in Figure 5, shows the climate of these negative attributes and associated words brought to the forefront. As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." This image depicts the social climate of Anti-Muslim attributes and associated words. They are rather hostile, full of profanities, racial slurs, and stereotypical, reflecting the world trend of misrepresenting who Muslims are

.

Figure 5: Word cloud representation of anti-Muslim words

The above discussions demonstrate the usages of anti-Muslim words, the multiple times they occurred in comments, and how frequently they appear, confirming the existence of Islamophobic discourse among interactors. The emerging themes from this section were portraying Muslims as the "other" who are violent and untrustworthy, who are plotting conspiracies, therefore being mocked and abused by using verbal means in discourse. Users use language and linguistic techniques to affirm this idea and intimidate the Muslims, using pronouns as distancing devices and manipulation through the choice of particular words to effectively position the addresses at a disadvantage, thus objectifying and marginalising them, showcasing the power dynamics and ideologies behind these interactions.

7.2   Anti-Islam associated words and attributes.

Anti-Islam words using negative attributes or associated words with Islam yielded a large number of data in response to the research question. They existed in all three languages: English, Sinhala and Romanised Sinhala. Table 7 shows the number of times they emerged across the dataset.

Table 7: Anti-Islam associated words and attributes

	English	Sinhala	Romanized Sinhala	Total
Anti-Islam associated words and attributes	9	33	21	63

Additionally, many forms of words emerged that clearly show how they are framed and used to convey anti-Islamic rhetoric, indicating a clear purpose of these interactions and, thus, the emergence of themes under which they are being analysed. These themes are;

i.   Attribute false assumptions and ridicule Islam

ii.   Employ threats and verbal abuse

Table 8 shows how these themes occurred in response to the purpose of employing these ant-Islamic words.

Table 8:   Anti-Islam words with themes

Themes	No of times
Attribute false assumptions and ridicule Islam	29
Employ threats and verbal abuse	34

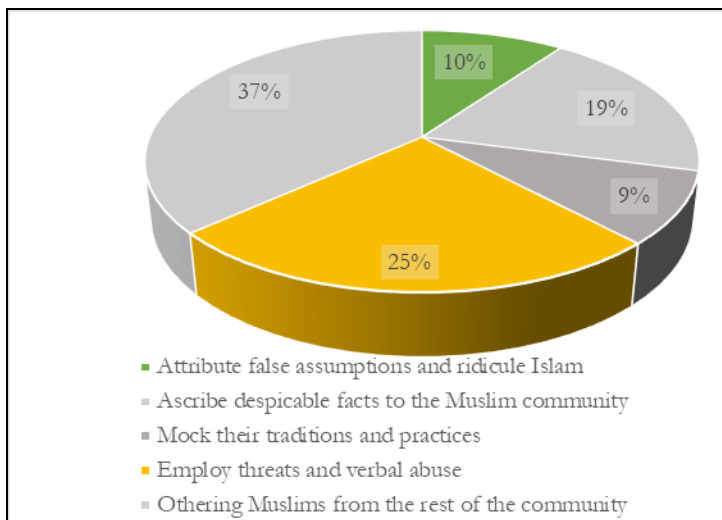Figure 6 shows the distribution of the two themes, which amounts to 35% of the dataset.

Figure 6:   Distribution of Anti-Islam themes within the dataset

Figure 7 illustrates how these anti-Islamic words were presented in the dataset.
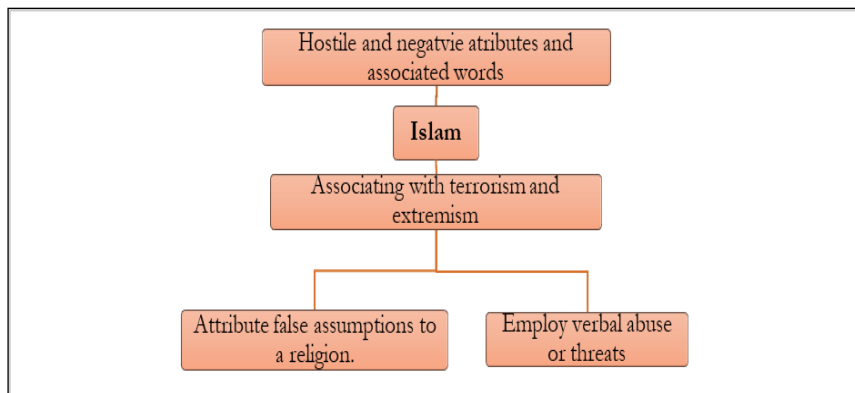

Figure 7: Anti-Islam themes

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The significant finding from the section is that it resembles the stereotypes of how Islam is represented globally. Employ verbal threats and abuse coupled with attributing false assumptions to Islam are the major themes in this section. Islam is described as a religion which propagates and thus causes violence and extremism; it calls for killing innocents in the name of religion. It is "not" a religion of peace, and if the world is to be peaceful and better, Islam should be ridden from the world. They further state that Islam is a terrorist religion, and all its followers are criminals who kill innocent people and anyone who is a non-Muslim. These types of interactionsaccount for 10% of the dataset and are the major arguments among non-Muslim users.

i

It's Death to the religion of peace or its Death to the unbelievers

i.

ii.

උඹල කොන්කරල මදී ඕයි . ගල් ගහල පන්නන්න ඕන . සාමය කියන වචනෙ තේරුම වත් දන්නැති සාමයේ ආගම

Here, it not only uses verbal means to intimidate the readers by implying that they either give up their religion or lose their lives, but it also explicitly threatens by stating that Muslims should be "cornered" or worse, "stoned and chased". These ideas were repeated and shared many times in the dataset and gained many "likes," showing their agreement with these sentiments, thus confirming Islam is being interpreted and is aligned with the existing stereotypes.

Furthermore, the word "Islam" is used in various forms to express their existing theories about what Islam and its followers are trying to achieve in Sri Lanka. They reflect the ideas that previous research findings have shown, as mentioned in the section on Islamophobia in Sri Lanka. These ideas were reiterated throughout their interactions when Islam was used to address or describe. The following four examples will show that.

i.

The true face of Islam

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ii.

Lazy Sinhalese still sleeping till Sri Lanka converts to Arabic names 🇦🇺👍

iii

මුලු ලෝකයෙන්ම මෙම මිලේච්ඡ ආගම තුරන් කිරීමට කාලයයි. එසේ නොවුනහොත් මේ සුන්දර මිහිතලය බොහෝ ඉක්මනින් මියැදෙනු ඇත.

iv.

තොපෙ අතලොස්ස කරන දේවල් තාම ගෙවල් වලින් පල්ලි වලින් හොයගන්නවා.. පල හුත්තො යන්න... තොපියි තොපෙ නබියවයි ඔක්කොම රොල් කරලා ගහන්න ඕනෙ අල්ලාහුතාලාගේ පුකේ..... මිනී මරන ආගම

Like   Reply   3y   👍❤️ 10

The above interactions show the users' view of Islam. They accuse the religion as "not peaceful" and ridicule it by employing derogatory terms to their prophet and God, making it very personal to the adherents of the religion. These interactions clearly show the underlying connections between language, power and ideology in these interactions and how Muslims are disadvantaged through them.

i.

තෝපි සේරම ඒකයි හම්බ නැතිකරේ.. පලයව් අපෙ රටෙන්.

ii.

Keri thambi hethikare lokenma nethi karala danna one😡😡😡😡😡😡😡😡

By employing pronouns "රතාපි, Mun, "උබල, Ubala", the plural forms of the pronoun "you", "your" and "these", it differentiates users from the addressees, thus effectively position the addressee as one of them and not ours. Linguistic choices indicate the social relationship the speakers perceive between them, the "Majority Sinhalese" and the target audience, "minority Muslims".
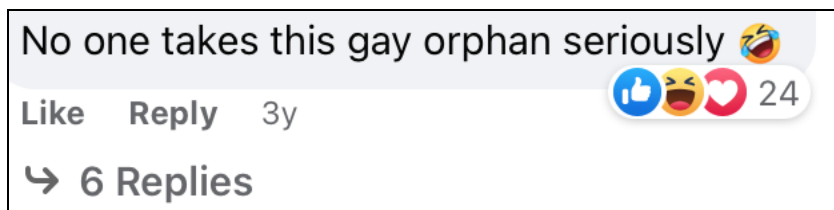
Since the linguistic relativity by the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis states that language and thought are intertwined and that language may determine the human perception of reality and, thus, affect their behaviour, these types of text should

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not be taken lightly. These threats may seem very real and personal in the context since, as routinely implied and mentioned in the comments, they are the "majority" concept of "majority rules". Furthermore, as discussed previously, these threats came to fruition earlier. Some of these comments were extracted soon after the Easter attack incident and before the May 2019 violence and riots in Chillaw, Minuwangoda, Kurunegala and Kandy; therefore, these interactions could have acted as inducements.

It should also be noted that there was a high level of intolerance for any opinion that did not engage in Islamophobic rhetoric or the beliefs and trends of the majority. Comments made to question the credibility of something shared or to make rational comments about what was happening with the community and country were not welcomed and treated very impolitely. They were attacked by calling them traitors to the country and belonged with "them", using derogatory terms to the extent of questioning their sexuality.

i.

අවජාතක උනාම මෙහෙම දේවල් කියනවා

ii.

No one takes this gay orphan seriously 🤣

Like Reply 3y 👍😂❤️ 24

↳ 6 Replies

This type of adverse remarks makes eradicating Islamophobic sentiments challenging since people are afraid to voice out their opinion for fear of backlash, or worse, harm to the person, thus fuelling stronger polarising effects among communities.

Overall, the findings confirm that the semantic fields in which "Islam" appears to be in these interactions are that Islam is essentially violent and promotes killing innocents.

8. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 Conclusions

In conclusion, there is significant use of negative attributes and associated words in online interactions, occurring in varied themes and patterns across the dataset, proving the existence of Islamophobic discourses in Sri Lanka. The use of these hostile and prejudiced discourses in online

24

interaction post-Easter bombing 2019 not only escalated out of proportionately, portraying Islam in an extremely negative light, attributing and ridiculing the religion that propagates violence and extremism but also targeting the Muslim community, subjecting them to victims of verbal abuses and threats and marginaling them as "others" who do not belong with the Sri Lankans.

They were being ascribed despicable facts, mocked their religious traditions and practices, and subjected to verbal abuses and threats using profanities, derogatory terms, and racial slurs. This was achieved by using languages and linguistic techniques such as distancing devices like plural pronouns, verbal means of

intimidation, and specific language choices, thus effectively "othering" the Muslim community from the rest of society. Since language influences the perception of reality, employing these strategies to affirm ideology and power relationships accordingly intimidates and objectifies the Muslim community, showcasing the social media users' perception of reality.

Sri Lankans, as a nation who are still coming to terms with decades of ethnic civil war, these Islamophobic sentiments further polarise the already divided nations, making the road to recovery that much more challenging. The discourse that appeared in these interactions closely resembles identical versions of islamophobia that exist in other

parts of the world, raising questions as to whether it is the current mood and trends of the world that are the reason for these sentiments.; hence, local and global interventions are needed to overcome this adversity. The recent United Nations resolutions to nominate March 15th as International Day to Combat Islamophobia, commemorating the murder of over 50 Muslims in New Zealand mosques in 2019, could be seen as a step in the right direction.

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[1]   Mohedeen & Mohedeen's 2008 study concerning the linguistic aspects of Islamophobia - expressions which serve to perpetuate prejudices against Islam and its adherents, looks at some common examples of Islamophobic language in various articles gathered from the Internet and responds to them in an objective manner. It was noted that although Islam, in Arabic, means peace, however, certain quarters have come up with many collocations with "Islam" and "Islamic", which are incompatible with and contradictory to things related to Islam. They note that the following expressions are extremely offensive to Muslims when they are used together with "Islamic," for example, Islamic terrorists/terrorism, fanatics, radicals, fascists, extremists/extremists, militants, threats, violence, etc. Many offensive terms also co-occur before "Islam", for example, fascist, fanatical, radical, hardline, militant Islam, etc. The term "Muslim" is used after "militant" and before "terrorists", as in militant Muslims and Muslim terrorists.

2.   Carnerero & Azeez, (2016) a. Boston only 1 act of #jihad this week #Muslims also done 52 other attacks killing 262 injuring 725 #Islam is waging a global war #edl #bnp (pg 28) b. You can deny it all you want … They want to kill us all! #jihad #Caliphate (pg 31) c. The Quran said, 'kill.' They killed.

#aynrand #objectivism #jihad #salafism #Islam (pg 30) IMAGE: Without Islam, peace could exist! #noIslam #Islamisevil #nosharia #jihad #evil (pg 31)

8.2   Recommendations

Most of these interactions were made in Sinhala or Romanised Sinhala compared to English, thus indicating that they are the preferred language for Islamophobic discourse to express these negative sentiments towards Muslims and Islam.

However, as early research points out that a more significant percentage of Facebook users are young adults, it is worth discovering why online interactors prefer Sinhala over English, as technology is still English-friendly. These could be found out through further research on the interactors' linguistic choices.

It is worth researching the speeches of the head of state, politicians, and people of concern to critically analyse their use of Islamophobic discourse.

8.3   Limitations

The research was limited to Sinhala, Romanised Sinhala, and English, which is a limitation of my research. The source dataset contained Islamophobic discourse in Tamil; including Tamil words would be another area to be explored to enhance this research.

A large number of articles were published in Facebook News Publishers post-Easter Bombings 2019, which contained Islamophobic discourses; a limited number of articles were taken for this study due to the sheer volume of time that was required to process each article manually.

The research was limited to typed text, whereas comments were posted and represented using memes, images, shapes, videos, and emojis, which were excluded from the current scope. These additional representations of comments with images did convey Islamophobic views; therefore, analysing these non-text-based comments could extend this research further..

Notes: Translations for Sinhala and Romanised Sinhala comments.

1. Your people who have their tips cut (been circumcised) did this heinous task. In Sri Lanka, we raise pigs but have them in pens and never take them inside our homes. That's the Sri Lankan way.

2. They called themselves a peaceful community. Whenever a Muslim is involved, where is the fuck is peace?

3. Eat pig shit, son of a bitch, fuckers together destroyed the country.

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4. You all are the same, fuckers. Get lost from our country.

5. 5Get lost fuckers. We have no relations with you after the 21st of last month (April). We will corner you all in this world. You all are worse than animals. Low bread, fuckers.

6. All of you are terrorists only.

7. Although all terrorists are not Muslims, all Muslims are terrorists.

8. All the degenerates and fuckers of this country are Muslims.

9. Here comes what they have been planning for the future. They only know to destroy and murder. They will do it to us, too. They are that much degenerated.

10. Sri Lanka cannot be turned into an Arab country, and if tried, they will perish.

11. Ok. Ok, Mushtafa, we know you all are good people. After the upcoming election, we will take care of you all. Don't worry, bro.

12. Cornering you all isn't enough. Must be stoned and chased. A peaceful religion that doesn't even know the meaning of peace.

13. It's time to get rid of this cruel religion from this world. If not, this beautiful earth will soon die.

14. We are still discovering what your few people did. Get lost fuckers. Roll your prophet and your god Allah and shove them in your ass. Murderous religion.

15. Illegitimates tend to say things like these.

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