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Humanities

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Humor Against Hatred

As difficult issues that challenge human morality and rationale enter politics, they become subject to a slew of factual arguments that take away from the emotions of an issue. To this regard, the article, “Defining Islamophobia Is the First Step Toward Addressing It” by Mohammad Zaheer, looks to define and exemplify the problem of Islamophobia in the UK over the last two decades as it affects politics. The article is presented as a formal argumentative piece from the news site “Foreign Policy.” The satire, “Punish a Muslim Day,” performed by Hasan Minhaj, looks to push this same argument; however, it does this by responding to a proposed hate crime, named “Punish a Muslim Day,” which calls for a day of targeted hatred and bigotry against Muslims. Despite the constructive use of rhetorical devices to appeal to logos in “Defining Islamophobia Is the First Step Toward Addressing It,” “Punish a Muslim Day” more effectively highlights the extent of Islamophobia by appealing to pathos with clever usage of satirical devices.

The article, “Defining Islamophobia,” develops its viewpoint on the extent of Islamophobia in a logical structure with precise and formal diction, specific allusions, and a reliance on statistics, but it fails in appealing to the emotions of the reader. The word choice of the article creates a high and professional diction to foster factual statements on the argument.

When introducing the development of the Muslim community, Zaheer notes that “At the same time, the Rushdie affair—and the alienation of Muslims that came with it—pushed many of the country’s young Muslims to coalesce around a Muslim identity, which, in turn, led to their further rejection by the broader British society” (Zaheer). The word “alienation” is used over other options that have a more casual connotation, such as “abandonment” or “separation”.

Zaheer utilizes this to further connect the predicament of Muslims in this situation to the politics behind the treatment of Muslims as aliens. Similarly, the word “coalesce” is opted for over terms such as merged or formed to establish that the Muslim community has evolved to be more than just an identity, but rather an established group of people. Zaheer consciously employs this precise diction throughout the text, allowing him to connect more opinionated statements with political facts. Similarly, Zaheer uses specific allusions to Islamophobia and its policies to factualize and highlight the extent of Islamophobia. When introducing the rise of Islamophobia, Zaheer alludes to how “Islamophobia in the United Kingdom really came under the spotlight in the 1970s due to the OPEC oil crisis, which saw the conflation of Arabs and Muslims, both being considered a threat to Britain’s economy and civilization,” (Zaheer). This allusion contextualizes the stereotype of Muslims and Arabs as “threats” to Britain, which originally sparked from a political issue on oil in the Middle East. This obviously faulty logic is then expanded upon to further Zaheer’s argument that Islamophobia is based on false stereotypes. These allusions provide certitude on his claims and make it difficult for a reader to argue against his logic, as they are built upon facts that come from a historical foundation. Oftentimes, these allusions are paired with statistics and numerical data to further incorporate facts and logic into Zaheer’s argument. Before beginning his argument on the unfounded stereotypes of Muslim culture, Zaheer emphasizes that “In 2019, YouGov found that 38 percent of British people believed that

Islam was not compatible with Western values. A much higher proportion of respondents had an unfavourable view of Islam compared to any other religion” (Zaheer). The use of statistics provides another concrete factual basis to support the author’s arguments. In combination with formal diction and specific allusions, these devices foster an argument that appeals heavily to logos and creates the basis for Zaheer to create an effective logical argument. This overreliance on fact and logic, however, proves to be a fatal flaw of the article. By over relying on logical and factual elements to support his argument, the author is unable to appeal to the emotions of the reader. More specifically, Zaheer fails to use a connection to the reader to incite emotions of understanding, anger, and annoyance at the hypocrisy of the opposing viewpoint of the argument. The factualized statements in the articles impede the reader from experiencing the emotions of the Muslims suffering from such Islamophobia and, as a result, the argument becomes less effective. The effects of the lack of emotion become evident when contrasted to the argument by Hasan Minhaj that looks at the same issue but through a satirical lens.

Unlike “Defining Islamophobia,” “Punish a Muslim Day” highlights the extent of the true reality of Islamophobia with humorous reduction, situational irony, and paradoxes that create a more effective argument. Minhaj’s argument begins with an almost instant reduction of the poster’s author by pointing out what really offends him is “The shitty graphic design: ...the weird fonts, the random underlining. Are you pushing a race war or bingo night at a nursing home?...If you’re gonna be racist, step your game up,” (Minhaj 1:19 – 1:34). This attack on the minor aesthetical aspects of the poster shifts the focus away from the opponent’s argument and onto the opponent themselves. By taking away from the opponent’s credibility and belittling their abilities as a person, Minhaj, not only limits the authority of the opponent, but he also furthers his own argument by appealing to the listener’s humor. This use of humor is not limited

to his use of reduction of the opponent; it is also complemented with clever and situational irony. As a part of his response to a proposed day of hatred and bigotry, he emphasizes that “They are proposing Punish a Muslim Day. Day, Trevor. One day. That’s 364 days less than normal; I take that as a W, alright.” (Minhaj 0:45 – 0:56). Minhaj defies the logical reaction expected to the proposed hate crime and in turn, he highlights how one day of Islamophobia would be an improvement from the current situation. This clever double meaning plays along with the paradox of the statements he makes. By stating that the obviously negative action would have a positive effect, he contextualizes the current state of Islamophobia that becomes apparent to the reader in a manner that is humorous while also effectively maintaining the severity of the argumentative statements. The usage of paradoxes reveals the latent truth in Minhaj’s statements in a manner that does not overwhelm the listener while simultaneously acting as an eye-opener to the status of Islamophobia as experienced by Muslims in the UK. In combination, these satirical devices appeal to a listener’s pathos by internalizing emotions of empathy for Muslims while bringing to light the true state of Islamophobia. This appeal to pathos proves itself to be more effective as it connects with the target of the satire on an emotional level, whereas Zaheer’s argument over-relies on its appeal to logos. Despite the solid factual foundation of Zaheer’s argument, the reader finds themselves overwhelmed and unable to connect their emotions with the experiences of Islamophobia.

The argument to highlight the extent of Islamophobia in the UK is shown through the argumentative rhetoric “Defining Islamophobia Is the First Step Toward Addressing It” by Mohammad Zaheer and the humorous satire “Punish a Muslim Day” by Hasan Minhaj. However, the approach towards developing this argument has great variance between the two pieces, as the first looks towards utilizing and relying on an appeal to logos to develop its

arguments. In contrast to this, “Punish a Muslim Day” utilizes humor in conjunction with satirical devices to appeal to pathos and degrade the ethos of the opponent that is satirized for Minhaj’s argument. By appealing to pathos and the audience’s empathy, Minhaj shows the effectiveness of humor and satire and the power of using a non-traditional and informal method even when discussing the most serious of topics.

Works Cited

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