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Rhetorical Strategies in Zakir Naik's Speech: A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach

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Abstract/Abstrak

This study explores the rhetorical strategies employed by Dr. Zakir Naik in one of his public speeches, focusing on how persuasion is constructed through Aristotle's rhetorical appeals: ethos, pathos, and logos. Using a descriptive qualitative method, the research analyzes a selected speech transcript to uncover how language and argumentation are strategically used to influence audiences in a religious and intercultural context. Drawing on Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory as the main analytical framework, the study identifies how Dr. Naik establishes credibility (ethos), appeals to emotion (pathos), and constructs logical reasoning (logos) to strengthen his message. The analysis reveals that Dr. Naik effectively blends these rhetorical elements to assert religious authority, counter opposing viewpoints, and engage audiences from diverse backgrounds. This study contributes to the understanding of rhetorical discourse in contemporary religious communication and provides insight into how language can be used as a powerful tool for persuasion in cross-cultural settings.

Keywords: *rhetoric, Aristotle, Zakir Naik, persuasive speech, ethos, pathos, logos, descriptive qualitative method*

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, religious discourse has moved beyond traditional settings and entered the domain of mass media, digital platforms, and intercultural communication. Religious leaders are no longer addressing only their immediate communities but are reaching global audiences with diverse cultural, ideological, and religious backgrounds. In such contexts, the effectiveness of religious speech often depends not only on doctrinal content but also on the speaker's ability to persuade, connect emotionally, and establish authority through rhetorical performance. One of the most prominent and controversial figures in this domain is Dr. Zakir Naik, a renowned Islamic preacher known for his public lectures on comparative religion delivered in English across various international platforms.

Dr. Naik's speeches are typically characterized by structured argumentation, intertextual references to religious scriptures, and direct engagement with the audience's beliefs and doubts. His rhetorical style has attracted both wide admiration among Muslim communities and sharp criticism from secular and interfaith circles. Despite this prominence, academic research analyzing how Dr. Naik constructs his arguments and persuades his audiences—especially using classical rhetorical theory—remains limited. This gap becomes even more significant considering the growing relevance of religious discourse in shaping public opinion and interreligious perceptions.

The classical rhetorical framework offered by Aristotle—which includes the three persuasive appeals of *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotional appeal), and *logos* (logical reasoning)—provides a valuable lens for investigating the persuasive dynamics of such speeches. Aristotle's theory, though ancient, continues to be applied in contemporary rhetorical studies, particularly in political communication, media analysis, and public speaking. However, its application in the analysis of Islamic religious discourse, especially in the English-speaking context, remains underexplored.

A review of existing literature reveals several gaps in the rhetorical study of Dr. Zakir Naik's speeches. For instance, Ali and Shah (2018) conducted a discourse analysis of Naik's speeches but focused primarily on Islamic identity construction rather than on rhetorical mechanisms. Their study employed Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model but did not explore the classical elements of persuasion that shape audience perception.

Similarly, Rahman and Hafeez (2020) examined Naik's discourse in the context of media framing and interfaith relations, concluding that his speeches often reinforce binary oppositions between Islam and other faiths. While valuable, their research emphasized ideological positioning rather than the micro-level rhetorical techniques employed by the speaker.

Another relevant study by Yusof and Zaini (2021) analyzed audience reception to Dr. Naik's debates and public lectures, noting the impact of his use of scripture and logic. However, their research remained largely descriptive and did not systematically apply any classical or modern rhetorical frameworks.

These studies collectively highlight important aspects of Dr. Zakir Naik's discourse—identity, ideology, and audience impact—but they leave a clear analytical gap in terms of understanding how rhetorical strategies are constructed through language in his speeches. No study to date has systematically applied Aristotle's rhetorical theory to examine the persuasive structure of Dr. Naik's oratory within a critical discourse framework.

This study aims to fill that gap by employing a descriptive qualitative method to analyze selected excerpts from Dr. Zakir Naik's speeches. Using Aristotle's rhetorical appeals as the main analytical tool, this research identifies and interprets how ethos, pathos, and logos are constructed to enhance persuasive effect in religious discourse. By doing so, this study contributes not only to the fields of rhetorical criticism and critical discourse analysis but also to the broader understanding of contemporary Islamic oratory in global contexts. Ultimately, the findings are expected to provide insights into how religious speakers use language as a strategic tool for persuasion, identity reinforcement, and ideological influence in multicultural and pluralistic societies.

Method

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research design, which is appropriate for exploring the rhetorical and linguistic features embedded within spoken discourse. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth interpretation of textual data and is particularly suited to understanding how rhetorical strategies function within a given social, cultural, and ideological context. The study is grounded in Aristotle's classical rhetorical theory, focusing on the appeals of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, as the primary analytical framework to interpret the persuasive elements in religious speech.

The subject of this research is a selected public speech delivered by Dr. Zakir Naik, chosen purposively based on its relevance, content richness, and popularity. The speech, titled *"Is the Quran God's Word?"*, was delivered in front of an international audience and is publicly available via Dr. Naik's official YouTube channel. This particular speech was

selected because it exemplifies Dr. Naik's typical rhetorical style, which combines religious references, logical reasoning, and emotional appeals directed at both Muslim and non-Muslim listeners. The unit of analysis is the transcribed textual content of the speech, including the main lecture and selected audience interactions during the Q&A session.

Data collection involved obtaining a high-quality video recording of the speech and transcribing it verbatim to ensure textual accuracy. The transcription process was carefully conducted to capture not only the linguistic content but also relevant rhetorical cues such as emphasis, pauses, and audience reactions. No additional instruments such as questionnaires or interviews were used, as the study relies solely on naturally occurring spoken data. The corpus was then organized into thematic segments based on topic transitions and rhetorical function.

For the data analysis, the study employs a critical rhetorical analysis within a qualitative discourse framework. Each segment of the transcribed speech was examined for the presence of rhetorical appeals, categorized under *ethos*, *pathos*, or *logos* according to Aristotle's taxonomy. The analysis also considered contextual and pragmatic factors, such as audience targeting, tone, and intertextual references. To enhance the analytical depth, the study incorporated elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)—particularly those proposed by Teun A. van Dijk—focusing on the ideological implications and power relations conveyed through rhetorical language. The combined use of Aristotle's rhetorical theory and CDA enables a more comprehensive interpretation of how persuasion operates both at the micro-linguistic level and within broader sociocultural dynamics.

This methodological approach allows the study to not only map the rhetorical devices used by Dr. Naik but also to critically assess how those strategies function in reinforcing religious authority, challenging competing ideologies, and engaging with global audiences.

Results

As what have elaborated in the background, Zakir Naik have been doing many talks all around the world until this present time with his son and the IRF (Islamic Research Foundation) which he has been leading since couple of years back. Main objectives of his talks commonly focuses on enlightening people's view of worshiping nowadays which he believe have been misguided, people's misconceptions about Islam and the most significant is persuading people to enter Islam which he believe the true and accepted religion by the one and only Almighty God.

These two analyzed videos are mostly discuss about how will people come to know that Islam is the correct or true religion of worshiping, what is the reason behind this universe creation, why can't people from other religion enter the Jannah (Heaven), why should Islam, and so on. Well, these common issues are very essential to be answered thoroughly to clear all misconceptions and enlighten people's view in this current state yet still many scholars can't provide answers that acceptable to the logic even of their own followers moreover of people outside of community but amazingly Zakir Naik has always been able to answer them all and sometimes successfully guides people to believe in Islam.

Discussion

Theoretically, persuasion can be achieved when the speaker uses three appeals to the hearer which are *ethos, logos* and *pathos.* In persuasive dialogue, speaker's

appeals are of three types. First, when the speaker shows his/her credibility to speak before the audiences. Secondly, the goal of persuasion may be achieved when the speaker is able to stir their emotions and feelings. Thirdly, when the speaker can proves any ideas acceptable to logic. The writer finds that a remarkable speaker like Zakir Naik is an excellent speaker with a genuine skill of persuasions. It has been proven on how he encountered and converted the questioners from various communities and backgrounds, highly-intelligent peoples or even scholars of certain religion. In this selected video analysis, this speaker implemented all three elements of Aristotle's rhetorics of *ethos, logos* and *pathos*.

1. Ethos

In a simple manner, *ethos* means how good is the speaker convinces the audience that she/he is credible or qualified enough to speak about the particular subject of concern. Zakir Naik, a speaker with thousands of public talk experiences certainly has the criteria of a speaker with good *ethos* as follows:

a. Being a notable figure and having a vested interest in the field of question.

Zakir Naik originally came from medical field and later he studied about comparative religion years after. He is currently leading Islamic Research Foundation (IRF) in India with branches in some countries as well. He travels extensively and has been featured at many Islamic conferences to clear what he considers misconceptions about Islam using the Qur'an, Hadith and other religious scriptures as a basis while also spreading *Dawah* (Islamic Proselytism). So, it comes to the conclusion that Zakir Naik has already being a notable figure in the field of comparative religion studies since he runs the IRF and travels around the globe to stand as a keynote speaker.

b. By using impressive *logos* that shows to the audience that the speaker is knowledgeable on the topic (presented on the next sub-point)

c. By appealing to a person's ethic or character

Zakir Naik is a typical speaker with two side coin of characters which can be friendly and temperamental depends on the questioners themselves. He is always being friendly to those who asks calmly and politely and sometimes being emotion to some questioners who just accusing him doing propaganda, blindly criticizing and discriminating any person or community. Nevertheless, as an educated person, instead of using emotion to encounter such questioner Zakir Naik shows his ethical side as he responses those accusations, critics or comments scientifically with references and logics.

In this analyzed video, Zakir Naik illustrated his ethic in dialoging with an audience from Hindu's background with lot of intelligent questions. The identical stereotype of Zakir Naik in question-answer session is how he treats people equally in greeting. In this video and even all of his dialogues, Zakir Naik greets people as *brother* for a male and *sister* for a female questioner. Here, the writer assumes it as the ethical stereotype of Zakir Naik where he believes that all people in this world are all brothers and sisters regardless of their religions. From the first line till the end of dialogue, in replying four different questions Zakir Naik used *brother* for fifteen times.

Meanwhile, a speaker with bad *ethos* possibly greets people with in racist manner like *this Hindus, this Christians or this Muslims ask, this young man, this woman* and so on. So, this shows how rhetoric is scrutinized from all sides and

how even a single word may create two different effects and portrays a speaker's character.

Also, in this dialogue, Anshul asked approximately four different questions as Zakir Naik tried to respond the previous questions given. Another good *ethos* from this speaker is to respect people's questions in every level of intelligence. Its remarked when he started to review the question first before giving any responses with an opening clauses like *the brother asked a very good question,* and *very good and very important question* (line 58, 138, 206 and 286).

Furthermore, in order to emphasize his *ethos* that he is a credible speaker, Zakir Naik stated his credibility as in the following data:

LINE 328

I said "Your Pundit is misguiding you!" and I misguiding you, tell me "Dr Zakir Naik you are wrong", and I'll take back my words. ***I'm quoting Sanskrit*** *(Hindu Scripture).*

LINE 402

So, I tell you, take a contradiction in The Qur'an because ***I'm a student of The Qur'an.***

The statement above implies the speaker ability to argue about what is aligns and contradicts with sacred scriptures. In a form of challenge, Zakir Naik implicitly showed what he has explained were definitely true by asking the audience to point out any mistakes that Zakir Naik made in his arguments about Hindu idol worship and any contradiction mentioned in the Qur'an where this scholar believes there is no single contradiction because he has already examined it as the student of Qur'an. Definitely, these two statements implies the speaker's credibility to speak since he uses more than one religious scriptures to speak about what is common or contradict related to the topic.

2. Logos

Three elements of mode of persuasion are a set of lethal persuasive appeals thus, it should never stand partially otherwise the goal shall never be achieved. Particularly, *logos* that writer finds as the most powerful appeal among the other two. This type of appeal may influence the audience comprehensively as long as the speaker is able to illustrate either directly or deductively a simple logic of what is good or bad, what is just or unjust, what is advantageous or harmful and so on. Apparently, Zakir Naik illustrated his *logos* to guide people to think logically as a mean of emphasizing his idea. In the previous unit, the writer presents how Zakir Naik mostly engaged with audience's logic using analogies. In addition, this speaker made some other approaches to his audience's logic through denotative and implicit arguments as follows:

LINE 74 (Deductive)

Premis 1*: But one creator who can create something from nothing,*
Premis 2*: ,that only God can do.*
Conclusion: *So, God is The Creator who can create something from nothing.*

As what presented above, the speaker stated his argument in two premises and then followed by a conclusion. In premise 1, the speaker mentioned the second type of a creator that the one who can create something from nothing

he supposed. While, the second premise states that the one who can do such is only the Almighty God. Thus, the speaker in his conclusion stated that God is a creator who can create something from nothing. This simple deductive analysis implies a simple logical message of limitless power of God and there is no other creatures possess that such power.

LINE 390 - 394

Zakir : If you say "I will not change", that means you are obstinate, that means you are stubborn.
Anshul: Hehehe
Zakir : Correct right?
Anshul : That's right.

This was the other attempt of the speaker to stimulate his audience logical side occurred in the final phase of the dialogue. The above piece of dialogue illustrates how Zakir Naik re-convinced his audience through logical approach when he found his audience still insisted to not leave his misguided belief after all explanations given. In a very brief dialogue, this scholar successfully convinced Anshul to think logically about his choice of whether or not to change what has been proven wrong by the speaker.

3. Pathos

The last appeal is related to audience's feeling and emotion. It can be in the form of simile (previous unit), a passionate delivery, or even a simple claim that a matter is unjust. *Pathos* may be used to appeal to fear, in order to sway the audience. It may also include appeals to audience imaginations and hopes; done when the speaker paints a scenario of positive future results of following the course of action proposed. Within the dialogue, Zakir Naik often engaged with audience's emotions dominantly through simile when he delivers his point of views which elaborated in previous unit. This section presents more Zakir Naik's appeals to stir people's emotions as follows:

LINE 272

So if you understand Almighty God, you will thank Him that what You are giving me, I don't even deserve of 0,00000000000…
If you don't understand, you will think this life is hell.

In this sample, Zakir Naik stated a conclusion after all explanations been given. The speaker dragged the questioner's emotion whom full of confusion and disappointment into enlightenment where he finally realized the true purpose behind all the pain in the test of life. The above statements created a strong emotional switch and stressed a thought comparison between those who understand and those who don't. Using a conditional sentence situation, the speaker portrayed two possible thoughts that the audience may have upon the test of life and God's plan behind it. Remarkably, the speaker dragged Anshul's emotion with a huge confusion in the beginning but later enlightened and made him converted at that time.

LINE 359

Zakir : Now you believe that idol worship is wrong?
Anshul : Yes.
Zakir : Do you believe Prophet Muhammad is the messenger of God?

Anshul : Yes, I do.
*Zakir : **Khalaz (Done)***
Audience : Clapping
*Zakir : **So that means you've turned to follow the true religion**.*

The next sample shows how Zakir Naik tried to give more another enlightenment upon his questioner's belief. After all fully-passionate explanations, Anshul himself finally realized and believed the fundamental pillars of all religion which are to believe on one God and believe that Prophet Muhammad is the Messenger of God. This data shows Zakir Naik attempt to tell the questioner that he already become a true believer since he believe on those two pillars even if he did not aware of it.

In conclusion, as a whole, Zakir Naik has implemented these three modes of persuasion effectively until the end of dialogue. It was indicated on his success in responding common intelligent questions that people probably possess and converting Anshul to become a Muslim as his main goal from the very beginning. His remarkable track records in comparative religion talks and studies has making him considered as an influential speaker and indeed possessed a high credibility in religious discussions. Besides, in carrying his ideas, Zakir Naik dominantly made some logical approaches either in simile forms or direct analysis in order to sway his audience's misconceptions. Moreover, through his ideas Zakir Naik caused some emotional effect to his hearer as a result of his stresses on certain ideas, passionately delivering style or direct statements etc. which at the end made the audience stand with him in the same point of view.

Conclusion

This study has examined the rhetorical strategies employed by Dr. Zakir Naik in one of his public speeches through the lens of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals—*ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*—using a descriptive qualitative approach. The analysis revealed that Dr. Naik effectively integrates these three persuasive elements to construct a coherent and compelling religious discourse aimed at both affirming Islamic teachings and challenging alternative worldviews. His use of *ethos* is evident in how he establishes his credibility through references to religious texts, scientific data, and his own scholarly background. *Pathos* is employed through emotionally charged language, appeals to religious identity, and empathy toward audience concerns. Meanwhile, *logos* is manifested through structured reasoning, analogies, and inter-religious comparisons designed to appear objective and rational.

The findings suggest that Dr. Naik's rhetorical approach is not merely spontaneous or informal but is strategically crafted to address a diverse, multicultural audience. His speeches function as both religious persuasion and ideological positioning, offering insights into how language can be used to legitimize religious authority, shape interfaith discourse, and assert theological dominance in a competitive religious landscape.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the limited but growing body of literature that applies classical rhetorical theory—particularly Aristotle's framework—to the analysis of contemporary Islamic preaching. It also demonstrates the value of combining rhetorical theory with critical discourse analysis to uncover both linguistic strategies and their underlying ideological functions. While this study offers a detailed look into one of Dr. Naik's speeches, it is limited in scope and does not account for variations across different audiences, languages, or cultural contexts. Future research could expand on this work by comparing multiple speeches, including

those delivered in other languages or settings, or by exploring audience reception through interviews and surveys.

Ultimately, this study highlights the enduring relevance of classical rhetorical principles in analyzing modern religious discourse and provides a critical lens for understanding how persuasion operates at the intersection of language, religion, and ideology.

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