

Disease as Sociopolitical Metaphor in Marina Mahathir's Columns

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ABSTRACT

Conceptual metaphors are powerful tools in contemporary journalism, helping writers convey complex ideas and evoke strong emotions. Among them, health metaphors stand out for their striking yet subtle ability to illustrate social and political issues. However, a review of the literature reveals a lack of published research on metaphors in news columns, particularly within the Malaysian context. This study critically analyses 24 articles written by Marina Mahathir in her column – Musings – between 2015 and 2020 for The Star Online, a local English-language daily, focusing on the use of health metaphors. Rooted in Lakoff and Johnson's Conceptual Metaphor Theory (1980) and Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis (2004), the study examines the prevalence of health and disease metaphors in Marina's writing and explores how her ideologies are conveyed through these metaphors, reflecting her inclination to confront sensitive, polarising, and often controversial subjects, despite the persistent challenges posed by media censorship in the country. Findings showed Marina's affinity for health metaphors, possibly aimed at compelling readers to engage with societal and political issues and highlighting their urgency and the need to address them. By likening these issues to diseases, Marina effectively calls for immediate and comprehensive interventions akin to medical treatments. This study underscores the significant role of health metaphors in news columns, countering the notion that metaphors are mere rhetorical tools and emphasising their power as cognitive and ideological devices that shape public perception.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor; health metaphor; ideology; news column; sociopolitical discourse

INTRODUCTION

Metaphors play a vital role in language and communication (Gunton, 2003). Lakoff (1995) states that we frequently think in metaphors, often unconsciously, with much of our everyday thought shaped by this rhetorical device. They serve as powerful tools for communicating nuanced ideas and perspectives through symbolic imagery, allowing us to grasp one concept in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Although often regarded as mere figures of speech that compare two ideas, metaphors are deeply embedded in everyday language. Geary (2011) challenges the notion that metaphors belong solely to literature, asserting that English speakers use them every 10 to 25 words and emphasising their central role in communication.

In sociopolitical commentary, conceptual metaphors enhance communication, encouraging readers to interpret meaning across multiple levels (Urbonaite & Seskauskiene, 2007). A striking example is the health and disease metaphor, which is often linked to themes of morality, governance, and social well-being (Forsberg & Severinsson, 2015). Ereshefsky (2009) argues that defining something as a disease goes beyond describing its features; it also involves making a normative judgment. Coetzee (2019) highlights the complexity of corruption, noting that those responsible for intervention strategies – often public sector officials and politicians – may

themselves be corrupt. Thus, combating corruption relies on strong societal perceptions and actions, which, in the media, are shaped by compelling metaphors that frame corruption in familiar terms, ultimately driving awareness and engagement.

Understanding how metaphorical language influences public perception is crucial, especially in contexts such as Malaysia, where press restrictions and crackdowns on freedom of expression are stringent (Reporters Without Borders, 2021). In such environments, writers may rely on figurative language to express dissent indirectly, and studying their use of metaphors can reveal how they navigate and challenge these constraints to spotlight key sociopolitical issues. While the use of metaphors by columnists remains underexplored, extensive research has examined both news media, including columns and editorials, as well as figurative language in general. However, most studies on metaphors in news columns have focused on non-Asian media (Atolagbe & Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2017), which Bernstein and Galily (2008) argue are “not equally applicable” to Asian countries like Malaysia.

The study of news discourse and metaphors across different regions underscores their crucial role in shaping public narratives. Bednarek and Caple (2014) introduced a discursive framework for analysing news values, demonstrating how metaphors influence perceptions of newsworthiness in British media. Feifei (2024) extended this analysis to the Chinese context by exploring the government’s use of war and family metaphors during the COVID-19 pandemic to shape public perception and promote national unity. Abu Rumman et al. (2024) examined the metaphors used to depict corruption during the Jordanian “Hirak” protest movement, revealing how disease and warfare metaphors reflected public sentiment and political activism. Sengupta et al. (2024) contributed further to the study of political metaphors by developing a dataset illustrating the differences in metaphorical framing effects on liberals and conservatives based on the source and target domains used.

In the Malaysian context, metaphors offer unique insights into regional discourse. Ravichandran Vengadasamy (2011) demonstrated how land serves as a metaphor for identity in short stories, reflecting sociological and cultural beliefs. Siti Aeisha Joharry and Habibah Ismail (2019) used corpus linguistics to examine stylistic differences among online news columnists and their impact on public opinion. Leo and David (2020) analysed metaphors in Malaysian English newspapers during the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how war and family metaphors framed the crisis and promoted national unity. Tan et al. (2021) explored a different dimension by studying war metaphors in sports news to uncover the role of linguistic modifiers in shaping their sentiment.

However, to the best of the authors’ knowledge, no research has examined a Malaysian columnist’s use of conceptual metaphors, leaving a gap in understanding how this figure of speech shapes public discourse in the country. As the studies mentioned earlier suggest, metaphors are far from neutral; they actively construct and reinforce ideological beliefs and values. Filling this gap is, therefore, crucial, as metaphors not only influence the expression of thought but also affect how readers interpret and interact with pertinent issues. In Malaysia, where cultural, political, and social dynamics are complex and diverse, exploring metaphor usage in the media can offer valuable insights into how columnists frame their ideologies, influence public opinion, and contribute to national dialogue.

Marina Mahathir, through her column *Musings* in *The Star Online*, uses health and disease metaphors to discuss Malaysia’s sociopolitical environment. These metaphors are strategic tools that allow her to comment on societal norms, values, and beliefs. Analysing Marina’s metaphors in Malaysia’s sociohistorical context is essential to unveiling how metaphorical language functions as a powerful device for political commentary and critique. This approach will also shed light on

how she tackles complex and sensitive issues like corruption, governance, and social inequality, deepening our understanding of metaphors' role in public discourse. Examining how Marina integrates metaphorical expressions into her columns could also reveal her strategy for navigating the fraught social and political landscape, providing a lens to interpret the complex interplay between language and sociopolitical issues in the country.

In short, this qualitative study aimed to uncover the nuances of health metaphors in Marina's columns and explore how her ideologies are conveyed through them. It also examined the role of conceptual metaphors in modern Malaysia's sociopolitical discourse. The study sought to illustrate Marina's rhetorical strategies for critiquing societal norms and political practices, thereby enhancing our understanding of Malaysian identity and the complexities of governance, especially in the context of media censorship. To address these objectives, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What health metaphors are present in Marina Mahathir's columns?
2. How do these health metaphors contribute to the construction of ideology in Marina Mahathir's columns?

WHY MARINA MAHATHIR

Marina Mahathir is a prominent Malaysian columnist widely known for her outspoken and unconventional views on national and global issues. She has received numerous accolades for her longstanding contributions to Malaysia's social and political landscape. In 1997, Marina was honoured with the *Datuk Paduka Mahkota Selangor* award by the Sultan of Selangor, which carries the title of *Datin Paduka*. She was named UN Person of the Year by the United Nations in Malaysia in 2010 and was recognised as one of the "100 Most Inspiring People Delivering for Girls and Women" by Women Deliver in 2011. Her contributions were further acknowledged in 2016 when she was appointed a member of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees' Advisory Group on Gender, Forced Displacement, and Protection and awarded the *Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur* by the French government the same year (Malaysiakini, 2016).

For over three decades, Marina has been a regular contributor to *The Star*, Malaysia's leading English-language daily, which ranks highly in brand trust scores, according to the 2021 Digital News Report by the Reuters Institute (Zaharom Nain, 2021). Her column, *Musings*, initially focused on personal reflections on motherhood but has, over time, evolved into a platform for discussing crucial social and political issues, resonating with a broad and diverse audience. Marina's sustained influence in the public sphere, along with her enduring linguistic contributions, makes her work an untapped and compelling area of study.

Language is a powerful tool in Marina's writing, allowing her to communicate with both a persuasive and rational voice. Much of the acclaim for her work comes from the engaging and insightful nature of her columns. Olson (1994) contends that successful writers build rapport with their readers, thereby establishing authority and trust. Marina's command of language and her ability to connect with her audience underscore her influence as a writer and communicator. Her column reflects her bold embrace of liberal and non-mainstream ideologies, championing progressive causes while challenging conservative trends in Malaysia's political and social landscape.

CONCEPTUAL METAPHOR THEORY AND CRITICAL METAPHOR ANALYSIS

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) explores the cognitive processes behind our understanding and interpretation of metaphorical expressions. Developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980), this theory asserts that metaphors are not just linguistic embellishments but essential to how we conceptualise the world. According to this framework, conceptual metaphors map one domain of experience onto another, creating a cognitive shorthand. For instance, phrases such as “life is a journey” or “time is money” demonstrate this cross-domain mapping, where the target domain (the subject being discussed) is understood through the lens of the source domain (the metaphorical reference point). These mappings are governed by structured correspondences between the two domains.

Dancygier (2016) defines metaphorical mapping as the systematic connections deeply rooted in our embodied experiences rather than merely theoretical constructs. Our interactions with the physical world shape and limit the metaphorical associations we form, rendering the process largely unconscious but deeply significant. The metaphors we use can also be influenced by our background, such as our history, concerns, and interests. For example, Kovecses (2010) found that a reader employed the metaphor EUROPEAN UNION AS AN ELECTRIC CIRCUIT in a letter to a Hungarian daily newspaper prior to Hungary joining the EU. Although this metaphor was unusual, it was a fitting choice given that the reader was an electrical engineer. This illustrates how our professions and personal experiences shape the way we intuitively use source domains to understand target domains in different contexts. Figure 1 illustrates the characterisation of metaphor through conceptual mappings between the source and target domains:

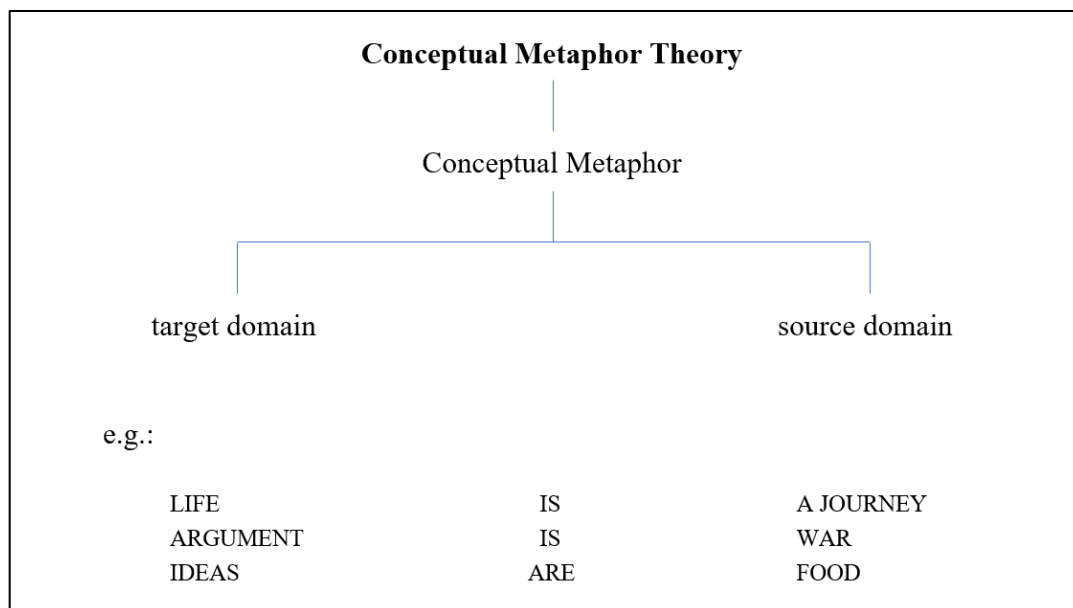


FIGURE 1. Conceptual Metaphor Theory framework (Kovecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980)

This study uses CMT as the primary framework to analyse Marina Mahathir’s use of health metaphors and examine their role in depicting sociopolitical issues in Malaysia. The systematic approach of CMT in uncovering patterns, ideologies, and meanings within conceptual metaphors is supported by numerous studies (Heyvaert et al., 2020; Krennmayr, 2011; Lamichhane, 2024;

Panahbar et al., 2017; Priyadarshni R. Lakshmi et al., 2016). However, research on health metaphors in news columns within the local context remains limited. This research is particularly important as it explores how a Malaysian writer uses metaphors to subtly comment on contentious issues, especially against the backdrop of censorship and media clampdowns (Yahoo! News Singapore, 2015).

While CMT provides the theoretical foundation for this research, the Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) serves as the analytical framework. CMA delves into the layers of language use, focusing on metaphorical expressions to uncover unconscious ideologies within discourse. While CMT views metaphors as profound conceptual constructs rather than mere linguistic flourishes, CMA builds on this by adding a pragmatic dimension, considering metaphors as tools for persuasion, composition, and stylistic expression (Charteris-Black, 2004; Zibin, 2020). In this framework, metaphor choice is a strategic decision influenced by cognitive, pragmatic, and ideological factors. Charteris-Black (2004) asserts that analysing a writer's conceptual metaphors provides deeper insights into their perspectives and implicit ideologies. The context is pivotal, as a metaphor's meaning can vary depending on its usage, necessitating a nuanced analysis that considers the language user's specific communicative goals (Charteris-Black, 2004).

An effective CMA involves three key aspects: linguistic, cognitive, and pragmatic, as well as three main processes: identification, interpretation, and explanation (Charteris-Black, 2004). Identification requires a careful examination of a text to locate metaphorical expressions. Interpretation then categorises these metaphors and explores their meanings and implications. Explanation investigates the broader sociopolitical context to uncover why specific metaphors are chosen (Charteris-Black, 2004). However, challenges arise due to the lack of consensus and rigorous methodology for defining and identifying metaphorical expressions. To address this, the Pragglejaz Group (2007) developed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP), providing a flexible yet reliable method to determine whether words carry metaphorical meanings within their specific contexts in everyday discourse (Dancygier, 2016; Pragglejaz Group, 2007). The group established the following steps for identifying metaphors:

1. Read the text to understand its overall meaning.
2. Identify the keywords (lexical units) in the text.
3. For each word:
 - a) Determine its meaning in the given context.
 - b) Check if it has a more basic meaning in other contexts – usually more concrete, related to bodily actions, precise, or historically older.
 - c) If the contextual meaning differs but can be compared to the basic meaning, it may be metaphorical.
4. If the word meets this criterion, mark it as a metaphor.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

The dataset for this study comprised metaphorical expressions related to health and disease from Marina Mahathir's columns in *The Star Online*. After reviewing 67 columns published between 2015 and 2020, eight dominant themes emerged: crime and punishment, democracy and politics, gender issues, free speech and media, matters of faith, public health, social values, and youth and education. The columns were categorised according to their predominant themes, though some

covered multiple topics, resulting in overlaps. Each column was, therefore, assigned to the theme most relevant to its primary focus.

In selecting the columns for analysis, the researchers chose those with the same theme to ensure consistency in metaphor identification, as different topics would likely produce different metaphors. Since nearly half of Marina's columns focused on politics, the study specifically examined this theme to explore how she employs disease metaphors to discuss what is regarded as a sensitive domain in Malaysia, narrowing the data to 24 articles centred on this topic. Analysing columns focused on politics and democracy during this period is especially significant, given that they were written by a columnist with left-leaning views during a time of intense political crisis and growing polarisation in Malaysia.

The six-year timeframe was selected to provide a contemporary analysis of Marina's metaphors, capturing a period marked by key political events. These included the *Bersih* protest in late 2015, organised by civil society groups advocating for electoral reform in response to the \$10 billion loss linked to the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. In 2018, Malaysia witnessed a historic election that ended the *Barisan Nasional* coalition's 60-year dominance. However, in 2020, the new government collapsed, and Dr Mahathir Mohamad's resignation as prime minister facilitated the return of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) to power. This political turmoil coincided with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, creating a unique convergence of political unrest and a health crisis in the country.

DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

To ensure a thorough exploration of the metaphorical elements in Marina Mahathir's columns, the study employed a dual-method approach. This method combined qualitative analysis, which involved a detailed examination of the texts to account for the abstract nature of metaphor identification, with a quantitative assessment to measure the frequency of health metaphors. The analysis was guided by Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory and followed the three-step approach outlined in Charteris-Black's (2004) Critical Metaphor Analysis.

While the study was primarily qualitative, descriptive statistics were integral to providing a solid interpretation of Marina's use of disease metaphors. These approaches were not treated separately but were interwoven, with each enriching the insights of the other. Descriptive statistics, however, were applied only to the initial phase of data analysis to identify metaphors, as metaphorical language and conceptual metaphors can be quantified. The subsequent stages – metaphor interpretation and explanation – relied more heavily on qualitative analysis to uncover the deeper meanings and implications of the identified metaphors.

METAPHOR IDENTIFICATION

To identify metaphorical linguistic expressions in Marina Mahathir's columns, this study employed the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) developed by the Pragglejaz Group (2007). The texts were thoroughly examined to gain a comprehensive understanding of their meanings, and the entire discourse was analysed to pinpoint keywords and potential metaphors. Keywords or lexical units related to health and disease were identified using the online Cambridge Dictionary and through contextual analysis of the discourse. The study then manually identified metaphorical expressions, focusing particularly on those linking social issues and immorality to

diseases. The basic meaning, often concrete and historically established, was compared to the contextual meaning to identify discrepancies. When differences were found, the similarities between the basic and contextual meanings were assessed to determine whether the keyword could be classified as metaphorical.

Charteris-Black (2004) highlights the complexity of qualitative analysis, particularly the challenge of distinguishing literal meanings from metaphorical interpretations of source words. This difficulty required a careful examination of both linguistic and non-linguistic contextual elements (Langacker, 1999). The analysis focused on lexical units that form syntagmatic relationships within sentences, as these often carry metaphors rooted in thought (Steen et al., 2010). Thus, the MIP framework serves as the foundation for metaphor analysis, aiming to delineate conceptual mappings by starting with linguistic metaphors through a bottom-up approach (Cameron, 2003; Krennmayr, 2011).

Metaphorical meanings hinge on the interplay between contextual and foundational interpretations. For a meaning to be considered metaphorical, the foundational sense must be distinct enough from the contextual one to be viewed as belonging to a different semantic or conceptual realm. Consequently, the practical guidelines established by Dorst et al. (2011) were applied to determine the metaphorical meanings of the lexical items:

1. If a word has multiple numbered meanings within its grammatical category, these meanings are considered distinct.
2. If a word has only one numbered meaning in its grammatical category, that meaning is considered the basic one, and any deviation from it in context is seen as distinct.

The following is an example of metaphor identification, using an excerpt from one of Marina's columns:

Sample expression:

*Hopefully, it stops them from further **spreading** foolishness.*

(AR13)

To determine whether the word "spreading" here is metaphorical, the four steps of MIP were applied:

1. In this context, the word "spreading" suggests the dissemination or propagation of ideas, behaviours, or attitudes – specifically, "foolishness".
2. The basic meaning of "spread" is "to cover or reach a wider or increasing area, or to make something do this" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).
3. However, in this specific context, the word "spreading" is not meant literally, as foolishness cannot be physically spread like a substance. Instead, it conveys the notion of ideas or behaviours becoming more widespread or influential, similar to how a disease spreads.
4. The contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in relation to it. Here, "spreading" is used metaphorically to emphasise concerns about the broader impact or influence of foolishness rather than its physical distribution.

In this sentence, one out of eight lexical units was identified as metaphorical. This example illustrates how MIP was applied in the study to analyse lexical units within a single sentence from one of Marina's columns. Typically, a single word is considered one lexical unit for metaphor analysis, with two main exceptions: proper nouns and phrasal verbs (e.g., "turned to"). According to Semino et al. (2017), although these items consist of multiple words, they often function as inseparable lexical units and are treated as such.

To enhance reliability and minimise subjectivity in identifying conceptual metaphors, the researchers followed the approach outlined by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005). This method involves tallying the types and frequencies of metaphorical keywords for each conceptual metaphor. The findings include details on the number of metaphorical expressions, the types of keywords, and their frequencies. It is important to note that a single metaphorical expression can contain multiple keywords, so the counts of expressions and keywords may not match.

METAPHOR INTERPRETATION

Interpreting metaphors requires a nuanced approach to connect them to their underlying cognitive and pragmatic aspects. This process involves understanding how conceptual metaphors shape culturally significant perceptions (Charteris-Black, 2004). For example, Charteris-Black's (2004) analysis of former American president George W. Bush's repeated use of the metaphor "to fight a crusade against terror" uncovered the underlying conceptual metaphor POLITICS IS RELIGION. He argues that for a conceptual metaphor to be meaningful, it must resonate with other linguistic expressions drawn from the same conceptual domain. Instances of POLITICS IS RELIGION are not only evident in Bush's famous phrase "the axis of evil" but also in various other expressions. Thus, POLITICS IS RELIGION emerged as a key conceptual metaphor in Bush's political rhetoric. In this study, metaphor interpretation involves evaluating the metaphors in Marina Mahathir's columns by examining both their literal meanings and contextual significance within a specific domain. This level of analysis requires dissecting metaphors based on their thematic and symbolic elements.

METAPHOR EXPLANATION

At the heart of deep metaphorical analysis lies an examination of the ideological underpinnings of metaphors. When analysing the language in Marina Mahathir's columns, a clear contrast emerged between straightforward, literal expressions and those layered with metaphorical meanings. Ideology shapes discourse and upholds social and political structures, often manifesting through metaphors (Wodak, 2021). Charteris-Black (2004) argues that identifying conceptual metaphors, such as "anger is heat", not only reveals the relationship between literal and metaphorical expressions but also uncovers fundamental ideological differences. For instance, one person may equate anger with heat, while another may associate it with madness – each reflecting a distinct ideological perspective. Studying Marina's metaphors requires a thorough exploration of the ideological orientations behind them, taking into account the political, cultural, and historical contexts of her columns.

The focus at this stage was to discern the objectives behind Marina's columns and identify the ideologies embedded in the metaphors she used. The goal was to connect these findings to the broader context, shedding light on the ideological impulses that guided her metaphorical choices. While previous studies have explored various aspects of metaphors – such as their emotional

impact, reality-shaping power, and influence on thought (Ahrens & Zeng, 2022; Bogetic, 2019; Budiman & Khristianto, 2024; Mang'eni & Schroeder, 2023; Saborido & Zamora-Bonilla, 2024) – these studies are not exhaustive and call for further research into the role of metaphors in shaping perspectives and driving social change.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

METAPHOR IDENTIFICATION

After a thorough examination of the 24 selected columns comprising approximately 25,000 words, a total of 32 metaphorical linguistic expressions related to health and disease were identified; this underscores the recurring “A is B” structure, where the vehicle (B) metaphorically represents the topic (A) across Marina Mahathir’s columns. While many of these metaphors diverge to some extent from Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) definition of conceptual metaphor, they still qualify as metaphorical linguistic expressions. In these constructs, one word – whether a noun, adjective, or verb – is used metaphorically, while the accompanying word retains its literal meaning (Black, 1962). The metaphorical element infuses the entire expression with figurative significance, adding nuanced layers to its interpretation. Table 1 catalogues these metaphorical expressions, which are highlighted in bold text:

TABLE 1. Metaphorical linguistic expressions in Marina Mahathir’s columns

Article	No.	Metaphorical Linguistic Expression
AR02	1	They seem to spend their entire lives thinking up nasty things to say, frequently misspelt and with the sort of perverse logic that only people with damaged frontal lobes can muster.
	2	Nothing pleases a troll more than to whip others into one big hysterical mob over an issue that they made up in their own sick minds .
	3	At the slightest thing, without any provocation, a troll makes a suggestion, and suddenly, a heaving mass of hysteria begins, aided by a media ever watchful for sensationalism.
	4	There is a certain psychosis that afflicts trolls.
	5	With these types of leaders, who can blame the masses for their madness ?
	6	We need to recognise that it is a madness that we are experiencing and having to bear these days.
AR03	1	Or is it just our addiction to putting down everything others do as simply a craving for publicity?
	2	May the advent of <i>Syawal</i> bring an end to the current madness and instead usher in a new light and new hope, God willing.
AR04	1	They may tolerate the odd person running a red light, but not if it becomes an epidemic because, obviously, it becomes very dangerous for everyone.
AR12	1	Perhaps the stunting of a girl’s educational growth is not considered evil by some.
	2	This means that if we tackle poverty, we will go a long way towards eradicating child marriage as well.
AR13	1	Hopefully, it stops them from further spreading foolishness.
AR14	1	Our students who go overseas often find that they are severely handicapped by their inability to look at anything they are taught with a critical eye.
AR16	1	I hope that some people are finally waking up to the presence of a tumour in our society that threatens to metastasise and spread all over our collective body.
	2	Once upon a time, we decided to take in a carcinogen and allowed it to breed.
	3	Despite the poison it kept emanating , we turned a blind eye to the toxins that were spreading .
AR17	1	This has been a rampant disease among our policymakers from times past and is still infecting them now.
AR19	1	But the real question is, will we ever recover from the pandemic of greed and hate that has also been unleashed?
AR20	1	Today, despite our supposed independence, we are still gasping for breath .

AR21	1	It is so nice to see a leader who, unlike some who come to mind, has not inhaled the toxins that usually pervade our political parties despite having spent years in the peninsula.
AR23	1	The education ministry should also be concerned that whole generations of children are going to be handicapped by their lost year of education.
	2	How are they planning to remedy the situation?

Identifying conceptual metaphors involves pinpointing metaphorical topics and vehicles within each expression, primarily guided by metaphorical keywords. These expressions are then categorised based on their respective vehicles and topics within specific domains. Conceptual metaphors are assigned to expressions that share common topics and vehicles, ensuring systematic classification.

A metaphorical keyword type includes all keywords derived from the same word family. For example, “infect”, “infectious”, and “infection” were grouped together under the root word “infect” and were indicated in brackets, such as [infect, infectious, infection], to show their common origin. Metaphorical keyword frequency refers to how often each keyword appeared and was denoted using the multiplication sign “×”. For instance, [infect×1, infectious×1, infection×1] indicates that each word appeared once in the identified metaphorical expressions. All conceptual metaphors in the study are presented in small caps.

1. SOCIAL ISSUES ARE DISEASES (16 metaphorical expressions)
[damaged frontal lobes×1]; [hysterical×1, hysteria×1]; [sick minds×1]; [psychosis×1]; [madness×3]; [addiction×1]; [epidemic×1]; [stunting×1]; [eradicating×1]; [spreading×1]; [handicapped×2]; [remedy×1]
2. IMMORALITY IS A DISEASE (16 metaphorical expressions)
[tumour×1]; [metastasis×1]; [spread×1, spreading×1]; [carcinogen×1]; [poison×1]; [emanating×1]; [toxins×2]; [rampant disease×1]; [infecting×1]; [recover×1]; [pandemic×1]; [gasping for breath×1]; [inhaled×1]; [pervade×1]

Marina employs health and disease metaphors to highlight the severity of social issues and immoral behaviours in the country, depicting them as infections that threaten society’s well-being. By framing these problems in medical and psychological terms, she emphasises their destructive nature and stresses the urgency for intervention.

The SOCIAL ISSUES ARE DISEASES metaphor, which appears 16 times in Marina’s columns, likens societal problems to ailments that impair rational thought and collective welfare. Terms like “hysteria”, “psychosis”, and “madness” suggest cognitive dysfunction on both individual and social levels, while words such as “epidemic”, “eradicating”, and “remedy” portray these issues as contagious conditions that must be tackled before they spread further.

Similarly, the IMMORALITY IS A DISEASE metaphor, which also appears 16 times, depicts unethical behaviour as a debilitating illness. Marina compares immorality to cancer using terms such as “tumour”, “metastasis”, and “carcinogen”, suggesting that corruption and vice can grow aggressively if left unchecked. Descriptions like “poison”, “toxins”, and “rampant disease” further emphasise immorality as a contaminant that seeps into society.

Both metaphors generate a strong sense of urgency, portraying social and moral decline as infections that require immediate intervention before they spread uncontrollably. Through disease-related language, Marina highlights the severity of these issues and the need for action to prevent widespread harm.

METAPHOR INTERPRETATION

This stage focused on interpreting conceptual metaphor mappings by analysing the characteristics of both vehicles and topics, with particular attention to metaphorical keywords and their functions. It provides a detailed discussion of each metaphor mapping, detailing how the attributes of the vehicle transfer to the topic and shape its perception.

Metaphorical topics were categorised to highlight Marina Mahathir's key concerns and how she represented them through conceptual metaphors. This process linked the conceptual metaphor topics to her discourse style, offering a better understanding of her approach to similar issues through varied metaphors. The findings provide valuable insights into the nature of specific topics in Marina's columns and her perspectives on them.

SOCIAL ISSUES ARE DISEASES

Marina Mahathir employs the conceptual metaphor SOCIAL ISSUES ARE DISEASES to draw a connection between societal challenges and the nature of illness. The metaphor emphasises the negative impact of social issues and the need for awareness, prevention, and intervention, much like managing diseases. In this metaphor, "diseases" represent the source domain, while "social issues" are the target domain. Diseases are defined as "an illness of people, animals, plants, etc., caused by infection or a failure of health rather than by an accident" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.) and are typically seen as harmful, undesirable, and potentially contagious. They inflict physical or mental suffering and often have underlying causes, risk factors, and symptoms that require identification and treatment.

Social issues are "a state of affairs that negatively affects the personal or social lives of individuals or the well-being of communities or larger groups within a society and about which there is usually public disagreement as to its nature, causes, or solution" (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). They encompass a broad range of concerns that adversely impact personal and social lives, as well as community well-being. These include poverty, inequality, discrimination, violence, addiction, and environmental degradation. Like diseases, social issues can lead to suffering, instability, and unrest within individuals and communities. Marina's use of the metaphor effectively communicates the urgency of addressing societal challenges, emphasising the need for collective action, empathy, and concerted efforts to prevent, diagnose, and treat these issues for the betterment of society.

The following are selected excerpts from Marina's columns that employ this conceptual metaphor, along with their corresponding discussions:

*They seem to spend their entire lives thinking up nasty things to say, frequently misspelt and with the sort of perverse logic that only people with **damaged frontal lobes** can muster.*

(AR02)

The phrase "damaged frontal lobes" serves as a metaphor for cognitive dysfunction, suggesting that the individuals in question – social media trolls, who often engage in disruptive and provocative behaviour – possess a warped, irrational way of thinking. By associating their behaviour with brain damage, Marina emphasises the abnormality of their logic, implying that their reasoning is not just flawed but fundamentally broken. This metaphor paints their thinking as a contagious form of dysfunction, spreading irrationality and perverse logic to others, much like a disease. The metaphor thus frames these individuals not just as misguided but as dangerously

impaired, distancing their arguments from rational discourse and highlighting the broader societal harm caused by their influence.

*They may tolerate the odd person running a red light, but not if it becomes an **epidemic** because, obviously, it becomes very dangerous for everyone.*

(AR04)

In this excerpt, Marina uses the term “epidemic” to convey how a minor issue, like running a red light, can escalate into a larger, more dangerous problem if it proliferates. By likening this escalation to a disease, Marina highlights the contagious nature of negative behaviours and how, when left to persist, they can quickly grow out of control and pose a serious risk to society. Just as an epidemic requires immediate intervention to prevent widespread harm, so too must societal issues be tackled early to avoid greater consequences.

*This means that if we tackle poverty, we will go a long way towards **eradicating** child marriage as well.*

(AR12)

Here, Marina metaphorically links the goal of “eradicating child marriage” to combating disease, suggesting that, in the same way a disease is cured by addressing its root causes, child marriage can be curbed by tackling the underlying conditions that facilitate it, such as poverty. Addressing poverty through targeted, holistic interventions can eliminate the economic desperation that drives families to resort to child marriage.

*The education ministry should also be concerned that whole generations of children are going to be **handicapped** by their lost year of education. How are they planning to **remedy** the situation?*

(AR23)

In this excerpt, Marina uses the term “handicapped” metaphorically to highlight the lasting and potentially debilitating effects of disrupted education on students resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown. It suggests that the lost year has put children at a significant disadvantage, impairing their academic development and future opportunities. The term “remedy the situation” introduces a metaphorical medical approach, implying the need for a treatment or solution to this problem. Framing the situation this way shows Marina’s emphasis on the urgency and need for a comprehensive plan to address this educational setback, repair the damage caused by the disruption, and ensure students’ academic progress and well-being.

IMMORALITY IS A DISEASE

Marina Mahathir uses the metaphor IMMORALITY IS A DISEASE to draw parallels between the distinct concepts of “immorality” and “disease”. By mapping characteristics of disease (source domain) onto immorality (target domain), she highlights the contagious nature of immoral behaviour and the urgent need for treatment or prevention. Disease encompasses characteristics such as contagiousness, harmful effects, treatment, cure, and stigmatisation. Similarly, immorality, like a disease, can spread rapidly within a community, affecting not only individuals but also the collective moral health of society.

Immorality refers to “behaviour that is morally wrong or outside society’s standards of what is acceptable” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). It can take various forms, such as lying, cheating, stealing, or intentionally harming others. Marina strategically employs this conceptual

metaphor to highlight the negative implications of immoral behaviour and its potential to spread harm, similar to a contagious illness. She emphasises the idea that, just like diseases, immorality can be addressed and rectified through appropriate means, promoting the notion that individuals can recover from their immoral actions by embracing more ethical behaviour.

The following are selected excerpts from Marina's columns that employ this conceptual metaphor, along with their corresponding discussions:

*I hope that some people are finally waking up to the presence of a **tumour** in our society that threatens to **metastasise** and **spread** all over our collective body. Once upon a time, we decided to take in a **carcinogen** and allowed it to breed. Despite the **poison** it kept **emanating**, we turned a blind eye to the **toxins** that were **spreading**.*

(AR16)

The terms "tumour", "carcinogen", "poison", and "toxins" evoke powerful disease metaphors. The phrase "a tumour in our society" signifies a malignant presence or harmful influence in the country that was threatening the overall health of society, similar to how a disease spreads rapidly within a body. Marina's use of the phrase "turning a blind eye to the toxins" further reinforces the metaphor, suggesting negligence or complicity in the unchecked proliferation of this societal ailment. The use of "metastasise" emphasises the potential for the problem to escalate and spread, highlighting the urgent need for action to eliminate this metaphorical cancer before it causes irreparable harm.

*This has been a **rampant disease** among our policymakers from times past and is still **infecting** them now.*

(AR17)

Here, Marina employs the term "rampant disease" metaphorically to describe a pervasive problem among policymakers, likening it to an infectious ailment that has taken root over time. She suggests that their obsessive focus on the upcoming election has become an entrenched, harmful mindset, preventing them from addressing the real, pressing issues at hand. The use of the word "infecting" suggests the contagious nature of the issue, highlighting how it spreads and impacts successive generations of policymakers. This metaphor underscores the persistent and widespread presence of the problem, emphasising its detrimental effect on governance and decision-making processes.

*But the real question is, will we ever **recover** from the **pandemic** of greed and hate that has also been unleashed?*

(AR19)

The phrase "pandemic of greed and hate" portrays political ills as contagious diseases, emphasising their widespread and destructive influence. The metaphor highlights the prevalent nature of greed and hate, stressing their harmful effects on social cohesion and well-being. Additionally, by asking whether society will "recover" from this, Marina suggests a process of renewal and rebuilding, akin to recovering from an illness, underlining the challenging road ahead in addressing these deeply entrenched issues.

*It is so nice to see a leader who, unlike some who come to mind, has not **inhaled** the **toxins** that usually **pervade** our political parties despite having spent years in the peninsula.*

(AR21)

The metaphorical phrase “inhaled the toxins” suggests contamination or corruption within political parties, much like breathing in harmful substances. Marina’s mention of a leader who has not succumbed to these toxins implies resistance to the negative influences pervasive within political circles. The word “pervade” highlights how these toxic influences spread throughout the system, affecting all levels of politics. This metaphor underscores the rarity and value of leadership untainted by political corruption.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Social issues encompass matters related to human rights, justice, equity, and overall well-being. They cover a broad spectrum of concerns such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, health care disparities, environmental challenges, education access, and various forms of social injustice. These issues are often complex and multifaceted, requiring collaborative efforts from individuals, organisations, and governments to resolve them effectively.

Discussing social issues through the metaphorical lens of diseases, as seen in Marina Mahathir’s columns, highlights the interconnectedness of these problems and their profound impacts on individuals and communities. For example, Marina likens child marriage to a disease, suggesting that “eradicating” (AR12) this blight requires tackling the root causes, such as poverty. By framing social issues as diseases, she emphasises the need for comprehensive solutions that target the underlying causes rather than merely treating the symptoms.

IMMORALITY

Immorality encompasses practices such as dishonesty, corruption, and actions that harm others or contravene principles of fairness and justice. In Marina Mahathir’s columns, immorality is implicitly framed as a disease through terms such as “metastasise” (AR16), “infecting” (AR17), and “pandemic” (AR19). These linguistic choices draw a strong connection between unethical behaviour and the contagious nature of diseases, reinforcing the idea that immoral behaviour can influence and corrupt individuals and society, similar to an infection.

This comparison suggests that unchecked immoral behaviour, like an untreated disease, can lead to severe and detrimental consequences, gradually eroding the moral foundation of a community or nation. It underscores the need to recognise, address, and prevent such behaviour to safeguard ethical integrity. It also highlights the urgency of timely intervention before the damage becomes irreversible.

METAPHOR EXPLANATION

Marina Mahathir’s columns present a comprehensive exploration of social issues and immorality through the powerful conceptual metaphor of health and disease. Terms like “madness”, “epidemic”, and “pandemic” are used to vividly illustrate the pervasive and detrimental nature of these problems. She also highlights the critical role of leadership in addressing these issues, suggesting that ineffective governance exacerbates societal decay. Urgent intervention is called for, as depicted by words such as “remedy”, underscoring the need to confront these challenges collectively before they spiral out of control.

Marina’s use of health metaphors extends beyond mere illustration, delving into the underlying ideologies of social dysfunction. Terms like “psychosis” describe the irrational behaviours incited by both leaders and trolls, revealing a critique of societal “hysteria” and

misinformation. This metaphorical language suggests that, just as diseases can spread uncontrollably, so too can harmful behaviours within society.

The metaphorical use of “epidemic” portrays how the normalisation of seemingly trivial but negative behaviours, such as ignoring traffic laws, could pose a collective risk. By framing it this way, Marina highlights the prevalence of such issues, emphasising the urgent need for immediate intervention. She warns that tolerating minor infractions can lead to the widespread acceptance of harmful practices, much like how an unchecked disease can become a severe threat to the community at large.

Marina’s reference to a “tumour in our society” that imperils us, threatening to “metastasise and spread” throughout our collective body, acts as a powerful call to action. This metaphor underscores the insidious and growing nature of societal problems and controversial individuals that, if left unaddressed, can infiltrate and damage the entire social fabric. She also critiques the passive acceptance of harmful elements, comparing it to allowing a “carcinogen” to spread unchecked, emitting “toxins” that “poison” society.

Additionally, she discusses a “pandemic of greed and hate” that has been unleashed, further emphasising the ubiquitous presence of social ills. This metaphor suggests that these vices are not isolated incidents but rampant afflictions that require comprehensive strategies to be effectively combated. The idea that we can “recover” from this implies a need for healing and restoration, akin to overcoming a prevalent health crisis.

Through these compelling conceptual metaphors, Marina elucidates the complex interplay between social issues, immoral behaviours, and diseases, urging readers to confront and address these challenges holistically to prevent irreparable harm. Her metaphorical language not only paints a vivid picture of moral decay but also serves as a clarion call for collective action and strong leadership to ultimately eradicate these ills from society.

CONCLUSION

Metaphors, often dismissed as mere linguistic embellishments, carry significant cognitive and ideological weight. In news columns, they serve as potent tools for evoking emotions and shaping readers’ perceptions of sociopolitical issues. The media, typically seen as a trusted source of information, is expected to act as the public’s champion. However, this study highlights how journalists’ fidelity to truth can be undermined by state interests, prompting the use of metaphors to subtly express dissenting opinions. This underscores the need to scrutinise media content, as figurative language shapes our understanding of events, making critical reading skills crucial for recognising these nuances. Metaphors in news discourse make contentious opinions more palatable, reinforcing the need for media transparency and impartiality. Understanding whether metaphorical language influences readers’ thinking can also guide more effective journalistic practices.

This research is significant in the study of metaphors, highlighting their complexity in journalistic writing and demonstrating how they serve as tools for conveying subtle messages, especially in the face of media censorship. This approach enables writers to tackle complex topics in a relatable way, fostering understanding and challenging state narratives. However, the conclusions drawn from the study are preliminary due to the non-representative sample and the challenges of analysing metaphorical language at the word level. Focusing on a single writer also introduces biases, limiting the objectivity and generalisability of the findings. Future research

could compare metaphorical strategies across multiple writers and media outlets and adopt corpus linguistics methodologies to identify patterns and trends in metaphor usage. It could also examine how Marina's metaphorical choices have evolved over time in response to shifting political and social climates or explore other linguistic elements, such as satire and rhetorical questions, in her columns.

Marina navigates the constraints of media censorship by using conceptual metaphors, particularly health metaphors, to campaign for progressive causes amid Malaysia's conservative political and social environment. Through evocative comparisons, she equates societal problems and immoral behaviours to diseases, raising awareness and highlighting the need to address them. Her metaphorical language underscores the necessity of collective action to remedy these ills and advocates for a healthier, more resilient society. Although the path to a better Malaysia may seem uncertain, Marina, through conceptual metaphors, calls on readers to unite, ensuring that the country's rich cultural diversity continues to nurture an inclusive and thriving sanctuary for all Malaysians.

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