

Language, Power, and Nonviolence: Peace Linguistics Features in Abdul Ghaffar Khan's *My Life and Struggle*

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Abstract

This research explores My Life and Struggle (2025) by Abdul Ghaffar Khan from the perspective of Peace Linguistics. Using the research frameworks focused on linguistic and literary peace features, it studies the language and content of the book to identify the strategies used for discursive presentation of conflict, negotiation, discourse, culture, power, and identity. The descriptive-analytical methodology employed to study My Life and Struggle views the autobiography as a discursive artifact reflecting Ghaffar Khan's ideological positioning and with the application of the tenets of peace linguistics, it studies how Ghaffar Khan's use of literary and linguistic features reflect his socio-political consciousness.

Key Words: non-violence, colonial encounters, mediation

Peace linguistics (Gomes de Matos, 1977, 1987) studies the use of humanizing and ethical language in conflict resolution situations. It considers humanizing discourse as the core peace linguistics principle and identifies the emphasis on shared humanity and love for humanity in a text (Gomes de Matos, 2014, p. 417; pp. 419–420). Since its emphasis falls on nonviolence, it is quite appropriate for the study of Ghaffar Khan's ideological commitment to non-violent methods expressed in his autobiography.

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Theoretical Framework

This study investigates how Abdul Ghaffar Khan uses language and discourse as instruments of conflict transformation in *My Life and Struggle*. The framework is based on the tenets of peace linguistics. These are used to study how Khan reconciles political conflicts, shapes perceptions of peace and violence, and challenges ingrained structures of conflict. Peace linguistics examines how language promotes reconciliation and de-escalates conflict by rejecting violent models. This study employs peace linguistics to explore how in *My Life and Struggle* peace is linguistically constructed.

The lens of Conflict Transformation Theory (Galtung, 1969, 1996) views communicative conflict as culturally structured and helps this research analyse how language sustains or disrupts cycles of conflict and employs dialogue to replace pressure. Khan uses the language of soft power to achieve moral authority and political legitimacy. The study applies soft power theory to identify non-threatening discursive strategies and inclusive identity construction (with frequent use of “we”) as a discreet tool for mediation.

This framework views Khan’s autobiography as creating space for an ideological and diplomatic discourse which can be studied as a contribution to peace studies and conflict resolution. It sets four objectives for its exploration of the text and then expands them to eight different queries to cover all the aspects of peace linguistics features as they apply to narratological analysis.

Research Objectives

1. To explore the role of Khan’s language in inscribing the tenets of peace linguistics.
2. To examine how Khan’s discourse articulates perceptions of conflict and peace.
3. To analyze how narrative framing challenges conflict and inscribes reconciliation.
4. To study ideological language in politics, media, and society

Research Questions

1. Which tenets of peace linguistics are identifiable in Ghaffar Khan’s *My Life and Struggle*?
2. How does Ghaffar Khan linguistically frame conflict and violence in the text?
3. How does Khan’s discourse redefine non-violence as active resistance?

4. What narratives foreground struggle and morality and expose the weakness of conflict-producing discourses?

Methodology

This study uses a translated text which is suspect of the expected weaknesses of translations. It, therefore, focuses on Khan's lexical choices in opting or rejecting conflict vocabulary, use of pronouns to inscribe individualistic or collective perspectives, and especially narrative frames which give salience to certain incidents against others. It explores Khan's adjectives, verbs, and nouns to examine what moral weight he assigns to peace and violence. It particularly studies Khan's discursive mechanisms like humanization to explore whether he demonises his opposition or presents them as morally complex. Foregrounding of collectivism, narrativising struggle as moral testing, and construction of counter discourses to oppose revenge, violence, militarization, and replacement of conflict discourses with peace alternatives are the primary focus of this study. Lastly, it studies Khan's speech acts to explore if he uses promises, pledges, and commitments to bind his readers to peace. The way Khan narrates incidents and relates them to their consequences also yields what political repercussions he frames as ensuing from his political activism.

This qualitative study adopts interpretation grounded in strategies of peace linguistics to answer its research questions. It does not employ quantified linguistic features but seeks to interpret ideological and pragmatical functions of language and discourse.

Ethical Considerations

This text-based research relies on the faithful representation of the original text in the translation. It does not extend its examination to issues and debates in translation studies.

Delimitation

This study is delimited to the study of Ghaffar Khan's peace linguistic strategies and does not extend to any other ideological or academic dimension. As an analytical-interpretive study, its focus is on discourse and does not extend to any other linguistic study. Although conscious that Khan's political ideas concerned state–people relations in both pre- and post-1947 periods, it concerns itself with Khan's peace linguistic strategies and does not take into view the state structures of power.

Literature Review

Communicating is an essential multifaceted human faculty. Gomes de Matos calls

language “a mental marvel used for meaning making.” Conflict is globally present, requiring the study of peace-enhancing activities (Curtis, 2022, pp. 6, 8–9). Communication for peace purposes has yielded such emerging approaches as conflict resolution, peace psychology, peace linguistics, and peace education. Developments have also taken place in Appreciative Inquiry, which “advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus does not require the use of incentives, coercion or persuasion for planned change to occur” (Bushe, 2013).

Francisco Gomes de Matos, a “peacelinguactivist” (Wright, 2019), highlighted its principles as loving the “communicative neighbor,” dignifying one’s dialogues, prioritising positivisers, and being a “communicative humanizer” (Gomes de Matos, 2012, 2014). His work has led to the development of peace sociolinguistics (see Friedrich, 2007), which studies how language practices contribute to peace-building and how linguistic practices can be used for reinforcing conflicts or promoting harmony. The emerging field of peace linguistics is an interdisciplinary domain focused on the role of language in promoting peace (Wright, 2019). Research focused on peace linguistics (see Wallensteen, 2011; Höglund & Öberg, 2011; Millar, 2018; Bretherton & Law, 2015) has radiated in several directions, including language education and conflict resolution (Deutsch, 2006).

Peace linguistics focuses on the use of language with empathy and dignity (Wright, 2019). Following Galtung (1996), it asserts that “peace is not just the absence of violence but the presence of positive, constructive social relations, which are fundamentally mediated through discourse” (Galtung, 1969). Research in peace linguistics, especially ethnographic research, requires what Millar calls the “circle of praxis,” which means “grounding analysis in peoples’ experiences of marginalization, oppression, or violence” (Millar, 2018, p. 70).

Findings

This study of *My Life and Struggle* by Abdul Ghaffar Khan explored and found many instances of Ghaffar Khan’s use of conciliatory rather than accusatory language when creating space for dialogue. Khan’s politico-moral framing required him to voice grievances, but he chose to do so without any attempt to delegitimise the need for dialogue. Khan’s use of calm and logical narration, even when chronicling violence, follows his ideology of non-violence, for which he was equated with Gandhi. However, he establishes that his non-violent movement

was older than Gandhi's and more powerful. His use of non-threatening language is paradigmatic for the future course of activism he envisioned for his followers.

One of the most striking features of the book's discourse is that conflict is narrated as a moral and ethical problem rather than a military contest. There is no glamorization of violence, and often weapons and assaults are linguistically accompanied by expressions of hatred, fear, cowardice, and moral decline; rather, non-violence is framed as bravery, discipline, and spiritual strength. Activism and struggle are expressed through narratives of service, sacrifice, discipline, and endurance, while non-violence is narrated as more "dangerous" than violence for unjust power structures.

When drawing moral contrasts, Khan counter-poses violence and victimhood without pleas for revenge. This delegitimises violence without instigating violent backlash. Thus oppression is delegitimised with narratives of the humility of prisoners, patience under torture, refusal to retaliate, and moral self-restraint. The oppressor appears increasingly brutal and fearful, while the oppressed is established as dignified, restrained, and morally superior. The use of collective pronouns expresses peaceful solidarity and also joins the activists with the general masses. Thus collective identity reduces polarization, even between people of different faiths.

Khan also narrates revenge as brutal, immoral, and antisocial, while forgiveness or patient silence is presented as morally superior. This is done by humanizing the enemy and avoiding demonisation. Durrani and Afridis are humanized just like the British in narratives of prison guards and officials. In narrating that his great-grandfather, Abaidullah Khan "was put to death at the hands of Durrani" (AG p. 11), Khan expresses no feelings of anger or desire for revenge. Khan narrates suffering without rhetorical exploitation or using it as a justification for unrestrained action. In discussing freedom fighting, he relates how his grandfather fought against the British, but specifies "Whenever and wherever the British were fighting, attacking our people, or trying to make them their slaves" (pp. 10 – 11). A similar incident when Afridis welcomed them with stones when they were at Jamrud (186), he states the facts without any judgment. The whole narrative is controlled by an emotional poise born of reasoned distancing from immediate incidents, giving his political struggle an atmosphere of demilitarization and moral legitimacy. This has the effect of winning the reader to peaceful political struggle.

The diction Khan uses evidences demilitarisation of vocabulary even in translation.

Words like kill, crush, destroy, or enemy are absent, while frequent use of words like service, sacrifice, discipline, and patience replaces the discourse of violence with that of peace. Even the discourse of masculinity, so expected in Pashtun culture, is noticeable by its absence. Peace discourse is also established by highlighting the traditions of the Pathans: “One of their worst characteristics was their habit of taking revenge... They badly needed to change their anti-social customs” (p. 96).

The textual evidence shows that the autobiography linguistically constructs peace and non-violence as the essence of activist struggle. Khan’s diction constructs peace with lexical choices that privilege love, brotherhood, service, and forgiveness. As he says, “The violent movement preached hatred, but the non-violent movement preached love and brotherhood” (p. 143), and “The violent movement created fear and cowardice... the non-violent movement made people fearless and brave” (p. 142). His use of metaphors, such as “You are not sheep, you are lions... Stop bleating like sheep” (pp. 82–83) or “A revolution is like a flood... it can bring fertility and prosperity” (p. 93), highlights the psychological dimensions of peace as against physical confrontation.

The Khudai Khidmatgar Oath is an epitome of peace linguistic features. In sentences such as “I promise to serve humanity in the name of God” (p. 96), Khan requires his followers to use active clauses and performative verbs for the avowal of peace. The oath, with its paradigmatic rejection of violence, makes it a model peace linguistic text (pp. 96–97). The diction and avowal of love and brotherhood in vows such as “I promise to treat every Pathan as my brother and friend” (p. 96) or “Serving His creation is serving Him” (p. 96) show how Khan linguistically associates non-violence with fearlessness and bravery, but also morality and regeneration (pp. 96–97, 143–144).

Khan’s peace linguistic practice rejects violence as a pathway to hate, fear, and moral degradation. Thus in the chapter titled “Violence or Non-Violence?”, he asserts, “The truth is that violence is born of hatred, and non-violence is born of love” (p. 143). His verdict on violence perpetrated on his followers is clear: “The violent movement had created fear and cowardice in the people’s minds... it had weakened morale. The non-violent movement made people fearless and brave and inspired them with a high sense of morality” (pp. 143–144). He emphasized that armed activism is futile as well as destructive, leading to death and state repression. In the Habib Nur episode, Khan shows how Nur’s pulling a revolver on a British

officer led to his hanging within twenty-four hours, followed by severe collective punishment (pp. 24–25).

Khan thus condemns Pashtun violence, both against the colonial state and intracultural. Pathans are described as inclined to violence against their own kith and kin, driven by revenge and feuds, which Khan calls antisocial customs that must be eliminated (pp. 95–96). The Khudai Khidmatgar oath categorically renounces violence: “I promise to refrain from violence... to forgive those who oppress me... to refrain from revenge and enmity” (pp. 95–96). This led the British to admit that “A non-violent Pathan is more dangerous than a violent one” (p. 144).

In sum, this study of *My Life and Struggle* accomplished answering eight research questions by identifying peace linguistics and peace narratives strategies. Its findings show that *My Life and Struggle* consistently delegitimises violence and recommends non-violence as ethical resistance more powerful than violent practices. The research finds that the autobiography practically uses the core peace linguistics values by rejecting violence, humanizing the political or ethnic opponents, employing collective pronouns, and eulogising self-restraint. Khan associates violence with hatred and fear (pp. 142–144). He, thus, practices peace in his writing process.

The restrained tone of *My Life and Struggle* and avoidance of an aggressive lexicon is visible in Khan’s refusal to demonise anyone. He narrates extreme repression without sensationalism (pp. 95–97), which discourages retribution. Its non-threatening narratives admire patient suffering and reject augmentation of conflict. The Khudai Khidmatgar oath empowers with ethical commitment (pp. 95–97). Similarly, Khan reframes conflict as a moral struggle rather than an armed contest. He narrates the futility of violence by emphasizing (pp. 24–25) and recommends non-violence as strategic disruption of unjust power (p. 144), more intimidating than armed struggle (p. 144, pp. 95–97). The autobiography establishes struggle as a moral test and morality as service rooted in collective consciousness (p. 91). Khan explicitly censures revenge, romanticisation of armed resistance, and fear politics anti-social (pp. 95–96). Avoidance of harsh language for his enemies goes along with inscription of how their rivals branded them as *Kafir* or *Wahabi* (p. 66). By positioning non-violence as ethically superior, Khan’s builds a counter-discourse of forgiveness, service, inclusion, and discipline. The research finds discursive peace-building mechanisms against the

use of conflict language. This makes Ghaffar Khan's autobiography a significant document in peace linguistics.

Conclusion

The application of peace linguistics clearly yields that Khan's lexical choices and narrative framing recommend a dialogic mode of conflict resolution. He not only avoids the lexicon of hatred and violence but also humanizes those who committed violence. Nowhere does he dehumanize people who oppressed him, narrating them instead with humanity. Through his non-violent narrative, he encourages understanding and empathy even when discussing people who harmed his family and followers. His avoidance of an aggressive tone and confrontational expressions prevents any verbal escalation that could be misused by his followers later.

Suggestions & Recommendations

This focused research only lights the way and hopes that its methodology will be used by future researchers to fully explore the utility of Peace Linguistics in exploring ideological texts. The autobiography of Ghaffar Khan is available in at least three versions. A recent publication of the revision of the previous texts has been published Bacha Khan Research Centre, Peshawar. The use of that text is strongly recommended with the addition that a comparative study of the three texts should be done using the lens of Peace Linguistics.

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