DOI: https://doi.org/10.3329/Spectrum.v18i1.76354

The Politics of Representation: Arundhati Roy's Re-framing of Media Narratives in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

Batool Sarwar[1]

Abstract

In the current global scenario, media discourse has incontestably become one of the most powerful means of constructing narratives that influence public response to events occurring in the modern world. When the issue of media power is examined within the overarching paradigm of international media representation of events occurring in countries with a long-standing history of colonization, it becomes clear that earlier Orientalist attitudes are still potent in representing certain populations as inferior to and of lesser value than their Western counterparts. This essay will examine Arundahati Roy's portrayal of media discourse in her 2017 work *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in the light of Said's 1978 idea of Orientalism and Butler's 2010 notion of the frames of recognition used in media discourse to show that certain lives are considered more valuable and grievable than others. This essay will also demonstrate how media representation can be placed within the framework of global capitalism with images and stories being circulated according to what sells best in the marketplace of global media consumption. Maintaining that Roy's attitude to media narratives in her novel is ambivalent and complex, this essay will argue that her representation of these media narratives within the larger frame of the fictional narrative of the novel is a subversive act that makes transparent the assumptions underlying media discourse and power.

Keywords: Media Discourse, Orientalism, media power, frames of narration, grievability

Introduction

In a world dominated by breaking news constantly flashing upon screens and appearing in print, the power of media to create and control narratives is almost unquestioningly accepted. As Swanson and Mancini (1996) point out, media has now emerged as an "autonomous power center in reciprocal communication with other power centers" (p. 11). However, while the power of the media is now taken as an incontestable fact, there is considerable debate as to what form this power takes and exactly how it manifests itself (Street, 2001, p. 26). When these questions of the nature of media power are posed within the overarching paradigm of international media and their representation of events occurring in countries that were former colonies, the discussion becomes even more multifaceted and complex. The field of postcolonial studies has continually examined the lingering effects of colonial rule on the lives and identities of former colonial subjects: "All post-colonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination, and independence has not solved the problem" (Ashcofts et al., 2004, p. 2). In the current global scenario, mass media has emerged as one of the major sites

[1] Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Dhaka

where representations of events occurring in former colonies are circulated in a manner that perpetuates age-old ideas of the Orient as the 'Other' against whom the West can measure and celebrate their own advancement and progress.

This essay will, therefore, examine Roy's treatment of media narratives in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) within the framework of postcolonial resistance to the dissemination of ideas and knowledge in a manner that subtly privileges the former colonizers of India. It will draw upon Said's 1978 notion of Orientalism to show how current media discourse is a continuation of a manner of representation that is so well established that its premises are now held to be objective truths that no longer need to be interrogated or verified. To show how this mode of representation results in a notion of certain lives as holding less value and importance than others, this essay will also draw upon the ideas Butler (2010) expounds in her book *The Frames of War* in which she argues that our responses to the loss and destruction of lives in a war or conflict depend upon the 'frames of recognition' that render some lives to be 'grievable'. This essay will also show that media representation can be placed within the framework of global capitalism with images and stories being circulated according to what sells best in the marketplace of global media consumption (Klikauer, 2021, pp. 3–53**).** Thus, media often create and disseminate news, not because of its inherent value but because it brings in higher ratings or increased subscriptions. From this perspective, the suffering and grief of others are seen as holding 'entertainment value' for Western audiences.

Despite these limitations, international media representation is often the only recourse that oppressed communities or victims have for their stories to be heard so media attention is often welcomed by victims whose stories are being covered. Thus, this essay will argue that Roy's attitude to media narratives in her novel is ambivalent and complex and will attempt to substantiate this claim by focusing on three separate strands of media narratives in the novel. Firstly, it will focus on the international media's coverage of the transsexual or *hijrah* community in India; secondly, the reporting of the anti-corruption protests in Delhi; and, finally, the media discourse revolving around the conflict in Kashmir. Roy's representation of these media narratives within the larger frame of the fictional narrative of the novel, however, is a subversive act that makes transparent the assumptions underlying media discourse and power. In other words, by re-framing the frame of media narratives, she makes visible what is often not seen—the context that lies behind the images and words that constitute the paradoxical site of media power.

Theoretical Underpinnings: Orientalism, Media Discourse and Frames of Narration

I would like to begin the task of linking the construction of narratives by the international media to Orientalist discourse by very briefly recapitulating some of the ideas that Said discusses in his ground-breaking *Orientalism* (1978). In his book, he views the Orient, not simply as a geographical territory but as a potent site for the construction of Western identity through structures of knowledge that depicted the Orient as the 'Other', the wild, barbaric place to which the progressive and democratic Western civilizations were a complete contrast. Said drew upon Gramsci and Foucault's notions of knowledge, power, and discourse as means of control and domination to articulate the complex processes by which the Orient became for Europe its "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (p. 2) so that "European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate self" (p. 3). He discusses at length the relationship between the Orientalist's knowledge and scholarship regarding the Orientals which gave them the

power to dominate, restructure, and have authority over the Orient. The Orient was tacitly assumed to possess a timeless, static, and unchanging quality which gave the Orientals an "essential identity" that only someone outside the Orient could examine, analyze, and classify (Said, pp. 32–36). Thus, creating the framework through which the Orient could be viewed was always the "Westerner's privilege; because his was the stronger culture, he could penetrate, he could wrestle with, he could give shape and meaning to the great Asiatic mystery" (Said, p. 44).

In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said extends his ideas to dwell on the potency of cultural formulations in which notions of the inequality of Eastern cultures in relation to the West are deeply embedded. This 'asymmetry' creates a tendency in anthropology, history, and cultural studies in Europe and the United States to "treat the whole of world history as viewable by a kind of Western super subject, whose historicizing and disciplinary rigour alone can confer meaning to the sprawling terrains and messy history of non-European nations" (Said, p. 35).

In this essay, I would like to contend that modern media networks are the heir to this legacy of Orientalist discourse created by formidable bodies of scholarship from the past. It is now the media networks that control the channels for the production and distribution of knowledge about current affairs in countries across the globe. Thus, stories and images from these countries can be consumed by Western audiences through a lens that allows them to view the events occurring there as a form of entertainment gained from viewing something foreign and exotic.

In his article on the links between media and Orientalism, Ranji (2021) emphasizes the fact that Western media outlets have the power to construct the narratives that shape people's responses to events occurring in non-Western countries (p. 1137). Even the grief and suffering of people in such countries can thus be capitalized upon by media networks as 'commodities' to be sold to an audience who can view them from their strategic location as a momentary break in the comfortable routines established by wealth and political stability. Furthermore, whether the pain and grief of people provoke shock and moral outrage or a sense of righteous exaltation at their humiliation depends upon how their stories fit into pre-existing global narratives of good and evil. "There is a poetics and politics to the representation of victims and violence" so that to be deemed "worthy of suffering" the narratives of these victims need to fit into "themes that are globally recognizable" (Rambukwella, 2022, p. 4).

In her 2007 book titled *Media Discourse: Representation and Interaction*, Talbot, too, focuses on how realities are represented in media through culturally constructed frames of reference which can be interpreted in multiple ways (p. 44). Talbot further explores this perspective by viewing media texts as "being embedded in a mesh of dialogism and intertextuality" (p. 64). What she means is that media texts do not transmit their message in a vacuum; they are preceded by "thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 276, cited in Talbot, p. 64). Thus, language can become a site for struggle as the "evaluative framing of a text" caused by an alignment with a particular socially constructed standpoint can be contested by other voices within the text that reinterpret the predominant frame of narration (Talbot, p. 75).

This concern with the frames of recognition that permit narratives of violence to elicit specific responses is central to Butler's book *The Frames of War* (2010). In the introductory essay titled "Precarious Life, Grievable Life", she outlines the notion of "precarity" which governs responses to news coverage of violence. According to Butler, while precariousness is a desirable ontological condition governing all life, as

it is the very fact that lives can be lost that makes it precious, precarity is a phenomenon constructed by social norms that deem some lives to be more precious and precarious than others. These norms thus permit lives to be framed in contexts that allow them to be recognized as fully alive and grievable in case of loss or injury, or as already forfeited and therefore ungrievable:

> Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic images of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss and who remain ungrievable. This differential distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous sadism, loss and indifference. (Butler, p. 24)

While Butler does not specifically mention Orientalism in her work, both Butler's notion of grievability and Said's contentions about the power of the colonizer to represent the Orient are grounded in underlying notions of the objectifying gaze. "In postcolonial theory, the gaze has meant an unequally constituted right to scrutinize, to represent what is gazed at, and to intervene and alter the object of the gaze" (Ram, 2018, p. 1). As Said (1978) points out in *Orientalism*, this imperial gaze creates the spatial and psychological distance required to objectify and examine the Oriental as the 'Other' (p. 44) Thus, the Orient can function as the ground where "European/Western images of Self and the Other have been constructed, the place where constructions of Superiority and Inferiority were produced" (Pennycook, 1998, p. 19). For Butler, this objectifying gaze results in the construction of the frame where the underlying notion of the inferiority of the object being gazed at allows it to be viewed as unimportant and therefore not worthy of being grieved for.

While it cannot be asserted that Roy (2017) is consciously indebted to either Said or Butler in her representation of media discourse, I feel that their works provide a useful perspective for examining the politics of representation in media narratives surrounding former colonial subjects. Thus, I will attempt to combine the notions of Orientalism and grievabilty to examine media narratives that render some lives not only ungrievable but capable of being used as a spectacle for Western audiences. Through an examination of media narratives in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* this essay will explore how current media discourses draw on Orientalist frames of reference to render the lives of Oriental subjects as exotic, foreign, and freakish. Furthermore, through a focus on Roy's reframing of such narratives within the larger fictional narrative of the novel, I will attempt to elaborate on another important point made by both Talbot and Butler that while such frames of recognition are powerful and pervasive, they are not absolute. Frames can sometimes be made to break free from their contexts, leaving a space where they can be reversed or subverted by their new interpretations (Butler, 2010, pp. 75–78).

The Orient as Spectacle: International Media Representations of the Transgender Community in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*

In order to provide a specific instance of how subjects can be Orientalized by media discourses as a spectacle which is foreign and exotic, I would now like to turn to an examination of how Roy (2017) depicts the relationship of the international media to Anjum and the transgender or *hijrah* community to which she belongs. *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, in which Anjum is a central character, is a prolific novel that deliberately subverts our expectations of the novel form in its self-conscious attempt to tell the "shattered story" (Roy, p. 416) of everything and everybody. Thus, the novel speaks in a polyphonic babel of voices in its attempt to create a panoramic view

of communal violence, political intrigue, violent class collisions, dysfunctional gender politics, and international media representation of these events in India. It is important to note at the outset, therefore, that while such representations are the central focus of this paper, they are but one of the many themes that this multifaceted novel explores.

The first part of the story focuses on the transgender personality of Anjum who was initially christened Aftab but chooses to live her life as a woman in the emotionally charged world of the *Khwabgah*, the commune of *hijrahs* in Dehli. The second strand of the story centers around Tilo, a political activist who has a relationship with a Kashmiri militant, and the men who love her among other men. The widely divergent worlds evoked through these characters are linked through the story of two children, Miss Jebeen the first and Miss Jebeen the second who is renamed after her predecessor, the three-year-old child who dies in a massacre in the turmoil of Kashmiri politics.

Anjum is born into a conservative but cultured Muslim family living in Old Delhi. Her mother is horrified to discover her transgender identity at the time of birth but subsequently does everything in her power to help Anjum (then named Aftab) live as a normal young boy. From childhood, however, Anjum exhibits feminine traits in her personality and is attracted to the world of the *hijrahs* she encounters. Finally, Aftab/Anjum escapes from home to go and live in the '*khwabgah'* or commune run by the eccentric but strong Ustad Kulsoom Bi. There, Aftab is finally able to transition into Anjum and look and dress in a manner that allows her to acquire an "exaggerated, outrageous kind of femininity" (Roy, 2017, p. 26).

Roy (2017), however, never celebrates Ajum's new identity in the manner that current discourses on transgender do, as a brave choice that gives her great happiness. She shows Anjum as a strong but unstable character whose gendered identity never really settles. Nor is Anjum the only one in the community to feel constantly torn apart by their conflicting gendered identities. As Nimmo, another fashionable *hijrah*, says, it is never possible for them to be happy, because unlike "normal" people who worry about price hikes, communal violence, and political tensions between India and Pakistan, what makes them unhappy is not external but inherent in their very nature: "The riot is i*nside* us. The war is *inside* us. Indo-Pak is *inside* us. It will never settle down. It can't" (Roy, p. 23).

This complex emotional world, however, is ignored when Anjum eventually becomes the darling of the international media that constantly courts her for interviews and photographs. Roy (2017) makes clear that they are not interested in her as an individual but in the image of an exotic and foreign brand of sexuality. This is how Roy narrates the attention given to Anjum by the foreign media:

> Over the years Anjum became Delhi's most famous Hijra. Film-makers fought over her, NGOs hoarded her, foreign correspondents gifted her phone number to one another as a professional favour, along with numbers of the Bird Hospital, Phoolan Devi, the surrendered dacoit known as "Bandit Queen", and a contact for a woman who insisted she was the Begum of Oudh who lived in an old ruin in the Ridge Forest with her servants and her chandeliers while she staked her claim to a non-existent kingdom. In interviews Anjum would be encouraged to talk about the abuse and cruelty that her interlocutors assumed she had been subjected to by her conventional Muslim parents, siblings and neighbours before she left home. They were invariably disappointed when she told them how much her mother and father had loved her and how she had been the cruel one. "Others have horrible stories, the kind you people like to write about", she would say. "Why not talk to them?" But of course newspapers didn't work that way. She was the chosen one. It had to be her, even if her story was slightly altered to suit readers' appetites and expectations. (p. 27)

I would now like to unpack what Short (1996) calls the multi-layered "discourse structure"[2] (p. 257) of this passage by referring to some of the theories underlined in the first section of this paper. Firstly, there is reporting of a media narrative revolving around Anjum, which presents her as a foreign or freakish object to an implied Western audience who might consume this narrative as a confirmation of the Orient as a place abounding in strange and foreign spectacles. Thus, Anjum's story is juxtaposed with those of other women who are perceived as strange and exotic, such as the Bandit Queen and the peculiar Begum of Oudh. None of these interviewers, however, is interested in the actual story of her upbringing or her later life. In fact, her interlocutors are "invariably disappointed" that she is unable to tell them stories of the cruelty inflicted on her by her conservative Muslim parents which would fit in perfectly with the globally recognized narrative of Muslim ignorance and contrasting Western liberalism and feminist freedom.

Even Anjum's own unwillingness to become a participant in this discourse is unimportant as Orientalists do not believe in the capacity of self-representation for an Oriental subject. If the international media has decreed her to be the "chosen one", she is the one who must be offered to the voyeuristic gaze of their audiences even if her story has to be "slightly altered to suit reader's appetites and expectations".

Thus, the spatial and psychological distance that such audiences have from Anjum allows her to be transformed into a viewed object, whose story can be bought and sold in the marketplace of media ratings. The power to wield the pen or hold the camera that frames her image is in the hands of the international media, working in the framework of traditional Orientalist discourse in which the power to represent and interpret the Oriental is the prerogative of the active and authoritative Western subject.

The reinforcement of cultural stereotypes, however, is not the only frame through which the narrative in this passage can be represented. It is important to remember that both Anjum and her interlocutors are characters in the novel; as such, there is another level to this discourse provided by the author and the message given to the implied audience who are the readers of the novel. The omniscient narrator's use of indirect speech to report the attitude of the media towards Anjum allows the implied author to borrow their words and inflect them with irony during the act of reporting. Certainly, for example, when the narrator informs us, the readers, that newspapers work by altering stories to suit readers' appetites and expectations, the implied author does not expect us to approve of that attitude but to find it biased and discriminatory. Thus, the dialogic nature of the text allows it to become a site for struggle with different voices functioning at different levels of the text.

While the voices of Anjum's interlocutors are reported using indirect speech, Anjum's protest at the media's insistence on portraying her story to fit a pre-existing stance is narrated in direct speech, allowing the readers to hear her voice without the mediation of the implied author. Thus, in Roy's (2017) narrative, the position between Anjum and her interlocutors is reversed, with the fictional narrative giving back to Anjum the voice that has been suppressed by the narrative of the international media. Furthermore, in embedding this passage within the larger fictional narrative of the novel which shows Anjum functioning as a complex character who can take control

[2] In his discussion on the discourse structure of the novel, Short (1996) points out that it contains multiple layers. One layer of the discourse is provided by the message the narrator gives to the readers, another layer is provided by the message the characters give to other characters and the overarching layer is the message given to the reader by the author. Short also points out that the message given by the various addressers to their respective adressees can differ even within the same stretch of discourse in a novel (pp. 256–257).

of her destiny, Roy reframes the international media narratives by making visible the strategies by which such misleading narratives are constructed.

It is also interesting to note that even for the international media, the frames through which they represent the *hijrah* community change with the transformation of political perspectives and the shift in attitudes towards transgender issues. Thus, Anjum is supplanted in international media representation by Saeeda, a younger transgender woman who is more in tune with global attitudes. Saeeda is a graduate, can speak English, and even more importantly, "she can speak the language of the times" (Roy, 2017, p. 38). Moreover, Saeeda is comfortable in Western clothes and what she lacks "in local flavor" she has made up for with her "modern understanding" of the law and Gender Rights Groups. All this places her in "a different league" from Anjum:

> Also, Saeeda had edged Anjum out of the Number One spot in the media. The foreign newspapers had dumped the old exotics in favour of the younger generation. The exotics didn't suit the image of the New India – a nuclear power and an emerging destination for international finance. (Roy, p. 38)

This passage, once again, makes transparent how representations of the Indian transgender community are dependent on pre-existing narratives concerning their community. At one time, it was the exotic image and local flavor that was sought after. However, with the changing attitude towards transgender people who are now celebrated as symbols of fluid modern identities, it is no longer popular to represent them in this way, and Saeeda is chosen as the new face that fits the frame. The change in frames of representation, however, does not cause a change in the modalities of interaction with the Oriental subject—Saeeda, as an individual, is no more visible than Anjum. She, too, remains a stereotype, presented in a manner that will have the greatest appeal to an international audience. Roy's fictional narrative which focuses on the complexity of their individual lives constantly contests these stereotypes and re-negotiates the frames through which we, as an audience, view the transgender community and their representation by the international media.

The International Supermarket of Grief: Media Representations of Victims of Disaster and Political Conflict in India

As the last passage quoted in the previous section shows, there is also a growing media awareness of India as a new global superpower. In the novel, however, Roy (2017) shows that this narrative of India as a vibrant modern democracy is achieved at the expense of the poor and marginalized who are excluded from participation in this celebration of prosperity and progress. In this section, I would, therefore, like to explore Roy's portrayal of media coverage of the victims of disaster and political conflict by applying Butler's notion of grievability to show how certain sections of the population are excluded from the privileges of being considered precious enough for their stories to evoke moral outrage and anger in the media.

In the novel, Roy (2017) shows how the narrative of India as a modern superpower is accompanied by the modernization of the capital city of Delhi. For Delhi to achieve a clean, modern appearance, however, thousands of poor people who are living in slums have their homes crushed by bulldozers and their lives destroyed. This is how Roy describes the media response to this large-scale destruction:

> Fiercely competitive TV channels covered the story of the breaking city as "Breaking News". Nobody pointed out the irony. They unleashed their untrained, but excellent-looking, young reporters, who spread across the city like a rash, asking urgent, empty questions; they asked the poor what it was like to be poor, the hungry what it was like to be hungry, the homeless what it was like to be homeless. "Bhai

> Sahib, yeh bataaiye, aap ko kaisa lag raha hai …?" Tell me, brother, how does it feel to be …? The TV channels never ran out of sponsorship for their live telecasts of despair. They never ran out of despair. Experts aired their expert opinions for a fee: Somebody has to pay the price for Progress, they said expertly. (p. 99)

This passage quite clearly shows that the destruction of the lives of the poor and powerless does not create a sense of moral outrage because they have not entered the perception of the world as people who have individual lives and stories. As the subjects have never been fully humanized, their despair cannot be mourned as the frames of recognition required to consider their lives precarious and grievable are absent. Thus, while their despair is widely covered as a way to drive up revenue from media viewership, it can also be euphemistically written off as the price of progress instead of being viewed as a tragic event requiring action and redress.

It is also interesting to read Roy's (2017) representation of such media coverage in the light of Bhabha's notion of exclusion in the creation of narratives of national identity. In the chapter of his book, *The Location of Culture* titled "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of a Modern Nation" (1994), Bhabha critiques the totalizing tendencies of modern nationalist narratives by pointing out that the impulse to construct the nation is generally achieved through acts of exclusion and forgetting the complex differences in cultural significations contained within the nation. For Bhabha, the "modern totalities of a nation" can only be achieved by narratives focusing on "homogeneity" and "anonymity" (p. 204). Bhabha's notion of anonymity in this critique also implies (though he does not elaborate on this point) something similar to Butler's notion of precarity and grievability — for people from certain classes and ethnicities to remain excluded and forgotten, national narratives represent them as nameless and anonymous. In other words, they have to be considered as less than fully human so that their stories do not evoke the kind of response that we accord to the destruction of precious human lives.

In the passage quoted above, Roy (2017) highlights the importance of media discourse in conferring this less-than-human status to a certain group of people. The questions that this 'excellent' (note, once again, the irony in the narrative voice) group of reporters ask so urgently are 'empty' ones; they elicit no reply that humanizes, for their audience, the tragedy entailed in the mass destruction of lives. In contrast, Roy creates a counter-narrative that describes the same event in language that forces the reader to confront the human tragedy:

> There were too many of them to be killed outright. Instead, their homes, their doors and windows, their makeshift roofs, their pots and pans, their plates, their spoons, their school-leaving certificates, their ration cards, their marriage certificates, their children's schools, their lifetime's work, the expression in their eyes, were flattened by yellow bulldozers imported from Australia. (pp. 98–99)

In direct contrast to the misery of the poor, the lives of a certain class of people improve dramatically:

> But the food shops were bursting with food. The bookshops were bursting with books. The shoe shops were bursting with shoes. And people (who counted as people) said to one another, "You don't have to go abroad for shopping any more. Imported things are available here now. See, like Bombay is our New York, Delhi is our Washington and Kashmir is our Switzerland. It's like really like saala fantastic yaar". (Roy, p. 99)

In this passage, Roy's comment about "people who counted as people" in terms of their lives being of value, is an almost direct approximation of Butler's (2010) notions of the socially constructed condition of precarity which invests certain lives with greater value than others. By juxtaposing the media representation of the misery of

the ungrievable poor with the prosperity of the elite, Roy reveals the complicity of media discourse in the rise of global capitalism. The enthusiastic comparison of cities in India to cities in Europe and America also reinforces the Orientalist notion of the West being the yardstick of prosperity against which 'backward' nations can measure their development and progress.

In the novel, Roy (2017) also shows how the mass displacement of people from Delhi and widespread bureaucratic corruption create a wellspring of anger which is exploited by the "baby-faced politician" who starts what he terms "India's Second Freedom Struggle", in which he declares a fast to the death to realize his dream of a corruption-free India. His ability to tap into the "reservoir of public anger" grants "instant stardom" to the old man (Roy, pp. 101–102). The Second Freedom Struggle brings together, around the person of this politician, the victims of the myriad injustices and corruption of Indian politics. These victims include farmers displaced from their land by dams and other industrial projects, low-paid sewage workers protesting against their working conditions, Manipuri Nationalists, Tibetan freedom fighters, the mothers of missing Kashmiri men picked up by various government agencies and victims of the 2008 Union Carbide gas-leak tragedy in Bhopal (Roy, p. 111).

The media, both national and international, are present in swarms to cover this movement as "television viewership skyrocketed and advertisements rolled in" (Roy, 2017, p. 103). Roy, once more, depicts how media coverage is shaped by the desire for greater financial gain and their alignment with the interests of certain groups, as well as with global narratives that dictate which lives are to be portrayed as grievable. For example, the hunger strike staged just next to the baby-faced politician by another Gandhian activist, protesting the appropriation of land from thousands of farmers and indigenous tribal people, receives far less coverage because the petrochemical corporations who get this land also own most of the television channels. Similarly, the protestors of the Union Carbide gas leak where "generations of deformed babies were born after the gas leak" are of no interest to TV crews because their struggle is "too old to make the news" (Roy, p. 111).

The protests by the "Mothers of the Disappeared" who bring along with them photographs of their sons who have been picked up by Indian government agencies are also totally ignored:

> No TV camera pointed at that banner, not even by mistake. Most of those engaged in India's Second Freedom Struggle felt nothing less than outrage at the idea of freedom for Kashmir and the Kashmiri women's audacity. Some of the Mothers, like some of the Bhopal gas leak victims, had become a little jaded. They had told their stories at endless meetings and tribunals in the international supermarkets of grief, along with other victims of other wars in other countries. They had wept publicly and often, and nothing had come of it. The horror they were going through had grown a hard, bitter shell. (Roy, 2017, p. 115)

This passage makes clear that the mothers from Kashmir are ignored because their narratives are in direct contradiction to the mainstream Indian nationalist rhetoric regarding the conflict in Kashmir as well as geopolitical narratives of Islamic militancy. The global narrative that depicts Muslim men as patriarchal misogynists, engaged in acts of terrorism, precludes any real engagement and sympathy for the cause of a people deemed ungrievable. Furthermore, their grief can become a commodity that can be sold at "the international supermarket" where the sorrows of victims can be capitalized to increase media viewership. Roy, therefore, not only indicts the media as being complicit in the interests of global capitalism but also shows that Orientalist framings that view certain people as the 'Other' can actually

allow their grief to be traded as a global commodity. As Biplab Dasgupta points out, "People—communities, castes, races, and even countries—carry their tragic histories and their misfortunes as trophies, or like stock, to be bought and sold on the open market" (Roy, p. 195).

In the second strand of the story, Roy (2017) also uses the character of the idealistic political activist, Tilo, and the men who love her to create a counter-narrative to this flat portrayal of the Kashmir issue. Tilo adopts the baby abandoned in the middle of the Second Freedom Struggle in memory of another child named Miss Jebeen, who is the daughter of Tilo's lover, Musa Yeswi, from his wife, Arifa. Musa is a classmate of Tilo at an architecture school along with Biplab Dasgupta and Nagaraj. Biplab later works as a senior agent for Indian intelligence and is active in spreading disinformation through media campaigns. He also recruits Nagaraj who reappears as a journalist covering news in Kashmir from the standpoint of the central government. Nagaraj thus plays the role of what Butler (2010) calls "an embedded journalist" who only covers conflicts from the perspective of a particular group that has the power to influence what people see and how they see it (p. 66).

The most powerful way in which Roy (2017) humanizes the struggle for independence in Kashmir, however, is through the figure of Musa, who returns to his homeland to fight for 'Azadi' or freedom. In portraying the character of Musa, Roy moves away from the rhetoric of cruel militants and brave Indian soldiers, routinely broadcast by the Indian government, and depicts the warmth of Musa's relationship with his wife and his three-year-old daughter, Miss Jebeen. Miss Jebeen is portrayed as a beautiful vivacious young girl with an infectious laugh and a thirst for life. She adores her father and waits for bedtime when he can tell her stories. The story-time ritual between them is moving and poignant as the words with which she begins it are chosen by her father as her epitaph to be etched on her graveside. Miss Jebeen is killed along with her mother by a stray bullet when the police open fire on the funeral procession of a Kashmiri activist which she was watching from an upstairs veranda. Miss Jebeen becomes the youngest of the victims to be buried in the Mazaar-e Shohaddah or the Martyr's Graveyard in Kashmir. In her last photograph taken after her death, "the bullet wound looked like a cheerful summer rose arranged just above the left ear" (Roy, p. 310). The photograph thus emphasizes the tragedy of a life cut short even before it had begun.

Roy (2017), however, does not stop at this sentimental representation of the photograph as a symbol of families torn apart by war. She complicates the picture by showing, once again, how journalists are selective purveyors of sensational images to sell in the international supermarket of grief. Miss Jebeen's photograph is one of the most powerful images to emerge in this marketplace, so for years it has been reproduced in books and human-right reports with captions such as "*Blood in the Snow*", "*Vale of Tears*", and "*Will the Sorrow Never End*?" (Roy, p. 327). The photograph of Miss Jebeen, therefore, becomes detached from its human context. It simply becomes the nameless image of a child which can be used to produce sentimentally titled news features that will capture readers' interests.

In the "supermarket of sorrow", the photograph of Miss Jebeen competes with the famous photograph of the Bhopal Boy, who is a victim of the Union Carbide gas leak. Several leading photographers claim the copyright of the photo of the dead boy buried neck-deep in debris. This photograph is reproduced in "glossy magazines all over the world". The global reproduction of this poignant image, however, does not bring any relief for the victims in Bhopal for "the story flared, then faded" while the battle for the copyright of the photo continues for years afterward (Roy, 2017, p. 327). Thus, Roy shows clearly how the sufferings of others become a source of profit

and photo credits for the international media because they are framed in this way by socially constructed global narratives.

The people of Kashmir, however, are also aware that without international media representation, their cause would be even more hopeless as "without the journalists and the photographers the massacre would be erased and the dead would truly die". Thus, the bodies are offered to the press "in hope and in anger" as a veritable "banquet of death". The photographers function in this transaction almost like directors, setting the stage to produce maximum impact on their audience. "Mourning relatives" are "brought back into the frame" for "their sorrow to be archived" in "books and films and photo exhibitions curated around the theme of Kashmir's grief and loss" (Roy, 2017, p. 327). Thus, Roy shows us what a photo, of course, cannot depict—the photographer caught in the act of capturing the photo and creating the frame, both literally and metaphorically, through which it is viewed.

In her essay on "Torture and the Ethics of Photography" in *Frames of War,* Butler (2010) reminds us of the fact that the frames of recognition through which we view photos of war and violence can be reinterpreted if a context is created by "photographing the frame itself"; this can only be done by forcing viewers to consider "what forms of social and state power are embedded within the frame":

> Rarely does this operation of mandatory and dramaturgical framing become part of what is seen, much less of what is told. But when it does, we are led to interpret the interpretation that has been imposed upon us, developing our analysis into a social critique of regulatory and censorious power. (p. 72)

I would like to end by contending that this act of subversive reframing is exactly what Roy (2017) achieves. By showing us the realities of the lives being represented in a reductive frame by media narratives, her novel becomes the larger canvas where the frame is photographed and the techniques that international media uses to construct such frames are made visible.

Conclusion

Roy's representation of media discourses throughout *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) can, therefore, be seen as a means of taking control of the narratives through which postcolonial subjects are represented. Her critique of the media representation of Anjum and the other *hijrahs* is achieved by showing how they are objectified as spectacles upon which Western audiences can turn their gaze from their strategic location and 'consume' such images as a form of entertainment. Roy's depiction of media responses to the Second Freedom Struggle and the coverage of the Kashmir conflict in the international media also shows how grief and suffering can be viewed without serious moral or emotional engagement. As this critical analysis of the novel has attempted to show, Roy's subversive act of reframing such narratives is an act of postcolonial resistance that re-inscribes the Oriental subjects back into the scene from which they had been previously excluded. Roy's novel becomes the site where power is given back to the marginalized and the voices of the subaltern are heard and celebrated in a manner that is sharply divergent from existing media narratives in which they play a part.

Roy's response to media discourse, however, remains ambivalent and complex because, sometimes, regardless of the framing, international journalistic coverage is the only thing that prevents the stories of victims from being completely erased from history. It is important to note that in the case of the coverage of actual events, the narrative is thrice removed from reality as the actual facts are represented through a media narrative which, in turn, is mediated through representations of

fictional characters in a novel. Yet, interrogating the frames of media narratives is an important ethical enterprise that Roy undertakes. By making visible the frames of recognition underlying media discourse, she enables us as readers to become more cautious and critical consumers of the narratives constantly being constructed by the international media.

References

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2004). *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. Routledge.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.

Butler, J. P. (2010). *Frames of war: When is life grievable?* Verso.

Klikauer, T. (2021). *Media capitalism: Hegemony in the age of mass deception*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Pennycook, A. (1998). *The cultural politics of English as an international language*. Taylor & Francis.

Rambukwella, H. (2022). Violent places: The politics of "framing" violence in postcolonial Sri Lanka. *Postcolonial Text*, *17*(2 & 3), 2–20. https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/2731

Ram, K. (2018). Gender, colonialism, and the colonial gaze. *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1873

Ranji, B. (2021). Traces of orientalism in media studies. *Media, Culture & Society, 43*(6), 1136–1146. https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211022692

Roy, A. (2017). *The ministry of utmost happiness*. Penguin Books.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.

Said, E. (1994). *Culture and imperialism*. Vintage.

Short, M. (1996). *Exploring the language of poems, plays, and prose.* Addison Wesley Longman.

Street, J. (2001). *Mass media, politics, and democracy*. Palgrave Macmillan

Swanson, D. L., & Mancini, P. (1996). *Politics, media, and modern democracy: An international study of innovations in electoral campaigning and their consequences*. Bloomsbury.

Talbot, M. (2007). *Media discourse: Representation and interaction*. Edinburgh University Press.