



Gender-Based Violence and the Media's Role: Exploring Arundhati Roy's "The Great Indian Rape Trick."

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Abstract— Arundhati Roy's essays "The Great Indian Rape Trick" offer a critical analysis of the representation of reality in media, focusing on Shekhar Kapur's film "Bandit Queen" and its portrayal of Phoolan Devi's life. Roy challenges the film's claim of being a "true story," arguing that it distorts Devi's narrative by overemphasizing her experiences of sexual assault and reducing her identity to that of a victim. The study explores how media narratives often sensationalize violence while failing to address underlying societal issues, reinforcing existing power dynamics and perpetuating systemic discrimination. Roy's critique examines the ethical implications of asserting "truth" in films portraying real individuals, highlighting the oversimplification of complex situations and the potential exploitation of subjects. The essay raises significant questions about the nature of representation, power dynamics in storytelling, and the complexities of translating lived experiences into visual media. Roy's analysis encourages readers to consider the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers when handling sensitive biographical content and the possible repercussions of presenting a single narrative as definitive truth. The study contributes to the broader discourse on media representation and its implications for social awareness and policy-making, emphasizing the need for responsible and nuanced portrayals of sensitive issues.



Keywords— *Bandit Queen, Justice, Media, Reality, Violence*

I. INTRODUCTION

Arundhati Roy, born on November 24, 1961, in Shillong, Meghalaya, India, is renowned for her literary achievements and political activism. Beyond her novels, she is actively engaged in human rights and environmental advocacy. Despite facing legal challenges, she remains unwavering in her pursuit of justice. Roy's essays and speeches address critical issues such as global capitalism, social inequality, and environmental degradation. She is a vocal critic of injustices against individuals. Her involvement extends beyond writing, as she actively participates in protests, campaigns, and advocacy efforts. Her unapologetic advocacy for marginalized communities, environmental conservation, and human rights continues to influence public discourse. Roy's activism focuses on

marginalized communities, amplifying the voices of the oppressed, particularly women. She highlights the intersectionality of oppressive systems, which create unique forms of marginalization. Roy's commitment to social justice extends to her support for various grassroots movements, including those advocating for indigenous rights and environmental protection. Her writings often intertwine personal narratives with broader societal issues, creating a powerful narrative that resonates with readers worldwide. Through her work, Roy challenges dominant power structures and encourages critical thinking about the complex socio-political landscape of contemporary India and beyond.

Roy's activism is fundamentally anchored in her profound empathy for individuals situated on the

peripheries of society. Through her non-fiction works, she vividly portrays the severe challenges encountered by the most impoverished and marginalized groups in India and beyond, who frequently become victims of governmental oppression, corporate exploitation, and military interventions. A persistent theme in her oeuvre is her critique of globalization, particularly the manner in which economic strategies have exacerbated inequality and undermined indigenous cultures. Her publications, such as *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) and *Listening to Grasshoppers* (2009), provide a pointed critique of capitalism-driven globalization, which she argues leads to the displacement and isolation of the world's most impoverished populations.

I. OBJECTIVE

This study aims to investigate the representation of reality in media through an analysis of Roy's essays entitled "The Great Indian Rape Trick" based on the movie *Bandit Queen*, directed by Shekhar Kapur, which in turn claims to be adapted from the biography of Phoolan Devi, written by Mala Sen. The research explores how these works challenge traditional narratives and present alternative perspectives on societal issues. By examining the portrayal of gender, violence, and power dynamics in both the literary and cinematic mediums, the study seeks to uncover the complexities of representation in Indian media. Furthermore, it aims to shed light on the ways in which Roy and Kapoor's works contribute to broader discussions about social justice and the role of media in shaping public perception.

II. THE GREAT INDIAN RAPE TRICK

"The Great Indian Rape Trick," is a powerful critique of Kapur's film *Bandit Queen*, which portrays the life of Phoolan Devi, a dacoit turned politician. Roy challenges the film's claim of being a 'true story,' pointing out that Kapur never met Phoolan Devi and relied solely on Sen's biography, which itself presented multiple versions of events. Kapur did not exhibit curiosity. He has openly acknowledged that he did not feel the necessity to meet Phoolan (Roy 837). Roy argues that the film distorts Devi's life by focusing excessively on her experiences of sexual assault, reducing her identity to that of a victim. This portrayal, Roy contends, not only misrepresents Devi's multifaceted life but also trivializes the broader reality of rape and its impact on survivors.

Here Roy explores the intricate influence of media in sustaining gender and caste-based violence within India. Her analysis reveals that media narratives, especially

those related to sexual violence against women, and caste-based injustices, often serve to uphold existing power dynamics and perpetuate systemic discrimination and oppression. Roy argues that these media narratives frequently sensationalize incidents of violence while failing to address the underlying societal issues that contribute to such acts. She contends that this approach not only trivializes the experiences of victims but also diverts attention from the need for structural reforms. Roy suggests that the media's selective focus on certain cases, often those involving upper-caste victims or perpetrators, reinforces existing hierarchies and obscures the pervasive nature of violence against marginalized communities.

In her essays, "The Great Indian Rape Trick I and II," Roy adopts a humanistic perspective on the life of Phoolan Devi, also known as the 'Bandit Queen.' Rather than perceiving Phoolan Devi solely through the prism of her gender, Roy advocates for societal recognition of her as a human being endowed with emotions, desires, and feelings. Roy interrogates the ethical implications of 'restaging the rape of a living woman without her permission' and accuses Kapur of exploiting Devi and misrepresenting the significance of her life. The film is adapted from the book *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen, which is informed by newspaper reports, interviews, meetings, and written accounts during Phoolan Devi's incarceration. Roy amplifies Phoolan Devi's voice, illuminating her experiences and challenging societal perceptions. In this context, Roy underscores the complexity of Phoolan Devi's identity beyond mere gender, inviting readers to perceive her as an individual wronged by systemic injustices. Phoolan Devi's narrative serves as a potent critique of both the caste system and patriarchy in India, highlighting the challenges faced by marginalized women in a profoundly stratified society.

In this analysis, Roy offers a critical examination of the complex narrative presented in the film *Bandit Queen* and its portrayal of Phoolan Devi's life. Through her incisive critique, Roy interrogates the notion of 'Truth' as articulated by filmmaker Shekhar Kapur, delving into the intricacies of ambiguity, manipulation, and representation. At the premiere of *Bandit Queen*, Shekhar Kapur asserted that he prioritized 'Truth' over aesthetics, proclaiming that 'Truth is Pure.' The film's commercial success was largely contingent upon this claim of authenticity. Kapur consistently emphasized that the film was a 'True Story,' a designation that set it apart from conventional narratives of rape and retribution in Indian cinema. The alleged authenticity of the film functioned as a defence against criticism, effectively marginalizing dissenting perspectives.

Roy's analysis delves deeper into the problematic nature of Kapur's claim to 'Truth' in *Bandit Queen*. She argues that the film's narrative, while purportedly based on real events, is a carefully constructed representation that blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Roy suggests that Kapur's insistence on the film's authenticity serves to silence alternative interpretations and experiences, particularly those of Phoolan Devi herself. The author contends that by presenting a singular, definitive version of events, the film potentially oversimplifies a complex life story and reinforces certain stereotypes about caste, gender, and violence in India.

According to Shekhar Kapur's film, every landmark-every decision, every turning-point in Phoolan Devi's life, starting with how she became a dacoit in the first place, has to do with having been raped, or avenging rape (Roy 839).

In the essay's second section, Roy continues her examination of the film *Bandit Queen*, probing further into the ethical and moral issues of portraying Phoolan Devi's life without her approval. She questions the filmmaker's choice to emphasize scenes of sexual violence, contending that this sensationalism not only misrepresents Devi's narrative but also reinforces damaging stereotypes about women and rape survivors. Roy points out that the film reduces Devi's identity to her victimhood, overshadowing her strength and autonomy. She also investigates the wider cultural and political factors involved in the commercialization of Devi's life story. Roy criticizes the exploitation of marginalized individuals for profit and entertainment, highlighting how the film industry often favours dramatic stories over truth and authenticity. Her essay acts as a call to action, urging filmmakers and audiences to handle stories of trauma and survival with care and respect. Through her sharp analysis, Roy highlights the necessity for ethical storytelling that respects the complexity of human experiences rather than simplifying them into mere spectacle. Her essay challenges the audience to reflect on the impact of such portrayals on societal views of rape and the dignity of survivors.

In their quest for Classic Cinema, they've stripped a human being of her Rights. Her Dignity. Her Privacy. Her Freedom. And perhaps, as I will argue later, of her Right to Life itself (Roy 857).

Roy's critique examines the broader implications of asserting 'Truth' in films that portray real individuals and events. She contends that such assertions can be fundamentally flawed, as they often involve oversimplifying complex situations, omitting contradictory perspectives, and potentially exploiting the subjects involved. Roy's analysis encourages readers to

consider the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers when handling sensitive biographical content and the possible repercussions of presenting a single narrative as the definitive truth. This critique raises significant questions about the nature of representation, the power dynamics inherent in storytelling, and the complexities of translating lived experiences into visual media. The essay suggests that the film's claim of being the 'Truth' is questionable and serves as a defence against criticism.

Whether or not it is the Truth is no longer relevant. The point is that it will, (if it hasn't already)- become the Truth (Roy 837).

III. THE TRUE STORY OF PHOOLAN DEVI

Phoolan Devi, widely recognized as the 'Bandit Queen,' was an Indian dacoit who later became a politician, with a life characterized by adversity, defiance, and perseverance. Born into a poor family in Uttar Pradesh, she experienced oppression from an early age, including being married off at the age of eleven and suffering abuse. Eventually, she joined a group of dacoits, targeting villages of the upper caste and gaining a reputation akin to Robin Hood among marginalized groups. Her most notorious act was the Behmai massacre in 1981, where twenty Thakur men were killed, reportedly as revenge for her own mistreatment. This incident triggered a large-scale manhunt, which ended with her surrender in 1983 as part of a negotiated agreement. She spent eleven years in prison before being released in 1994, with the charges against her being dismissed.

After her release, Phoolan Devi entered the political arena, securing a position as a Member of Parliament with the Samajwadi Party in 1996. She championed the rights of lower-caste groups and fought for justice for the marginalized. Despite her efforts, her past continued to shadow her, and in 2001, she was murdered outside her residence by Sher Singh Rana, who claimed his actions were in retaliation for the Behmai massacre. Her life story attracted global attention through the contentious film *Bandit Queen* and several biographies, including her own dictated autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi*. Despite the differing accounts of her life, she remains a symbol of defiance against systemic oppression and caste-based violence in India.

Phoolan Devi, a historical figure of considerable significance, transcended her personal narrative to become a legendary icon, shaped by a multitude of narratives. Kapur's adaptation, drawing inspiration from Sen's book, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, achieved notable recognition. Sen's work itself offers a multifaceted examination of events, incorporating

Phoolan's personal account, a journalist's perspective, and eyewitness testimonies. This approach results in a richly layered, humanistic exploration of Phoolan's life. Sen adeptly integrates Phoolan Devi's diaries, letters, interviews, and police records to construct this compelling narrative of resilience, defiance, and transformation. The book underscores the life of an extraordinary woman who challenged societal norms and left an indelible impact on India's history.

In her works, "The Great Indian Rape Trick I and II", Roy shifts from a strictly feminist viewpoint to a more humanistic approach. These essays give a voice to Phoolan Devi, a woman who faces dual marginalization in India's caste-focused society. Roy encourages people to look past the myth and see Phoolan as a person, acknowledging her hardships and the intricacies of her life. Roy finds it notable that Kapur showed little interest in Phoolan Devi, as he admitted he didn't feel it was necessary to meet her. His producer, Bobby Bedi, shared this view, suggesting Kapur would have met her if he thought it was important. Roy challenges this mindset. How can a filmmaker claim to portray the 'True Story' without directly interacting with the person involved? She questions how Kapur determines that Sen's account of Phoolan Devi's life is the 'Truth'.

Roy expresses concern about the choice not to show the film to Phoolan Devi, maintaining that this claim is true even though the individual whose life inspired the film has never watched it. Known for her perceptive socio-political insights and literary prowess, Roy delves into the complexities of Phoolan Devi's life and its portrayal in cinema. In her critique, Roy not only scrutinizes the artistic choices made by Kapur but also brings attention to the broader discourse on gender, caste, and violence in Indian society. A significant element of Roy's critique is her analysis of the viewpoint from which Phoolan Devi's story is depicted in the film. She meticulously examines how the film portrays Devi's experiences with trauma, abuse, and violence, highlighting that these narratives are predominantly viewed through a male perspective. Roy contends that Kapur's film fails to adequately convey the intricacies of Phoolan Devi's agency and individuality, simplifying her complex identity to that of a one-dimensional victim or a shallow symbol of defiance. Roy argues that by perpetuating such simplistic narratives, the film not only diminishes Devi's character but also reinforces existing stereotypes about gender and caste in Indian society.

Roy delves into the film's portrayal of caste dynamics, particularly focusing on how Phoolan Devi's interactions with her oppressors are depicted. She critiques the film for turning caste-related violence into mere

spectacle, arguing that this approach overlooks the structural inequalities and systemic injustices that are the root causes of such acts. Roy highlights that the film's focus on sensationalized violence often obscures the socio-political realities underlying these issues, thereby diminishing the significance of Devi's struggle against caste oppression. She questions the ethical considerations of cinematic representation, especially in relation to Phoolan's real-life experiences. Roy raises important questions about the filmmakers' responsibility when depicting sensitive topics like sexual violence and caste discrimination, emphasizing the need for nuance, empathy, and ethical reflection. She argues that by prioritizing sensationalism over sensitivity, Kapur's film risks causing harm and exploitation, particularly to marginalized communities whose stories are being portrayed.

Roy's critique of Kapur's *Bandit Queen* extends beyond a mere aesthetic assessment; it represents a profound examination of power, representation, and ethics within the cinematic domain. Through her incisive analysis, Roy encourages a critical reflection on the narratives we consume and the broader socio-political implications they encompass. In doing so, she challenges us to envision alternative storytelling methods that are more empathetic, inclusive, and ethically responsible. Roy addresses the events omitted from the source material of the film *Bandit Queen*, namely Sen's book *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*. Her examination of these omissions underscores the selective nature of cinematic adaptation and its potential to reshape historical narratives. By scrutinizing these editorial choices, Roy reveals the power dynamics inherent in the film's production and its portrayal of Phoolan Devi's life. This critical approach highlights the importance of considering not only what is depicted on screen but also what is excluded, and how these decisions influence our understanding of complex social issues and marginalized individuals.

Roy meticulously highlights a pivotal moment in the book that underscores the systemic violence and misogyny experienced by Phoolan Devi. Roy sharply focuses on the scene depicting the removal of Phoolan's uterus without her consent by a prison doctor, a harrowing incident emblematic of the gross violations of bodily autonomy and reproductive rights faced by countless women, particularly those from marginalized communities. She underscores the profound implications of this act of medical violence, emphasizing how it epitomizes the erasure of Phoolan Devi's agency and autonomy as a woman. By depicting the doctor's actions as a manifestation of patriarchal power and control, Roy exposes the broader socio-political dynamics at play,

wherein women's bodies are often subjected to exploitation and violation under the guise of medical authorities. Roy draws attention to the deeply ingrained sexism and racism embedded within the doctor's remarks during the procedure. It is recorded in "The Great Indian Rape Trick I":

One last terrifying thing. While she was still in jail, Phoolan was rushed to hospital bleeding heavily because of an ovarian cyst. Her womb was removed. When Mala Sen asked why this had been necessary, the prison doctor laughed and said, "We don't want her breeding any more Phoolan Devis (Roy 848).

Roy critiques the physician's comments, which are characterized by anti-humanistic, anti-feminist, and racially charged undertones, as they not only dehumanize Phoolan but also perpetuate harmful stereotypes related to gender and race. Roy condemns these remarks as indicative of a broader culture of misogyny and racial prejudice prevalent in Indian society, highlighting the intersections of gender, caste, and race in shaping experiences of oppression and violence. Through her analysis of this pivotal scene, Roy reveals the insidious mechanisms by which systems of power intersect to perpetuate violence and injustice against marginalized individuals. By centring Phoolan's experience of reproductive violence within a broader critique of patriarchy and casteism, Roy challenges viewers to confront the systemic inequalities that underpin such acts of oppression. In doing so, she underscores the urgent need for feminist solidarity and resistance in the face of systemic violence and injustice.

Roy critically examines the media's portrayal of narratives surrounding incidents of violence, with a particular focus on sexual violence against women. She contends that the media frequently sensationalizes these incidents, emphasizing graphic details rather than addressing the systemic issues that contribute to gender-based violence. Roy argues that the film *Bandit Queen* attempts to depict Phoolan Devi as a victim—a woman who endured rape and abuse and seeks solace in the man she loves. The film portrays Phoolan Devi as a 'one-man woman,' eliciting sympathetic reactions from viewers, as the Indian middle-class audience often expects a woman to love and remain with a single partner throughout her life.

Roy elucidates how media portrayals frequently reinforce stereotypes based on gender and caste. She examines the depiction of Dalit women as victims of sexual violence, which perpetuates the stereotype of Dalit women as inherently vulnerable and powerless. Similarly, media representations of gender-based violence often attribute blame to the victim or emphasize factors such as the

victim's attire, thereby perpetuating victim-blaming attitudes. Roy underscores the media's selective reporting of violent incidents, particularly concerning marginalized communities such as Dalits and Adivasis. She contends that mainstream media often neglects to report atrocities committed against these communities, thus perpetuating their marginalization and invisibility in public discourse. Roy discusses how media coverage of violence, especially when it becomes routine or normalized, desensitizes the public to these issues. This normalization of violence contributes to a culture of impunity, where perpetrators feel emboldened to commit further acts of violence.

IV. OBSERVATIONS

Our observations reveal a stark contrast in the portrayal of socio-political issues between the literary work and the cinematic adaptation. While the novel delves deeply into the complexities of social inequality and political corruption, the film glosses over these themes in favour of a more action-oriented narrative. This shift in focus significantly alters the overall message and impact of the story, potentially diluting its social commentary. As a result, viewers of the film may miss out on the nuanced exploration of societal issues that made the original literary work so compelling and thought-provoking.

Previous research has extensively documented the influence of media on public perception, particularly in the context of social justice and human rights. This influence extends to shaping public opinion on critical issues such as racial equality, gender rights, and environmental justice. Media coverage can amplify or downplay certain perspectives, potentially swaying societal attitudes and policy decisions. Understanding the mechanisms of media influence is crucial for fostering a more informed and equitable public discourse on social justice matters.

Understanding how media representations shape societal views is crucial for addressing misconceptions and fostering informed discourse. Media portrayals often serve as a primary source of information for the public, influencing perceptions and attitudes towards various social issues. These representations can either reinforce existing stereotypes or challenge them, playing a significant role in shaping public opinion and policy decisions. By critically analysing media content and promoting diverse and accurate portrayals, we can work towards a more nuanced understanding of complex societal issues and promote positive social change.

Despite their common theme, the two works occasionally present contradictory viewpoints on the impact and interpretation of the events depicted. The differing perspectives offered by the authors provide

readers with a nuanced understanding of the complex historical narrative. These contrasting interpretations challenge readers to critically examine the events from multiple angles, encouraging a more comprehensive analysis. By presenting divergent viewpoints, the works ultimately contribute to a richer, more multifaceted exploration of the subject matter.

This study contributes to the broader discourse on media representation and its implications for social awareness and policy-making. By examining the portrayal of homelessness in news media, we gain insights into how public perception is shaped and influenced. This understanding can inform strategies for more accurate and empathetic reporting on vulnerable populations. Furthermore, it highlights the need for media literacy education to help audiences critically evaluate the information they receive and its potential biases.

The findings have significant implications for media creators, suggesting the need for responsible and nuanced portrayals of sensitive issues. Media producers should consider the potential impact of their content on audience perceptions and attitudes. Collaborations between media professionals and mental health experts could lead to more accurate and empathetic representations. Additionally, media literacy programs could be developed to help viewers critically analyse and contextualize the portrayals they encounter.

It is important to approach the analysis with caution, recognizing potential biases and the subjective nature of media interpretation. Researchers should employ a diverse range of methodologies, including both quantitative and qualitative approaches, to gain a comprehensive understanding of media representations. Cross-cultural comparisons can provide valuable insights into how different societies perceive and portray similar events or issues. Additionally, considering the historical context and evolving media landscape is crucial for a nuanced analysis of contemporary media content.

This research offers a novel perspective by juxtaposing a literary work with its cinematic counterpart, providing unique insights into media representation. The comparative analysis reveals nuanced differences in character development and thematic emphasis between the two mediums. By examining the adaptation process, we gain a deeper understanding of how narrative elements are transformed and reinterpreted across different artistic platforms. This interdisciplinary approach not only enriches our comprehension of both the original text and its film adaptation but also sheds light on the broader cultural implications of storytelling in diverse media formats.

V. LIMITATIONS

The study is limited by its focus on only three works, that is, Roy's essays, Mala Sen's book on Phoolan Devi and the movie titled *Bandit Queen* directed by Shekhar Kapur, which may not fully capture the diversity of media representations on the topic.

Further research could explore a wider range of media sources, including news articles, documentaries, and social media discussions, to provide a more comprehensive analysis of Phoolan Devi's portrayal. Additionally, a comparative study examining representations of other female bandits or outlaws in different cultural contexts could offer valuable insights into gender dynamics and media narratives. Future investigations might also benefit from incorporating audience reception studies to understand how these media representations influence public perceptions and attitudes towards female criminality and social justice issues.

VI. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Arundhati Roy's essay, "The Great Indian Rape Trick," offers a critical perspective on how the media contributes to the perpetuation of gender and caste-based violence in India. Roy's sharp analysis reveals that media narratives often uphold existing power dynamics, reinforce damaging stereotypes, and further marginalize victims from already marginalized communities. She emphasizes the necessity for journalism to adopt a more ethical and responsible approach, one that prioritizes truth and social justice. Additionally, she acknowledges the potential of alternative media platforms and grassroots movements to challenge prevailing narratives and amplify the voices of those historically silenced. As we continue to explore the intricate intersections of media, violence, and social inequality, Roy's insights serve as a powerful reminder of the media's significant role in shaping public perceptions and discourse, highlighting the urgent need for media practices that foster inclusivity, empathy, and accountability. Roy's essay questions the very foundations of truth, representation, and storytelling, urging us to scrutinize the narratives that shape our understanding of real lives and to engage more deeply and compassionately with the complexities of human existence. As a writer-activist, Roy calls for media representations that are free from gender and caste biases.

Roy's analysis extends beyond critique to propose a transformative vision for media practices. She envisions a journalism that not only reports facts but actively works to dismantle systemic inequalities and give voice to the

voiceless. This approach calls for a fundamental shift in how stories are sourced, framed, and presented, with a focus on amplifying diverse perspectives and challenging entrenched power structures. Roy's essay invites readers to become more critical and engaged consumers of media. By encouraging a deeper examination of the narratives we encounter, she empowers individuals to question the status quo and seek out alternative viewpoints. This active engagement with media can lead to a more informed and empathetic society, one that is better equipped to address complex social issues and work towards meaningful change.

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