Framing Displacement: Migration, Ethics of Storytelling, Memory, and the Search for Self

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore the intricate relationship between an artist's environment, socio-political realities, personal experiences, and technological advancements in shaping documentary filmmaking. My focus is on themes of migration, identity, and displacement, particularly in the context of the Global South. I argue that documentary filmmaking is inherently subjective, influenced by my perspective as a filmmaker, rather than being a neutral presentation of truth. I critique Western-dominated narratives and highlight the ethical dilemmas of representing marginalized communities, such as the Rohingya crisis. My goal is to advocate for a more ethical, culturally authentic approach to documentary filmmaking that prioritizes the voices of underrepresented people.

In one sentence, how my surroundings influenced me to be an artist and at the same time, how my education and industry influenced me to project myself to the world in between I have tried to find out who am I.

Introduction

In the introduction, I have tried to explore my environment, socio-political realities, personal experiences, and technological advancements as an artist and how all these things shape documentary filmmaking from a personal point of view. I set the stage for my thesis by discussing how migration, identity, and displacement are central to my work, both as a Bangladeshi immigrant and as a filmmaker. I critique the Western-dominated attention economy and the pressure on filmmakers to create eye-catching content. I also introduce the ethical challenges of representing marginalized communities, particularly in the context of the Rohingya crisis. I argue that documentary filmmaking is not about presenting objective truth but about telling subjective stories shaped by my perspective and external factors. I also touch on the role of technology in shaping narratives and the need for filmmakers like myself to reclaim authenticity and challenge Western hegemony.

Chapter 1: My Artistic Journey – Migration, Cinema, and Identity

The author aimed to explore how personal experiences of migration, colonial history, and cultural identity shape his documentary filmmaking, particularly in representing marginalized communities.

In this chapter deals with personal trajectory within the larger history of migration, colonial legacies, and artistic practice. I seek into my personal and artistic journey, exploring how my experiences as a Bangladeshi immigrant have shaped my work. I discuss the historical context of British colonial rule in Bangladesh and its lasting impact on the region's socio-economic conditions, including the de-industrialization of local industries and the imposition of Western education systems. I also reflect on the Partition of 1947 and its traumatic effects on the region, leading to mass migration and displacement. I connect these historical events to my own family's migration stories and how they have influenced my cinematic work, particularly in portraying the struggles of migrants and refugees. The chapter highlights how these historical forces continue to shape migration patterns and social inequalities today.

Insight: This chapter highlights how my personal and historical experiences of migration and displacement are deeply intertwined, shaping both my identity and my artistic vision. I use my own family's migration stories to explore broader themes of identity, belonging, and the socio-economic challenges faced by migrants.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework – Migration, Culture, and Cinema

The author sought to establish a theoretical foundation by integrating ideas from scholars like Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson, and Edward Said to analyze migration, identity, and cultural representation in his films.

In this chapter, I establish the theoretical foundation for my thesis, drawing on thinkers like Stuart Hall, Benedict Anderson, and Edward Said. I explore the concepts of cultural identity, imagined communities, and Orientalism, and how they relate to migration and cinema. Said's Orientalism is employed to critique the ways Western media frames non-Western migrants, often reducing their experiences to simplistic, dehumanizing stereotypes. I discuss the subjective nature of documentary filmmaking and the importance of representing marginalized voices authentically. I also reflect on the influence of cinematic realism, particularly the work of André Bazin, and the ethical responsibilities I face as a filmmaker in representing non-Western subjects. The chapter also draws on Bill Nichols' theory of documentary modes to examine how different storytelling approaches affect audience perception and ethical responsibility in documentary filmmaking.

Insight: This chapter emphasizes the fluid and evolving nature of identity, particularly in the context of migration. I argue that migration is not just a physical journey but an emotional and psychological one, and that cinema can be a powerful tool for exploring these complexities.

Chapter 3: Representation, Power, and the Ethics of Documentary Filmmaking

The author aimed to critically examine the power dynamics and ethical dilemmas in documentary filmmaking, particularly in representing non-Western subjects and challenging Eurocentric narratives.

In this chapter, I critically examine the power dynamics and ethical dilemmas involved in documentary filmmaking, particularly when representing marginalized communities. I critique the Eurocentric frameworks that dominate the global media landscape and discuss how non-Western filmmakers like myself are often forced to conform to Western narratives to gain visibility. I also reflect on my own work, particularly the film "The Border Within", and the ethical challenges of representing the Rohingya crisis. I emphasize the importance of reflexivity and collaboration in documentary filmmaking to ensure ethical representation.

Insight: This chapter highlights the tension between cultural authenticity and global exposure, particularly for filmmakers like me from the Global South. I argue that I must navigate the attention economy while staying true to my cultural roots and ethical responsibilities.The chapter also examines how the audience plays an active role in shaping representation.

Chapter 4: Personal Truths and Cinematic Realities

The author intended to reflect on the subjective nature of documentary filmmaking, exploring how personal memories, cultural inequalities, and ethical challenges influence the portrayal of reality in his work.

In this chapter, I explore the subjective nature of reality in documentary filmmaking, focusing on the role of memory, cultural inequality, and ethical dilemmas. I reflect on my film "Before Pandemic and War, There Were Bed Bugs and Love!", which examines the cultural conflicts in an interracial relationship. I discuss how personal memories and cultural differences shape the narrative and how ethical considerations influence my storytelling process. I also touch on the challenges of balancing personal experiences with broader socio-political themes.

Insight: This chapter underscores the importance of memory in shaping narratives and the ethical challenges of representing personal and cultural conflicts in documentary filmmaking. I argue that documentaries are not just about recording events but about interpreting and reconstructing them through my personal lens.

Chapter 5: The Border Within and Wandering: A Rohingya Story – A Comparative Analysis

The author aimed to compare his film The Border Within with Wandering: A Rohingya Story to highlight the differences in cultural perspectives, ethical representation, and the impact of global film festivals on non-Western narratives.

In this chapter, I compare my film "The Border Within" with "Wandering: A Rohingya Story" by Western filmmakers Mélanie Carrier and Olivier Higgins. I critique the Western approach to representing the Rohingya crisis, arguing that it often simplifies and exoticizes the experiences of marginalized communities. I contrast this with my own approach, which seeks to provide a more nuanced and culturally authentic portrayal of the Rohingya people. I also discuss the role of film festivals in shaping global narratives and the challenges I face as a non-Western filmmaker in gaining recognition. The chapter also reflects on audience reactions, examining how different cultural contexts shape the reception of migration narratives.

Insight: This chapter highlights the cultural hegemony in the global documentary film industry and the challenges I face as a non-Western filmmaker in representing my own stories. I argue that Western narratives often dominate the global media landscape, marginalizing the voices of those from the Global South.

Conclusion

The conclusion underscores the need for filmmakers like me to navigate the complexities of representation, power, and ethics in documentary filmmaking. I advocate for a more inclusive and ethical approach that challenges dominant narratives and amplifies the voices of underrepresented communities.

In the conclusion, I reiterate the central argument of my thesis: that documentary filmmaking is inherently subjective and shaped by my perspective, socio-political context, and ethical considerations. I call for a more nuanced and ethical approach to documentary filmmaking that prioritizes the voices of marginalized communities and challenges Western-dominated narratives. I emphasize the importance of reflexivity, collaboration, and cultural authenticity in creating documentaries that can contribute to a more inclusive global discourse.

By blending artistic inquiry with theoretical frameworks, the dissertation positions documentary filmmaking as both a creative practice and a form of research—a means of interrogating social realities, questioning established truths, and fostering a deeper understanding of migration, identity, and displacement. The work ultimately envisions a documentary landscape where filmmakers from the Global South can assert their agency, telling stories on their terms without being confined by Western expectations or the demands of the digital media economy.

Bibliography

The bibliography provides a comprehensive list of references, including works by Stuart Hall, Edward Said, Bill Nichols, and other theorists, as well as historical and cultural studies that inform my research.