

INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION AND THE ETHICS OF DOCUMENTARY REPRESENTATION: NEGOTIATING SYMBOLIC CAPITAL, PARTICIPANT AGENCY, AND ETHICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DOCUMENTARY CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

The growing international recognition of Indian documentary cinema through institutions such as the Academy Awards and the global film festival circuit has largely been understood as a celebration of aesthetic innovation, authentic storytelling, and the increasing visibility of local narratives within transnational cinematic cultures; however, far less scholarly attention has been paid to the ethical relationships that emerge, transform, or become contested between filmmakers and the documentary participants whose lived experiences constitute the very foundation upon which such global recognition is built. While international awards, festival selections, and worldwide distribution frequently produce symbolic prestige and institutional legitimacy for documentary filmmakers, these moments of celebration also reveal a series of unresolved questions concerning authorship, representation, participant agency, ethical responsibility, and the unequal distribution of both symbolic and material rewards, particularly when the individuals whose lives are documented subsequently challenge the terms of their representation or the conditions under which their stories continue to circulate.

It is within this broader context that this paper undertakes a comparative analysis of *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), *Writing with Fire* (2021), and *To Kill a Tiger* (2022), three internationally celebrated Indian documentaries that, despite receiving exceptional global recognition, became the centre of significant public debates concerning allegations of exploitation, disputes over representational authority, questions surrounding informed consent, and the ethical responsibilities of documentary practice towards vulnerable and marginalized participants. Rather than approaching these controversies as isolated incidents or individual production disputes, the paper argues that they are symptomatic of deeper structural tensions that emerge when documentary narratives acquire international symbolic value while the participants themselves continue to negotiate questions of ownership, recognition, voice, and justice long after the completion of the filmmaking process.

Drawing upon Bill Nichols' framework of documentary ethics, Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of symbolic capital and the field of cultural production, and Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of representation and the politics of speaking for the Other, this paper argues that the ethical questions raised by these documentaries cannot be adequately understood through the language of consent, authenticity, or representation alone, but instead demand a more expansive understanding of documentary ethics that encompasses the production, circulation, reception, and afterlife of documentary texts within global cultural economies. Through a qualitative comparative analysis of the films alongside interviews, public statements, media reports, and the discursive controversies that unfolded following their international recognition, the paper demonstrates that the accumulation of symbolic capital within the global festival circuit frequently produces asymmetrical relationships in which filmmakers

acquire visibility, professional legitimacy, and institutional authority, while participants continue to struggle over material recognition, narrative ownership, and the continuing right to negotiate how their lives are represented within globally circulating documentary narratives.

By shifting the analytical focus from the documentary text alone to the ethical, political, and institutional relationships that documentaries generate across their production and post-release trajectories, this paper contributes to ongoing debates in documentary studies, film ethics, and the political economy of global cinema by arguing that the ethical evaluation of internationally celebrated documentaries must extend beyond questions of truthful representation to include the unequal circulation of symbolic capital, the redistribution of authorship and authority, and the continuing responsibilities that filmmakers owe to those whose lives become the subjects of internationally acclaimed cinematic narratives.

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary resurgence of Indian documentary cinema within the global film festival circuit has undoubtedly altered the ways in which Indian documentaries are imagined, circulated, and evaluated across international cultural institutions, particularly as *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), *Writing with Fire* (2021), and *To Kill a Tiger* (2022) have travelled through prestigious festivals, streaming platforms, and award ceremonies, eventually occupying spaces that had historically remained inaccessible to Indian documentary practice [1]–[4]. While these moments of recognition have been celebrated as evidence of an increasingly global Indian documentary movement capable of producing stories that transcend national boundaries and speak to universal concerns surrounding gender, ecology, caste, violence, and human resilience [5], [6], the very narratives through which these documentaries acquire international legitimacy also compel us to ask a rather uncomfortable question that remains surprisingly underexplored within documentary scholarship: what happens to the ethical relationship between filmmaker and participant once the documentary ceases to remain a local encounter and instead becomes an internationally circulating cultural object, accumulating prestige, symbolic value, institutional legitimacy, and commercial visibility across global cinematic networks [7], [8]?

This question becomes particularly significant because documentary cinema occupies a peculiar position within visual culture, constantly negotiating an unstable boundary between artistic expression and ethical responsibility, between narrative construction and lived experience, and between cinematic authorship and the lives of individuals whose realities simultaneously constitute the material from which the documentary derives its affective, political, and aesthetic force [7], [9]. Unlike fiction cinema, where performance remains largely bounded within fictional worlds, documentary cinema continually invokes an ethical contract with its audience by claiming proximity to reality, and it is perhaps this claim to reality that renders questions of responsibility far more complicated than questions of aesthetics alone [7]. Every editorial decision, every omission, every narrative emphasis, and every circulation of the finished film extends beyond cinematic form and enters the lives of participants who continue to inhabit the social realities from which the documentary has already departed, even as the film itself continues to travel through festivals, award ceremonies, streaming platforms, classrooms, and critical discourse.

Yet, despite a rich body of scholarship on documentary realism, participatory filmmaking, observational cinema, and representational politics [7], [9]–[11], the afterlife of documentary recognition remains comparatively neglected. Much of the existing literature continues to privilege the completed documentary text as the primary object of analysis, examining questions of form, authenticity, spectatorship, ideology, and aesthetics, while often overlooking the evolving social relationships that emerge after the documentary enters circuits of international recognition [8], [12]. The movement of a documentary from production to circulation is not merely a change in exhibition context; rather, it transforms the documentary into a form of cultural capital that generates visibility, legitimacy, professional authority, institutional prestige, and future opportunities for filmmakers, while simultaneously altering the lives of documentary participants in ways that frequently remain absent from critical evaluation [8], [13]. It is therefore insufficient to ask whether a documentary represents its subjects truthfully; equally important is the question of how the symbolic and material value generated through that representation

is negotiated, distributed, and experienced by those whose lives have become publicly available through cinematic narration.

The controversies surrounding *The Elephant Whisperers*, *Writing with Fire*, and *To Kill a Tiger* reveal precisely these tensions, although each does so through a different ethical register [2]–[4], [14]–[17]. In one instance, questions emerged regarding compensation, reciprocity, and the obligations that filmmakers owe to participants whose lives become central to internationally celebrated narratives [14], [15]; in another, participants publicly questioned the representational choices through which their professional identities were edited and subsequently understood by global audiences [16]; while in the third, debates surrounding informed consent, vulnerability, legal protections, and the representation of a minor survivor of sexual violence complicated the celebratory discourse that accompanied the film's international success [17]. Although these controversies differ in their immediate circumstances, they collectively point towards a broader structural problem that exceeds any individual documentary, namely that international recognition frequently transforms documentary participants into producers of symbolic value while leaving unresolved the ethical terms through which that value is created, circulated, and redistributed.

Rather than approaching these controversies as isolated disputes between filmmakers and participants, this paper argues that they should be understood as manifestations of a larger political economy of documentary recognition in which global festivals, award institutions, distributors, streaming platforms, and media discourse collectively participate in producing symbolic capital that is unequally distributed across the field of cultural production [8], [13]. Consequently, the ethical questions raised by these documentaries cannot be reduced to individual intentions or isolated production decisions, but instead demand an examination of the institutional structures through which documentary authority, representational legitimacy, and cultural value are produced and sustained. It is within this intersection of documentary ethics, symbolic capital, and representational politics that the present study situates itself.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

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LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ORIENTATION

Scholarship on documentary cinema has historically engaged with questions of realism, authenticity, spectatorship, and the politics of representation, producing a rich body of theoretical work that examines how documentaries construct meaning while simultaneously claiming privileged access to reality [7], [9]–[11], [18]. Yet this scholarship has often remained centred upon the documentary text itself, treating the completed film as the principal site through which ethical and political questions are negotiated. While such approaches have generated invaluable insights into documentary form and spectatorship, they become less adequate when documentaries are understood not merely as cinematic texts but as social relationships that continue to evolve long after production has ended, particularly once these films enter global circuits of festivals, awards, and institutional recognition [7], [8], [12]. The documentary, in other words, does not conclude with its final frame; rather, it acquires an institutional afterlife that reconfigures relationships between filmmakers, participants, audiences, critics, distributors, and cultural institutions, producing new forms of visibility, authority, and symbolic value that extend well beyond the original act of filming [8], [13].

It is precisely this afterlife of documentary circulation that remains relatively under-theorized, despite the growing centrality of international film festivals and global streaming platforms in determining which documentary narratives acquire worldwide visibility and which remain excluded from international cinematic discourse [5], [8], [19]. Existing scholarship has examined festivals as sites of cultural mediation, canon formation, and transnational circulation [5], [19], [20], while documentary studies has separately explored ethics, consent, observational practice, participatory modes, and representational politics [7], [9], [10]. However, these conversations have seldom been brought together to ask how international recognition itself reconfigures documentary ethics by transforming films into prestigious cultural objects whose symbolic value may not be equally shared by those whose lives enabled their production in the first place [8], [13]. The ethical question therefore shifts from simply asking whether documentaries represent reality responsibly to asking how institutional recognition reorganizes relationships of power, authorship, agency, and accountability after the documentary has already achieved global circulation.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ethical questions that emerge within documentary cinema cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical tradition because the documentary itself is never merely an aesthetic object nor solely an ethical encounter, but rather exists simultaneously as a representational practice, a social relationship, and an institutional commodity whose meanings continue to be produced and transformed across different sites of circulation [7], [8], [13]. Consequently, understanding the controversies surrounding *The Elephant Whisperers*, *Writing with Fire*, and *To Kill a Tiger* requires moving beyond an understanding of documentary ethics as simply a matter of informed consent or responsible filmmaking, towards an examination of the wider political and institutional structures within which documentaries acquire legitimacy, prestige, and authority [2]–[4], [7], [13]. It is precisely at this intersection of ethics, representation, and symbolic value that the present paper locates its analytical framework by bringing into conversation Bill Nichols' work on documentary ethics [7], Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital [13], [21], and Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of representation and speaking for the Other [11], [22], not as isolated theoretical interventions but as complementary ways of understanding how documentary authority is produced, contested, and negotiated.

Bill Nichols has consistently argued that documentary cinema differs fundamentally from fiction because it enters into an ethical relationship with real people whose lives continue beyond the temporal boundaries of the film itself [7]. The documentary image therefore cannot be understood merely as a representational image; it is simultaneously an intervention into the lives of those represented, and this intervention carries obligations that cannot simply disappear once production has concluded or legal consent has been obtained. Nichols' intervention becomes particularly significant because it shifts the discussion away from the simplistic question of whether documentaries tell the truth and instead asks what responsibilities accompany the act of representing another person's lived reality [7]. Documentary ethics, within this formulation, is neither reducible to factual accuracy nor exhausted by procedural notions of consent, for ethical responsibility persists throughout the documentary's production, circulation, reception, and continuing social life, requiring filmmakers to remain attentive to the consequences that representation produces long after the documentary has entered the public sphere [7], [9]. The ethical controversies surrounding the three documentaries examined in this paper illustrate precisely this extension of responsibility beyond production, suggesting that the completion of the film does not necessarily mark the completion of the filmmaker's ethical obligations [14]–[17].

Yet ethics alone cannot explain why these tensions become particularly visible only after documentaries receive international recognition. The question is not simply why participants contest their representation, but why such contestations acquire new urgency once documentaries become internationally celebrated cultural objects. It is here that Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of symbolic capital becomes indispensable because it enables documentary recognition to be understood not merely as artistic appreciation but as the accumulation of

institutional legitimacy that possesses real social, professional, and economic consequences [13], [21]. Festivals, awards, international critics, streaming platforms, and cultural institutions do not simply celebrate documentaries; they actively participate in constructing hierarchies of value through which certain films acquire visibility, prestige, authority, and historical significance [5], [19], [20], [21]. Symbolic capital, within Bourdieu's formulation, is never merely symbolic, for it frequently converts into professional opportunities, financial resources, institutional credibility, future funding, and the authority to continue producing cultural work [13], [21]. Documentary recognition therefore cannot be understood as an innocent celebration of cinematic excellence alone; it also constitutes a process through which value is generated and distributed across the field of cultural production, often unevenly.

This unevenness becomes particularly important because while documentary participants provide the lived experiences through which documentaries acquire emotional authenticity and political legitimacy, they do not necessarily occupy equivalent positions within the institutional structures that reward documentary success. The filmmaker frequently emerges as the visible author whose creative vision becomes celebrated across festivals and critical discourse, whereas participants often remain positioned as subjects of representation whose continuing relationship with the documentary becomes increasingly difficult to negotiate once the film acquires an independent institutional life [8], [13]. The accumulation of symbolic capital therefore simultaneously produces new inequalities, not necessarily because filmmakers intentionally exploit participants, but because the institutions through which recognition is organized privilege particular forms of authorship while rendering other forms of contribution comparatively invisible [13], [20], [21]. The controversy thus exceeds individual morality and enters the broader political economy through which documentary labour, visibility, and recognition are differentially valued.

However, even the unequal distribution of symbolic capital cannot entirely explain the persistence of these ethical disputes unless one also interrogates the representational assumptions upon which documentary authority itself rests. Trinh T. Minh-ha's critique of representation offers precisely this intervention by questioning the very possibility of transparently representing the lives of others, particularly those who have historically occupied marginalized positions within dominant systems of knowledge and cultural production [11], [22]. Rather than accepting documentary claims to authenticity at face value, Trinh urges us to examine the subtle ways through which representation itself becomes an exercise of power, not necessarily through deliberate misrepresentation but through the authority to decide which experiences become narratively significant, which voices remain audible, which silences are preserved or erased, and ultimately who retains the power to interpret another person's reality [11], [22]. Her insistence on "speaking nearby" rather than "speaking for" the Other is especially relevant because it shifts ethical attention away from whether filmmakers possess good intentions and towards the unequal representational structures within which those intentions operate.

When read together, Nichols, Bourdieu, and Trinh reveal that documentary ethics extends far beyond the immediate encounter between filmmaker and participant. Ethical responsibility is inseparable from institutional recognition because recognition itself redistributes authority, visibility, and value, while representation simultaneously shapes whose voices continue to matter once the documentary begins circulating independently of the people whose lives it depicts [7], [11], [13]. The ethical controversies surrounding *The Elephant Whisperers*, *Writing with Fire*, and *To Kill a Tiger* therefore cannot be understood as exceptional failures within otherwise successful documentaries; rather, they illuminate structural contradictions embedded within contemporary documentary practice itself, where international recognition increasingly depends upon intimate access to marginalized lives, yet the institutional rewards generated through that access are often negotiated through unequal relations of authorship, symbolic capital, and representational power [14]–[17]. The present study therefore approaches these three documentaries not simply as films but as sites where ethics, institutional legitimacy, and representational authority intersect, revealing how the global circulation of documentary cinema simultaneously produces visibility and vulnerability, recognition and contestation, prestige and ethical uncertainty.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The present study adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach, not with the intention of establishing causal relationships between documentary production and ethical controversy, but rather to examine how similar ethical questions emerge across different documentary contexts despite involving distinct participants, filmmaking practices, and narrative concerns [23], [24]. The three documentaries selected for this study—*The Elephant Whisperers*, *Writing with Fire*, and *To Kill a Tiger*—are brought together not because they share identical production histories or identical forms of controversy, but because each occupies a similar institutional location within the contemporary global documentary landscape, having achieved exceptional international recognition while subsequently becoming the subject of public debates concerning the ethical relationship between filmmakers and documentary participants [2]–[4], [14]–[17]. Their comparative value therefore lies less in the similarities of the controversies themselves than in the common institutional conditions through which those controversies became publicly visible [13], [20].

The analysis draws not only upon the documentaries as cinematic texts but also upon interviews with filmmakers and participants, public statements, media reports, festival discourse, and secondary scholarship surrounding each documentary [14]–[17], [25]. Such an approach deliberately moves beyond textual analysis alone because the ethical questions examined in this paper emerge not exclusively within the documentary image but through the continuing social life of the documentary after its release, particularly as participants, filmmakers, journalists, critics, and audiences negotiate competing interpretations of responsibility, representation, ownership, and recognition [7], [8], [13]. Consequently, the primary object of analysis is neither the documentary text nor the controversy in isolation, but the relationship between the two, understood within the wider institutional framework of international documentary circulation [5], [8], [20].

The documentary texts and the accompanying public discourses were analysed through qualitative thematic interpretation informed by documentary ethics, symbolic capital, and representational theory, enabling the study to identify recurring ethical patterns across the selected case studies [7], [13], [22], [23].

CONCLUSION

The ethical debates surrounding *The Elephant Whisperers*, *Writing with Fire*, and *To Kill a Tiger* have largely unfolded within public discourse as independent controversies, each discussed according to the immediate circumstances that produced it, whether allegations of exploitation, disagreements over representation, or questions concerning informed consent and the visibility of vulnerable participants [14]–[17]. While these discussions remain important, approaching them as isolated incidents ultimately obscures the deeper structural conditions that make such controversies increasingly likely within contemporary documentary practice. What the present study has sought to demonstrate is that these debates are not simply about individual documentaries or individual filmmakers, but about a transformation occurring within the institutional life of documentary cinema itself, where international festivals, award institutions, streaming platforms, global criticism, and transnational circulation have fundamentally altered the ethical terrain within which documentary relationships now operate [5], [8], [13], [20].

The increasing globalization of documentary cinema has simultaneously expanded the visibility of marginalized communities while also intensifying the ethical responsibilities that accompany such visibility [5], [19]. Recognition, within this context, cannot be understood merely as an external reward that arrives after a documentary has already completed its ethical work; rather, recognition actively reorganizes the relationships between filmmakers, participants, institutions, and audiences by generating new forms of symbolic authority, institutional legitimacy, and interpretative permanence that continue to shape the lives of documentary participants long after production has concluded [8], [13], [21]. The documentary therefore acquires what may be understood as an institutional afterlife, a phase in which ethical questions are no longer confined to filming or editing but emerge through the continuing circulation of representation across global cultural networks [8], [20].

By bringing Bill Nichols, Pierre Bourdieu, and Trinh T. Minh-ha into conversation, this paper has argued that documentary ethics, symbolic capital, and representational authority should not be treated as separate analytical concerns but as mutually constitutive dimensions of the same institutional process [7], [11], [13], [21], [22]. Nichols reminds us that documentary filmmaking establishes ethical relationships that cannot be reduced to technical procedures or legal consent [7]; Bourdieu demonstrates that international recognition redistributes symbolic value in ways that produce unequal positions within the cultural field [13], [21]; and Trinh exposes the representational authority through which one person's interpretation increasingly becomes another person's publicly circulating identity [11], [22]. Considered together, these perspectives suggest that the ethical challenges surrounding contemporary documentary cinema emerge not because documentary filmmakers necessarily fail to act ethically, but because the institutional structures through which documentaries acquire global recognition continue to privilege cinematic authorship while offering comparatively limited conceptual space through which participant agency may continue to evolve after representation has already entered the public domain.

This does not imply that documentaries should cease representing marginalized communities, nor does it diminish the extraordinary political, social, and cultural importance of films that bring invisible lives into public consciousness. Such a conclusion would reproduce precisely the binaries that documentary scholarship has long attempted to overcome [7], [10]. Rather, the argument advanced here is that the ethical vocabulary through which documentary practice has traditionally been evaluated has become increasingly insufficient in the context of twenty-first-century global documentary circulation. Concepts such as informed consent, truthful representation, and participant access remain indispensable, yet they no longer exhaust the ethical questions generated by documentaries whose circulation now extends across multiple institutional, commercial, educational, and digital spaces in ways that neither filmmakers nor participants can fully anticipate at the moment of production [7], [8], [9]. Documentary ethics, consequently, must expand its analytical horizon beyond production ethics towards what may be described as the ethics of circulation, recognition, and institutional afterlife [8], [13].

Viewed from this perspective, the three documentaries examined in this paper should not be understood merely as exceptional films that later encountered unfortunate controversies, but as important sites through which the changing political economy of documentary cinema becomes visible [2]–[4], [14]–[17]. Their significance lies precisely in revealing that documentary recognition is never simply an aesthetic achievement; it is simultaneously an institutional process through which visibility, authority, symbolic capital, and ethical responsibility are continuously produced, negotiated, and redistributed [13], [20], [21]. The controversies surrounding these films therefore compel documentary scholarship to ask not only how documentaries represent reality, but how the global institutions that celebrate those representations simultaneously reshape the ethical relationships from which those representations originally emerged [8], [13].

Ultimately, the contribution of this paper lies in proposing that international recognition itself should be understood as an ethical category within documentary studies rather than merely an institutional outcome or professional milestone [8], [13]. If documentaries increasingly derive their cultural power through global circulation, then the ethical evaluation of documentary practice must also follow the documentary into those spaces of circulation, asking not simply what responsibilities filmmakers owe during production, but what responsibilities persist once documentary narratives acquire institutional permanence and begin to live independent lives within the global cultural imagination [7], [8], [13]. It is perhaps only by extending documentary ethics into this institutional afterlife that we can begin to understand why the celebration of documentary cinema and the contestation of documentary authority so frequently emerge at precisely the same historical moment [8], [13], [21].

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