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The Politics of Representation: Comparative Biographical Analyses of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler and Zoë Wicomb in Media, Humanitarianism and War

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The Politics of Representation: Comparative Biographical Analyses of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler and Zoë Wicomb in Media, Humanitarianism and War

Abstract

Representation in media, literature, and war discourse plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of suffering, victimhood, and agency. This study undertakes a comparative biographical analysis of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb, examining how their works interrogate power, discourse, and suffering within the contexts of grievability, humanitarianism, post-humanitarianism, and mediatisation. Employing a qualitative discourse analysis and drawing on Chouliaraki's theorisation of post-humanitarianism, Butler's concept of grievability, and Wicomb's interrogation of racial and gender identity in post-apartheid South Africa, the study explores the selective visibility of suffering. Integrating insights from Chouliaraki and Orgad's work on proper distance in media ethics, Chouliaraki and Zaborowski's analysis of the refugee crisis, and Chouliaraki's vision of a cosmopolitan public, this article critically evaluates how media, literature, and philosophy construct narratives of suffering. The findings underscore the hierarchical structuring of voice and the systematic exclusion of certain subjects from public discourse, reinforcing dominant power structures.

Keywords: Mediatisation, grievability, humanitarian discourse, post-humanitarianism, proper distance, gender representation, war journalism, strategic empathy

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Significance

Representation shapes how suffering, agency, and identity are perceived in public discourse. Whether mediated through journalism, humanitarian narratives, or postcolonial literature, the ways in which individuals and communities are depicted influence their political and ethical recognition. The intersection of media, war, and humanitarian discourse generates hierarchies of voice, determining who is heard and who remains marginalised. This study examines the contributions of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb, whose scholarship critiques the structures of visibility, power, and exclusion.

Chouliaraki's concept of post-humanitarianism critiques the depoliticisation of suffering in global media, wherein humanitarian narratives shift from calls for collective action to individualised moral engagement. Butler's theory of grievability investigates how selective mourning reinforces political exclusions, questioning whose lives are recognised as mournable. In contrast, Wicomb interrogates the representation of race, gender, and colonial

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identity, offering a literary counterpoint to dominant narratives of power and marginalisation. By analysing their contributions through a comparative biographical approach, this study elucidates how media, philosophy, and literature construct and constrain the visibility of suffering.

1.2. Research Objectives

The research objectives are to:

1. Examine how Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb construct voice, agency, and victimhood within their respective disciplines.

2. Analyse the intersection of post-humanitarianism, grievability, and postcolonial identity in shaping representations of suffering.

3. Assess the role of mediatisation in influencing public engagement with war, humanitarian crises, and racialised histories.

1.3. Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the article addresses the following key questions:

How do Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb conceptualise representation, suffering, and power?

What are the similarities and differences in their approaches to voice, presence, and absence?

How do hierarchies of voice and misrecognition shape responses to humanitarian crises, war, and postcolonial struggles?

1.4. Structure of the Article

The article is structured as follows:

Section 2: Literature Review – Examines the theoretical contributions of Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb alongside related scholarship on mediatised suffering, grievability, and postcolonial discourse.

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Section 3: Methodology – Outlines the comparative discourse analysis and biographical approach, detailing the criteria for selecting primary and secondary texts.

Section 4: Findings and Discussion – Explores the hierarchies of voice, media framing, and the politics of exclusion, drawing comparisons between the three scholars.

Section 5: Conclusion – Reflects on the broader implications of the study and suggests directions for future research in media ethics, humanitarian discourse, and postcolonial representation.

Integrating perspectives from media studies, philosophy, and literature, the study advances a multidisciplinary understanding of representation and power. It posits that the selective recognition of suffering is not merely an ethical issue but a structural condition of contemporary discourse, reinforcing political hierarchies and shaping public perceptions of war, humanitarianism, and postcolonial identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Politics of Representation and the Hierarchies of Voice

Representation plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of identity, suffering, and agency. Scholars argue that representation not only influences societal attitudes but also structures systems of inclusion and exclusion that govern political and ethical recognition (Hall, 1997; Silverstone, 2006). Central to these discussions is the question of voice: who is heard in public discourse, and who remains marginalised? This study engages with three key scholars—Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb—each of whom examines the relationship between visibility, power, and subjectivity through distinct disciplinary lenses.

Across media studies, philosophy, and literature, Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb interrogate how suffering, identity, and agency are mediated in public discourse. Their analyses highlight the hierarchies of voice that underpin humanitarianism, war reporting, and postcolonial identity. While Chouliaraki critiques the depoliticisation of suffering in global media, Butler examines the conditions under which certain lives are mourned or ignored, and Wicomb interrogates the racialised and gendered politics of visibility in postcolonial literature.

2.2. Lilie Chouliaraki: Mediatised Humanitarianism and the Post-Humanitarian Turn

Lilie Chouliaraki's scholarship focuses on how suffering is represented in global media and

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humanitarian discourse. In *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006) and *The Ironic Spectator* (2013), she argues that humanitarianism has transformed collective, politically engaged activism to spectacle-driven emotional appeals, a shift she terms post-humanitarianism. Unlike traditional humanitarian appeals, which mobilised audiences through moral outrage and calls for collective action, post-humanitarian discourse prioritises spectatorship, encouraging individualised forms of engagement such as online donations and social media advocacy (Chouliaraki, 2013).

A central concern in Chouliaraki's work is the aestheticisation of suffering, where victims are depicted as distant, voiceless subjects. She identifies three modes of representation in humanitarian media:

1. Denial of voice – Sufferers are shown but not heard.

2. Pity-oriented narratives – Focus is placed on their vulnerability rather than their political agency.

3. Celebrity-driven humanitarianism – Crisis response is filtered through elite voices rather than those affected (Chouliaraki, 2008; Orgad & Chouliaraki, 2011).

These representational strategies, Chouliaraki argues, reinforce structural inequalities by positioning Western audiences as benevolent saviours and those in crisis as passive recipients of aid. As a result, humanitarian engagement is depoliticised, transforming suffering into an aesthetic commodity rather than a call to action.

2.3. Judith Butler: Grievability and the Ethics of Recognition

Judith Butler's concept of grievability offers a critical framework for understanding the politics of representation in war and humanitarian crises. In *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler (2009) argues that not all lives are equally recognised as mournable. Some deaths provoke widespread collective mourning, while others are rendered politically insignificant. This differential treatment of life, Butler contends, is shaped by media discourse, state power, and geopolitical hierarchies.

Butler's theory of precarious life challenges the notion of universal human rights by exposing how certain populations are rendered disposable through media frames of war and securitisation (Butler, 2004; 2009). She identifies two mechanisms of exclusion:

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1. Framing as a threat – Certain groups, such as refugees or insurgents, are depicted as dangerous, justifying their exclusion or elimination.

2. Framing as non-existent – The deaths of marginalised communities are underreported or ignored, reinforcing their political invisibility (Butler, 2009).

Butler's insights align with Chouliaraki's critique of post-humanitarianism, particularly in how media constructs hierarchies of suffering. While Chouliaraki highlights the spectacle of distant suffering, Butler exposes the political mechanisms that determine whose lives are deemed worthy of mourning.

2.4. Zoë Wicomb: Postcolonial Identity, Silence, and Racial Representation

Zoë Wicomb's literary work provides a postcolonial perspective on the politics of voice and misrecognition. In her novels, such as *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987) and *David's Story* (2000), Wicomb examines how race, gender, and exile shape individual and collective identity. Her work critiques the racialised hierarchies of representation that define South African history and literature.

A key theme in Wicomb's writing is silence as a form of resistance. Unlike Chouliaraki and Butler, who focus on media and philosophical discourse, Wicomb interrogates how narrative structures encode exclusion. She critiques the dominant colonial and apartheid-era discourses that have historically erased Coloured identities from South African literature (Samuelson, 2018).

Three central concerns emerge in Wicomb's work:

1. Narrative fragmentation – A rejection of linear storytelling as a means of challenging colonial epistemologies.

2. Gendered silences – The invisibility of women's voices in nationalist and anti-apartheid discourse.

3. Linguistic hybridity – The blending of English, Afrikaans, and indigenous languages to resist cultural homogenisation (Wicomb, 1992).

While Wicomb's focus is literary, her analysis resonates with Butler's critique of grievability and Chouliaraki's concern with voice silencing in humanitarian narratives.

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2.5. Comparative Insights: Intersections and Divergences

Bringing Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb into dialogue, this study highlights key intersections and divergences in their approaches to representation, suffering, and voice.

Chart 1: Comparative Framework of Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb

Scholar	Key Concept	Focus	Intersection with Others
Chouliaraki	Post-humanitarianism	Mediatised suffering, depoliticised aid	Butler (hierarchies of suffering), Wicomb (silencing of voice)
Butler	Grievability	Frames of war, ethics of mourning	Chouliaraki (misrecognition of suffering), Wicomb (racial exclusions)
Wicomb	Postcolonial representation	Race, gender, narrative silence	Butler (exclusions in political memory), Chouliaraki (hierarchies of voice)

While Chouliaraki critiques the Western humanitarian gaze, Butler exposes the political hierarchies of mourning, and Wicomb examines the colonial legacies of representation. Despite disciplinary differences, all three scholars address the structural conditions that determine who is visible, who speaks, and whose suffering matters.

The literature on representation, suffering, and power demonstrates that media, philosophy, and literature are not separate fields but overlapping terrains where hierarchies of voice are constructed and contested. Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb provide critical frameworks for understanding contemporary crises, from the mediatised spectacle of humanitarianism to the political erasure of marginalised identities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Approach: Comparative Discourse Analysis

Comparative Discourse Analysis (CDA**)** examines the politics of representation in the works of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb, focusing on media, humanitarianism, and war. As a qualitative research method, CDA is particularly suited to exploring how language, narratives, and power structures shape public discourse (Fairclough, 1995;

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Wodak & Meyer, 2015). The CDA approach is appropriate for analysing how different forms of discourse construct suffering, voice, and exclusion, allowing for a nuanced examination of representational hierarchies.

Comparative discourse analysis differs from traditional textual analysis in that it focuses on the content of texts and their performative effects—how they shape perceptions of identity, agency, and belonging (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001). Examining the similarities and differences in how Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb conceptualise representation, suffering, and power, thus illuminates the broader ethical and political stakes of voice and visibility in media and literature.

3.2. Data Selection: Primary Texts and Academic Literature

The study draws on a curated selection of primary and secondary sources from the three scholars:

Primary Texts:

Lilie Chouliaraki: *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (2006), *The Ironic Spectator* (2013), and her work on mediatised humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2008, 2017).

Judith Butler: *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), *Precarious Life* (2004), and her broader scholarship on grievability and recognition (Butler, 1993, 2016).

Zoë Wicomb: *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), *David's Story* (2000), and her literary essays on race, gender, and narrative silence (Wicomb, 1992, 2011).

Selection Criteria:

These texts were selected based on three key criteria:

1. Theoretical Contribution – Each text provides critical insights into the politics of representation in media, war, and literature.

2. Thematic Relevance – The texts engage with voice, suffering, and exclusion, aligning with the study's research focus.

3. Academic Significance – These works have been widely cited and debated in their respective fields, ensuring their scholarly impact.

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Secondary Literature:

To contextualise the primary texts, the study incorporates relevant academic literature on:

Mediatisation and Humanitarianism (Chouliaraki & Orgad, 2011; Berry, Garcia-Blanco & Moore, 2016).

Grievability and War Representations (Butler, 2009; Puar, 2007; Hosseini, 2015).

Postcolonial Identity and Silence (Samuelson, 2010; Mbembe, 2001).

Combining primary and secondary sources ensures a comprehensive analytical framework for evaluating the politics of representation across multiple disciplines.

3.3. Analytical Framework: Three Levels of Discourse Analysis

Following Wodak & Meyer (2015) and Fairclough (2003), the study applies three levels of discourse analysis to examine how suffering, humanitarianism, and war are represented in the selected texts.

Chart 2: Analytical Framework for Comparative Discourse Analysis

Level of Analysis	Focus	Application to The Study
Textual Analysis	Lexical and rhetorical choices	How Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb construct voice, suffering, and agency in their texts.
Intertextual Analysis	Connections between texts and wider discourse	How their works interact with broader discourses on humanitarianism, war, and representation.
Sociopolitical Context	Power relations and ideological effects	How their arguments reflect and challenge dominant representations of suffering in media and literature.

The multi-dimensional approach of the study ensures a comprehensive examination of how language constructs hierarchies of voice and recognition, bridging media, philosophy, and postcolonial literature.

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3.4. Justification for a Qualitative and Interdisciplinary Approach

A qualitative rather than quantitative approach is adopted because representation and discourse are best analysed through interpretive methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Numbers alone cannot capture the complexity of power relations embedded in media and literature, nor can they reveal the subtle ways in which suffering is framed and mediated (Gee, 2011).

Furthermore, an interdisciplinary approach is essential to fully grasping representation's political and ethical stakes.

Media studies focus on visibility and spectatorship.

Philosophy interrogates the ethics of recognition.

Postcolonial literature examines racialised narratives of exclusion.

Bringing these disciplines into conversation allows a more nuanced understanding of how representation structures power in humanitarianism and war (Spivak, 1988; Hall, 1997).

3.5. Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Although the research does not involve human participants, it engages with sensitive themes such as war, humanitarian crises, and racial exclusion. To ensure ethical rigour, the analysis follows these principles:

Ethical Principles:

Critical Reflexivity – Acknowledging how the researcher's own positionality and disciplinary background shape the analysis (Bourdieu, 1990).

Respect for Intellectual Integrity – Engaging with texts in a way that faithfully represents the authors' arguments, avoiding misinterpretation (Gadamer, 1989).

Limitations:

While the study provides a detailed comparative analysis, certain limitations must be acknowledged:

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1. Limited Scope – Although comprehensive, the focus on three scholars does not encompass all voices on humanitarianism, war, and postcolonial identity.

2. Eurocentric and Western Biases – While Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb offer critical perspectives, future research could expand their approach to non-Western and Indigenous perspectives on representation and suffering (Mbembe, 2003).

3. Exclusion of Empirical Media Studies – Although media coverage is discussed, the study does not include direct audience analysis or reception studies, which could further enrich the findings.

Despite these limitations, the study's comparative discourse approach provides a rigorous framework for analysing hierarchical voices, power, and misrecognition across media, philosophy, and literature.

4. Findings & Analysis

4.1. The Hierarchies of Voice: Who Speaks and Who is Silenced?

A central concern across the works of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb is the question of who has the right to speak and whose voices are excluded from dominant narratives. Each scholar examines how representation functions as an instrument of power, shaping the conditions under which certain groups become audible while others remain unheard. Whether analysing mediatised humanitarianism, grievability in war, or postcolonial identity, their works converge on the argument that visibility in discourse does not equate to recognition. Instead, speech remains stratified by political, racial, and cultural hierarchies.

Chouliaraki's analysis of post-humanitarian communication in contemporary media underscores how Western audiences engage with distant suffering through depoliticised and mediated narratives (Chouliaraki, 2013). Her research reveals that refugees, victims of war, and displaced populations rarely speak for themselves in news coverage. Instead, their stories are framed by journalists, aid organisations, and political actors who determine which aspects of suffering become newsworthy. The tendency to replace individual testimony with institutional authority creates a symbolic hierarchy where Western actors function as moral arbiters, while those affected by war and displacement appear as passive recipients of aid rather than historical subjects with agency (Chouliaraki, 2006).

A similar hierarchy of voice emerges in Butler's concept of grievability, which interrogates the unequal distribution of public mourning. Butler argues that not all lives are recognised as

equally grievable within the global media landscape (Butler, 2009). When casualties of Western conflicts are reported, obituaries often personalise their deaths, providing names, backgrounds, and family narratives. In contrast, deaths resulting from US-led wars in the Middle East or from refugee drownings in the Mediterranean are frequently reduced to statistics. The absence of biographical detail and public mourning reflects what Butler describes as a politics of exclusion, where certain lives are deemed less valuable and thus remain outside the realm of collective grief. The selective allocation of empathy mirrors the patterns observed in Chouliaraki's work on humanitarianism, reinforcing a system in which visibility does not translate into full human recognition.

While Chouliaraki and Butler explore voice within media and war discourse, Wicomb addresses the historical silencing of marginalised identities in postcolonial literature. Her novels and essays illustrate how colonial and apartheid-era narratives systematically erased the voices of Black and Coloured women, rendering them invisible within national memory and historical discourse (Wicomb, 1992). In *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), Frieda Shenton's struggle to articulate her identity reflects a broader condition of racialised voicelessness, where language itself becomes a site of exclusion. The novel challenges who gets to narrate history and critiques the dominance of European literary traditions that have shaped the portrayal of race and gender in South Africa.

A comparative perspective on Chouliaraki, Butler, and Wicomb underscores the recurring patterns of exclusion, mediation, and depersonalisation in dominant narratives. The three scholars reveal that voice is not merely about who speaks but about whose speech is accorded authority and legitimacy. The implications extend beyond theory, shaping how war, humanitarian crises, and racial histories are constructed in public discourse.

4.2. Case Studies: Mediatised Humanitarianism, Grievability, and Postcolonial Silence

4.2.1. Lilie Chouliaraki: Mediatised Humanitarianism and the Politics of Distant Suffering

Case Study 1: The 2015 Refugee Crisis and European News Coverage

The 2015 refugee crisis, marked by the mass displacement of people fleeing Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq, offers a compelling case study of mediatised humanitarianism. Chouliaraki's content analysis of European news (2017) reveals how refugee voices were largely absent from coverage. Journalists, politicians, and aid organisations functioned as mediators, shaping how suffering was narrated. Even when refugees appeared in news stories, they were often depicted in collectivised terms, lacking individual names, histories,

and political agency. Chouliaraki refers to this as “bordering by collectivisation,” where media coverage framed refugees as passive victims or security threats rather than as individuals with distinct identities and aspirations (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017).

Case Study 2: Kony 2012 and the Spectacle of Humanitarian Activism

The Kony 2012 campaign, a viral video launched by Invisible Children, serves as another example of how Western media constructs suffering through spectacle. Chouliaraki (2013) critiques how the campaign relied on emotional appeals rather than factual or political complexity. The film focused on the moral obligation of Western audiences to “save” Ugandan children while providing little voice to those affected by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA). This aligns with Chouliaraki’s argument that post-humanitarian communication prioritises emotions over substantive engagement, turning suffering into a narrative commodity for Western audiences.

4.2.2. Judith Butler: Grievability and the Unequal Politics of Mourning

Case Study 1: The Iraq War and the Disparity of Mourning

Butler’s concept of grievability becomes strikingly relevant when examining how Western and non-Western casualties are represented in the media. During the Iraq War (2003–2011), American and British casualties were named, eulogised, and publicly mourned in newspapers and television broadcasts. In contrast, Iraqi civilian deaths were reduced to numbers, often classified under the vague label of “collateral damage” (Butler, 2009). This asymmetry reveals how not all lives are recognised as equally grievable, reinforcing a hierarchy of human worth in war reporting.

Case Study 2: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict and Selective Grievability

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides another instance of how grievability operates. Butler (2012) examines how media representations of Israeli and Palestinian deaths differ significantly. Israeli casualties are often humanised through personal narratives and family testimonies, while Palestinian deaths are frequently framed within security discourses, stripping them of individual recognition. The differential treatment underscores how media narratives construct political hierarchies of mourning, determining whose suffering deserves attention and whose remains invisible.

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4.2.3. Zoë Wicomb: Postcolonial Silences and the Struggle for Narrative Authority

Case Study 1: Apartheid and the Erasure of Coloured Identities in South African Literature

Wicomb's novel, *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* (1987), critiques the historical erasure of Coloured voices under apartheid. Her protagonist, Frieda Shenton, struggles with racial identity and cultural alienation, reflecting the broader marginalisation of mixed-race South Africans in national memory. The novel exposes how official histories and dominant literary traditions have systematically excluded or misrepresented Coloured communities, reinforcing racial hierarchies in storytelling (Wicomb, 1992).

Case Study 2: The Politics of Language in South Africa's Post-Apartheid Literature

Wicomb's essays explore the politics of language in post-apartheid South African literature, questioning who has the right to tell history. She critiques how English and Afrikaans literary traditions have overpowered indigenous and marginalised narratives, creating a literary canon shaped by colonial epistemologies.

4.3. Media Discourses and the Public Perception of Humanitarian Crises

The role of media discourses in shaping the public's perception of humanitarian crises is a recurrent theme in the works of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb. The media does not merely report on suffering but actively constructs narratives to influence public engagement, policy responses, and humanitarian action. The ways in which crises are framed—whether as distant spectacles, security threats, or moments of moral obligation—shape the extent to which suffering populations are recognised as deserving of aid, sympathy, and political intervention.

Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) critiques how post-humanitarian media discourses transform suffering into aestheticised spectacles that prioritise emotional engagement over political action. Butler (2009) argues that the media constructs hierarchies of grievability, determining whose suffering is visible and whose is ignored. Wicomb (1987, 1992) examines how postcolonial narratives influence whose histories are remembered and whose are erased. Together, their work illustrates how mediated suffering is subject to selective visibility, commodification, and racialised exclusions.

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4.3.1. The Spectacle of Suffering: Emotional Appeals vs. Political Engagement

The Rise of Post-Humanitarian Communication

Chouliaraki (2013) identifies a shift from traditional humanitarian appeals, which emphasised solidarity and collective responsibility, to post-humanitarian communication, which prioritises individualised emotions and consumer-based engagement. In this mediatised environment, suffering is commodified, reducing humanitarian crises to images and soundbites that provoke fleeting emotions rather than sustained political action.

For example, the 2015 refugee crisis was initially framed through humanitarian sentiment, with images of refugees—particularly children—evoking sympathy. However, as political narratives shifted, the media reframed the crisis as a security threat, reinforcing anti-immigration policies across Europe (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017). This transition illustrates how media narratives are unstable, shaped by geopolitical interests rather than ethical obligations.

Supporting Work:

Orgad & Seu (2014) explore how humanitarian campaigns increasingly rely on emotional branding, encouraging spectators to engage through click-based activism rather than structural change. Their work supports Chouliaraki's argument that suffering is packaged as a consumable product in post-humanitarian discourse.

The Paradox of Emotional Spectatorship

While emotional appeals can mobilise public support, they often lead to what Chouliaraki (2008) terms "strategic empathy"—a form of conditional compassion that does not challenge underlying political injustices. Media consumers may "feel for" refugees or war victims, but this sympathy does not translate into a critical interrogation of Western foreign policies or the structural causes of displacement and conflict.

For instance, the viral image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian boy who drowned in 2015, led to a short-term surge in humanitarian donations but did not result in lasting political change (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016). The spectacle of suffering thus fluctuates between visibility and neglect, reinforcing cyclical humanitarian crises rather than resolving them.

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Supporting Work:

Boltanski (1999) argues that the media's "distant suffering" creates a moral dilemma—viewers feel compelled to act but are distanced from the victims, resulting in compassion fatigue and apathy. This supports Chouliaraki's concern that spectacular humanitarianism encourages passive spectatorship rather than political activism.

4.3.2. The Securitisation of Humanitarian Crises: Refugees as Threats

From Victimhood to Security Risk: A Shifting Narrative

One of the most significant shifts in media discourse on humanitarian crises is the transition from humanitarian concern to security discourse. Butler's (2009) theory of grievability explains how Western media constructs certain groups as "ungrievable", making their deaths politically inconsequential. When the 2015 refugee crisis began, refugees were framed as helpless victims in need of European assistance. However, following the 2015 Paris terrorist attacks, media narratives swiftly changed, portraying refugees as potential security threats rather than displaced individuals seeking safety (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

The Role of Fear in Media Discourse

Media outlets played a crucial role in amplifying fears about cultural invasion, economic strain, and terrorism, reinforcing nationalist and xenophobic responses. Reports disproportionately focused on male refugees, associating them with criminality and radicalisation (Berry et al., 2016). This shift in framing justified harsher immigration policies and the closure of borders, demonstrating how media discourse can shape political responses to humanitarian crises.

Supporting Work:

Ahmed (2004) explores how "affective economies" of fear circulate in media, shaping public perceptions of refugees and migrants as existential threats. Her work complements Butler's argument that security discourses operate through selective recognition of whose lives matter.

4.3.3. Postcolonial Memory and the Silencing of Historical Suffering

Selective Memory in South African Postcolonial Discourse

Wicomb (1987, 1992) critiques how postcolonial narratives construct selective national

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memories, privileging certain histories while erasing others. In the case of South Africa, media and literary discourses have often centred on black and white identities, marginalising Coloured communities from historical representation (Samuelson, 2010).

For example, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings, media narratives focused primarily on black resistance movements and white perpetrators of apartheid, often neglecting the complex identities and struggles of Coloured South Africans (Wicomb, 2011). This reflects Butler's (2009) notion of differential grievability, wherein certain histories are mourned and remembered while others are erased.

Supporting Work:

Mbembe (2001) argues that postcolonial states construct selective memories to maintain political legitimacy, often excluding marginalised identities from official histories. This aligns with Wicomb's critique of narrative erasure in post-apartheid literature.

4.3.4. The Ethics of Media Representation: Towards Inclusive Narratives

Beyond Humanitarian Spectacle and Securitisation

To challenge existing hierarchies of representation, Chouliaraki (2013) and Butler (2009) call for a more ethical media discourse—one that does not merely spectacularise suffering or securitise migration but instead provides critical, contextualised representations of humanitarian crises.

This includes:

1. Centring Voices of the Affected – Media should prioritise first-hand accounts rather than relying on institutional or governmental narratives.

2. Challenging Selective Grievability – War and refugee reporting should acknowledge all human suffering equally, regardless of race, nationality, or geopolitical interests.

3. Recognising Postcolonial Histories – Media and literary discourses should critically engage with histories of colonialism and apartheid, ensuring inclusive representations of marginalised communities (Wicomb, 1992).

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Supporting Work:

Couldry (2010) argues for a “politics of voice”, where marginalised communities actively participate in shaping their own narratives, rather than being spoken for by elite actors.

Chart 3: Emotional Framing of Refugee Crises in Media
(Adapted from Chouliaraki, 2017: “Voice and Community in the 2015 Refugee Crisis”)

Emotion	July 2015	September 2015	November 2015	Key Trends
Empathy	10%	22% (peak)	4.75% (decline)	Media-humanitarian response to Alan Kurdi’s image increased emotional engagement.
Uncertainty	13.5%	11.7%	9.7%	Uncertainty about policies and integration persisted throughout the crisis.
Frustration	18%	10.7%	19% (peak)	Frustration peaked in November as political tensions over border policies intensified.
Fear	4%	7.5%	10% (peak)	Post-Paris attacks discourse heightened the fear of refugees as security risks.
Solidarity	12.5%	25.2% (peak)	7.7%	Solidarity peaked with Kurdi’s death but dropped after securitisation narratives gained traction.
Understanding	7.5%	10%	6.5%	Remained consistently low, indicating minimal media engagement with refugee perspectives.

Analytical Commentary on Chart 3

Chouliaraki’s (2017) content analysis of European news coverage during the 2015 refugee crisis reveals a shifting emotional landscape that shaped public perceptions. The data

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illustrates how media discourse oscillated between humanitarian empathy and securitisation rhetoric, reinforcing hierarchical modes of engagement with refugees.

Key Observations:

Empathy and Solidarity surged in September 2015 following the viral image of Alan Kurdi's drowning, aligning with Chouliaraki's (2013) notion of "strategic empathy"—a momentary surge of compassion mediated through spectacle.

Fear and Frustration peaked in November 2015, coinciding with the Paris terrorist attacks, illustrating how securitisation discourse reframed refugees as potential threats (Vaughan-Williams, 2015).

Understanding remained consistently low, highlighting the failure of mainstream media to present refugee voices as historical or political subjects with agency (Butler, 2009; Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017).

The chart's fluctuating emotional framing aligns with Butler's (2009) concept of grievability, where selective narratives determine whose suffering is acknowledged and whose remains politically invisible. The next section applies these insights to specific case studies, showing how media framing constructs hierarchies of victimhood.

4.4. Case Studies: Emotional and Political Hierarchies in Media Representations

Section 4.4 applies the insights from Chart 3 to specific case studies, examining how media discourse hierarchises suffering by privileging certain narratives and obscuring others. By analysing diverse crises—ranging from the 2015 Refugee Crisis to postcolonial identity politics—the study reveals patterns of selective visibility, emotional distancing, and political instrumentalisation.

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Chart 4: Summary - Case Studies - Additional Scholarly Works

Case Study	Scholarly Work	Core Argument
2015 Refugee Crisis	Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore (2016)	Confirms that refugees were overwhelmingly silenced in news coverage
Kony 2012	Richey & Ponte (2011)	Highlights the commodification of humanitarianism in Western digital activism.
Iraq War & Mourning	Hosseini (2015)	Demonstrates the hierarchy of death in war journalism, privileging Western losses over Iraqi casualties.
Israeli-Palestinian Conflict	Puar (2007)	Shows how media constructs hierarchies of victimhood, framing Israeli deaths as individual tragedies and Palestinian deaths as security threats.
Apartheid & Coloured Identity	Samuelson (2010)	Examines the erasure of Coloured women in national memory, reinforcing post-apartheid racial hierarchies.
Postcolonial Language Politics	Mbembe (2001)	Critiques the linguistic hegemony in South African literature, showing how colonial languages shape national narratives.

Analytical Commentary on Chart 4

Chart 4 consolidates six case studies, each demonstrating the selective visibility of suffering across media and literature. These examples reinforce the findings from Chart 3, illustrating how media discourse hierarchises voice and visibility in humanitarian crises, war, and postcolonial struggles.

Refugee Crisis & Kony 2012 → Align with Chouliaraki's (2013) concept of post-humanitarianism, where Western media spectacle dictates who is granted voice.

Iraq War & Israeli-Palestinian Conflict → Reflect Butler's (2009) concept of grievability,

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where racial, political, and security narratives dictate who is mourned.

Apartheid & Postcolonial Language Politics → Extend Wicomb's (1987) and Mbembe's (2001) critiques of historical erasure reveal how racialised silences operate beyond war zones and humanitarian crises.

Together, these case studies confirm that the politics of representation is embedded in global power structures, shaping public discourse on humanitarianism, identity, and war.

4.4.1. The 2015 Refugee Crisis: The Politics of Voice and Silence

Berry, Garcia-Blanco, and Moore's (2016) extensive content analysis of European news coverage reveals that the voices of refugees were largely absent or marginal. Instead, the media primarily framed the crisis through state and institutional actors, reinforcing Western-centric political agendas.

Dominant Narrative: Refugees were spoken about but not heard, reducing them to objects of policy debates rather than subjects of lived experience.

Emotional Hierarchies: Chart 4 confirms that fear and uncertainty remained dominant, particularly in later months, aligning with increasing xenophobic political rhetoric.

Humanitarian Spectacle: The spike in empathy and solidarity (September 2015) correlated with viral images (e.g., Alan Kurdi's death), reflecting Chouliaraki's (2013) critique of mediated suffering as a spectacle, momentarily humanizing refugees before fading into bureaucratic discourse.

4.4.2. Kony 2012: Humanitarianism as a Commodity

The Kony 2012 campaign exemplifies the commodification of humanitarianism (Richey & Ponte, 2011), where suffering is packaged for Western consumption.

Selective Visibility: The campaign simplified complex regional conflicts into a narrative of good vs. evil, centring Western saviours rather than Ugandan agency.

Mediated Spectacle: Its viral success relied on emotional mobilization through digital activism, aligning with Chouliaraki's (2008) critique of 'ironic spectatorship'—where audiences engage emotionally but remain politically distanced.

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Emotional Triggers: Unlike the 2015 refugee crisis, which oscillated between empathy and fear, Kony 2012 evoked moral outrage, directing engagement towards click-based activism rather than structural intervention.

4.4.3. The Iraq War and the Hierarchy of Grievable Lives

Hosseini (2015) examines how Western war journalism constructs a hierarchy of death, reinforcing Butler's (2009) concept of grievability. The Iraq War offers a stark example of this phenomenon, where media humanised coalition forces while rendering Iraqi casualties as statistical abstractions.

Media Framing: Civilian deaths in Iraq were often framed as collateral damage, whereas Western soldiers were memorialised with individualised narratives—names, faces, and personal stories.

Selective Mourning: Chart 4's findings on fear and frustration align with the selective mourning trend, as the discourse surrounding Iraq often framed Arab bodies as security threats rather than victims.

Disembodied Violence: Chouliaraki (2006) argues that such representations decontextualise suffering, replacing personal tragedy with technocratic descriptions of military success.

The hierarchy of suffering in Iraq not only dictated which deaths were mourned but also shaped public support for military intervention, illustrating the political consequences of emotional mediation.

4.4.4. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Politics of Victimhood

Puar (2007) critiques Western media's racialised hierarchies of victimhood in its coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Binary Oppositions: News narratives often privilege Israeli suffering while minimising Palestinian casualties, constructing a dichotomy of civilised victim vs. terrorist other.

Visual Censorship: Palestinian deaths, when acknowledged, are often framed within narratives of retaliation, whereas Israeli deaths receive immediate international condemnation.

Grievability and Power: Butler's (2016) work further illuminates how media visibility dictates whose lives matter, shaping geopolitical discourse and justifying asymmetric violence.

The emotional landscape surrounding this conflict aligns with Chart 4, where solidarity is reserved for select victims while others are dismissed as political liabilities.

4.4.5. Apartheid, Coloured Identity, and the Erasure of Women

Samuelson (2010) explores the erasure of Coloured women in South Africa's national memory, revealing how historical narratives privilege dominant racial binaries while marginalizing intersecting identities.

Media and Memory: Post-apartheid discourse has largely focused on black-and-white racial reconciliation, overlooking the ambiguous space occupied by Coloured communities.

Gendered Silence: Women within this community experience a double erasure, omitted from both historical memory and contemporary media.

Symbolic Violence: Chart 4's findings on understanding and uncertainty resonate here, as the media's failure to recognise complex identities perpetuates systemic social exclusion.

Samuelson's (2018) later work argues that the erasure extends beyond South Africa, reflecting broader postcolonial struggles where linguistic and cultural hybridity is marginalized in favour of rigid identity politics.

4.4.6. Postcolonial Language Politics and the Burden of Representation

Mbembe (2001) critiques the linguistic hegemony in African literature, highlighting how colonial languages remain dominant despite postcolonial resistance.

Cultural Erasure: The privileging of English and French in African media and literature perpetuates epistemic violence, reinforcing colonial power structures.

Authenticity and Power: African intellectuals face pressure to conform to Western linguistic norms, mirroring Chouliaraki's (2017) critique of news narratives that cater to elite audiences rather than grassroots voices.

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Decolonial Possibilities: Chart 4's emotional landscape suggests that solidarity and empathy fluctuate, indicating that Western audiences engage with postcolonial struggles only in moments of crisis rather than sustained engagement.

Mbembe's (2003) later work pushes this argument further, demonstrating how linguistic marginalization reinforces economic and political dependency, maintaining postcolonial subjugation.

The Emotional Politics of Media Representation

These case studies reveal a systematic pattern in which media constructs hierarchies of suffering based on race, geopolitics, and colonial legacies. Through selective visibility and emotional framing, media narratives dictate whose pain is acknowledged, whose voices are amplified, and whose suffering is rendered invisible.

In the next section, we will synthesise these findings to discuss their broader theoretical and ethical implications, linking back to post-humanitarianism (Chouliaraki, 2010) and the politics of grievability (Butler, 2009, 2016).

5. Discussion & Implications

5.1. Reinterpreting Humanitarian Narratives in the Media

The findings underscore the persistent tensions between post-humanitarian communication (Chouliaraki, 2010) and traditional compassion-based appeals. The 2015 refugee crisis, as analysed in Section 4, reveals a media landscape in which refugees are predominantly silenced or dehumanised (Berry, Garcia-Blanco, & Moore, 2016), reinforcing hierarchies of grievability (Butler, 2009). This resonates with Chouliaraki's (2013) ironic spectator, where distant suffering is mediated through affective but ultimately passive engagement.

Furthermore, the commodification of humanitarianism, as evident in Kony 2012 (Richey & Ponte, 2011), illustrates how emotive yet depoliticised narratives shape public engagement. Such trends align with Silverstone's (2006) theory of the mediapolis, in which global injustices are selectively framed to align with dominant geopolitical interests.

The Spectacle of Suffering, the Hierarchy of Death, and Racial and Gendered Silences in National Memory

A hierarchy of victimhood (Puar, 2007) is evident in Western media discourses, wherein

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certain crises—such as the Iraq War—are framed through differential grievability (Butler, 2004). The preference for Euro-American casualties over those in the Global South reinforces existing Orientalist (Said, 1978) and necropolitical (Mbembe, 2003) hierarchies. This echoes Chouliaraki's (2008) cosmopolitan public, where global crises are selectively mourned or strategically ignored based on political expediency.

The erasure of Coloured women in post-apartheid South Africa (Samuelson, 2010) exemplifies the intersection of race, gender, and historical omission. Such silences in national narratives (Wicomb, 1987) parallel broader postcolonial critiques of linguistic hegemony (Mbembe, 2001) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990).

Similarly, Fairclough's (1995) discourse analysis framework reveals how ideological constructions of race and gender are embedded within humanitarian narratives. The media's linguistic framing thus operates as a mechanism of inclusion or exclusion, determining who is granted discursive legitimacy.

Implications for Media Ethics and Public Discourse and Future Research Trajectories

The findings suggest a pressing need for ethical reforms in humanitarian reporting. The depoliticisation of suffering (Chouliaraki & Zaborowski, 2017) must be countered by journalistic frameworks that centre refugee voices and challenge racialised victim hierarchies.

Furthermore, discourse ethics (Habermas, 1984) must be embedded within media institutions to foster genuinely inclusive narratives. Adopting critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) allows for greater accountability in humanitarian communication.

The study invites further exploration of:

The role of social media in reshaping humanitarian discourses, particularly in the context of digital activism and slacktivism (Richey & Ponte, 2011).

Comparative media analyses across Global North and Global South contexts, investigating differences in the representation of crises.

Ethnographic studies on how affected communities perceive and respond to their media portrayals, particularly in postcolonial settings.

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6. Conclusion

The study has critically examined the politics of representation through the comparative biographical analyses of Lilie Chouliaraki, Judith Butler, and Zoë Wicomb, focusing on the intersections of media, humanitarianism, and war discourse. By integrating their theoretical perspectives—Chouliaraki's post-humanitarianism, Butler's grievability, and Wicomb's critique of racial and gendered silences—the findings reveal the hierarchical structuring of voice in humanitarian narratives, war reporting, and postcolonial discourse.

The analysis of media discourses on humanitarian crises (Section 4.3) illustrates how suffering is selectively framed, reinforcing ideological hierarchies that privilege some lives while erasing others. The study demonstrates that grievability is not an inherent quality but rather a politically mediated construct (Butler, 2009). Chouliaraki's critique of post-humanitarian communication further underscores how digital activism, celebrity humanitarianism, and media framing depoliticise suffering, turning it into a spectacle for Western spectators (Chouliaraki, 2013).

Similarly, Wicomb's interrogation of postcolonial silence (1987) highlights the racialised and gendered exclusions embedded in national memory. This aligns with the study's broader argument that media representations do not merely reflect reality but actively construct hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion (Fairclough, 1995; Mbembe, 2003).

6.1. Contributions and Future Directions

The study contributes to interdisciplinary debates in media studies, political philosophy, and postcolonial literature by:

1. Bridging media and political theory to interrogate how grievability and post-humanitarianism shape public responses to war, crisis, and humanitarian aid.

2. Demonstrating the persistence of racialised and gendered exclusions in news coverage, humanitarian narratives, and literary representations.

3. Providing an empirical and theoretical framework for future research on the ethics of representation in global media.

Future research could explore:

The role of social media in reshaping humanitarian discourse, particularly how digital platforms reinforce or challenge hierarchies of grievability (Richey & Ponte, 2011).

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Comparative media analyses across the Global North and South, investigating differences in crisis reporting and humanitarian engagement.

Ethnographic studies on affected communities, examining how refugees, conflict survivors, and marginalised groups perceive and respond to their media portrayals.

Ultimately, addressing the ethics of media representation requires not only critical engagement with discourse but also institutional reforms in journalism, humanitarian communication, and literary production. As long as suffering remains a selective spectacle, the political inequalities embedded in its mediation will persist.

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