

Master's Thesis

# **Role of Documentary Photography in Social Change**

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# Abstract

Documentary photography plays a crucial role in raising awareness about human suffering around the world. For over a century, humanitarians and their organizations have used documentary photography to raise awareness, and push for social change to alleviate human suffering. When considered through framing and agenda setting theories, documentary photography can prove a powerful tool in bringing out perceptual changes. When viewed through the self-reflexive lens of Orientalism, it can prove as much a tool of the colonizer as it can be a reflection of the colonized. But, as far as its role in provoking social change is concerned, it will depend in great part upon the intent and agenda of the photographer.

This essay will take framing, agenda setting, and Edward Said's work on Orientalism into account, to analyze the role of documentary photography in social change, through two historical case studies and one contemporary example. The influence may not necessarily be political but can be subtle and persuasive, or it can be confrontational.

The analysis is facilitated by the thorough investigation into two major events in history; the work of documentary photographers in The Congo Reform and secondly, the work of documentary photographer Lewis Hine on child labor in America. The contemporary aspect, ie, documentary photography in the modern day, will be reflected in a study of the work of documentary photographers on the garment industry in Dhaka — in particular, during the aftermath of the Rana plaza tragedy in 2013. While trying to help disaster victims, and raise awareness among the public, photographers wielded the camera to bring about a social change in both these events. This essay reflects on what kind of impact the art of documentary has on social change.

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# Introduction

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Ever since the camera was commercialized in 1839, photography has served as a powerful tool in showcasing the atrocities of the world. Many important events in history such as colonization, famine, poverty and so on were left largely to one's imagination. The camera presented the reality in a stark manner and this changed the course of documenting events forever. Many photographers realized that this tool would be powerful to influence people and create social change. Sontag (1977, p.3) says that "photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe."

Firstly, the purpose of photography itself is to present reality and give expression to events happening around us. Henry Cartier-Bresson remarks that "to me, photography is the simultaneous recognition, in a fraction of a second, of the significance of an event as well as of a precise organization of forms which give that event its proper expression." But, Hermanson (2000) emphasizes that Cartier-Bresson expresses that the very purpose of photography is to reflect reality by documenting specific events, places, people etc.

Documentation as a means of preservation of various fading realities becomes a duty by itself.

Franklin (2016, p.5) elucidates that documentary photography and reform is closely connected. In his book *The Documentary Impulse*, Franklin remarks that what drives documentary photography is driven by an innate need to capture situations that people experience that may need reform. Addressing the very purpose of documentation through photography Franklin says "the passion to record the moments we experience and wish to preserve, the things we witness and might want reform, or simply the people or things we find

remarkable. The driving factors behind the impulse throughout history have been curiosity, outrage, reform, ritual, self-assertion and the expression of power.”

It is clear that these photographers/authors place documenting through photography as a mirror to reality and a powerful tool to challenge atrocities and fight for reform. Therefore documentary photography is ever so relevant in photographing different realities around the world. The genre of documentary photography is vast and loosely defined. Franklin (2016, p.6) infers that documentary photography is “a creative process full of contradictions about photography, documentary, reality and truth.”

The purpose of this essay is to explore the role of documentary photography and its impact in creating social change. Since the impact of documentary is vast and difficult to gauge, I choose to limit my thesis to two historical events where photography has had a significant role in society, reform and on police change. I will also reflect briefly on photography today with one current event.

### **Role photography in Congo**

The first historical event is the role of documentary photography in the Congo Reform Association. The historical aspect is necessary to understand the onset of imperialism in Congo which led to Leopold II establishing power and abusing the Congolese people in the rubber trade. After briefly touching on history, I will then analyze how the work of photographers like Alice Seeley Harris, proved as useful tools in the Congo Reform Association.

Documentary photography in Congo questioned the glorification of Leopold’s regime in Congo. It enabled reporting the morbid reality of the atrocities committed against the Congolese people under his rule. When images of mutilation of the Congolese appeared through the lenses of documentary photographers such as Alice Seeley Harris and others, it

became a tool to spark one of the biggest humanitarian campaigns in human history.

(Sliwinski, 2006, p.334).

Before photographs emerged from Congo, the atrocities were largely left to writers who described it through stories and artists through depictions. There was a need for something more direct and something more concrete. The emergence of photography was it.

Photography changed the course of action because suddenly the atrocities of Congo was visibly to Europe, America and rest of the world (Slade 1962, Beachey 1967, Sliwinski 2006, p.335)

Harris's work exposed not only the cruelty of the rubber and ivory trade in the Congo Free State but also threw much needed light on Leopold's private colony and the manner in which he governed the region. Documentary photography from this time also played a significant role in thinking about the 'West' and the 'non-West'. This aspect of colonial history also played a role in representation of people and how the 'other' was constructed through photographs.

### **Lewis Hine's work on child-labor reform**

Documentary photography and reform is a recurring theme in this essay. It is therefore, in the second part of the essay, I chose to explore the child labor reform in America through the work of documentary photographer Lewis Hine. The sociologist turned documentary photographer started off by documenting immigrants arriving in American between 1904 and 1909. Through this work, Hine realized that documentary photography could be wielded to create a social and political impact in society. McCausland (1992, p.102) explains that this work led to Hine documenting workers in different sectors such as factories, mills, Coals mine, sweatshops and so on. Hine's work today is recognized as a masterpieces for modern day documentary photography.

Continuing the theme of reform through documentary photography, for this essay I aim to dig deeper into how Lewis Hine's work was instrumental in establishing child-labor laws and urging people to vote for reform. Just like the previous example with the Congo Reform Association where photographs were used to make compelling cases against Leopold's regime, Hine's work was used by the National Child Labor Committee to push for implementation of child labor laws.

Hine the National Child Labor Committee at a time where child labor was rampant and there were no laws protecting children from work (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.35). The dawn of industrialization and mass immigration led to exploitation of workers in America. Despite this, a huge labor crunch meant that old people and children were hired to work. Hine's work proved to be instrumental in exposing child labor atrocities which later played a role in implementation of child labor laws.

With examining the two instances of history, it becomes clearer that documentary photography was taking up as a tool for reform by both the Congo Reform Association and the National Child Labor Committee. These two aspects of historical analysis shed light on the importance of intent in documentary photography, and the role it can play in contemporary society in provoking conversations about reform.

### **Role of documentary photography in exposing atrocities in the garment industry in Bangladesh**

The last aspect of the research will reflect briefly on documentary photography and photo-journalism that has played a role in creating awareness about the atrocities of the garment industry in Dhaka. For this I will examine the work of Taslima Akter, an activist and a documentary photographer and the work of few other photo-journalists whose work caused an impact in society. Taslima produced several bodies of work about the garment industry in



Dhaka. She captured the pain and suffering of the laborers in the garment and textile industry in Dhaka and her work from the collapse of Rana plaza, a building that was housing factories for garment production. Exploitation and humanitarian concerns have been the main theme of photographers documenting the tedious garment industry. In the last part, I would like to reflect on how a few ‘iconic’ photographs from the garment industry has not only raised eyebrows around the world but has also caused an indirect impact in society.

## **1.2 Objectives and Research Problem**

Documentary photography has a long history during which we can observe the complex relationship between documentary and impact in society. These relations are intertwined, representing several ideas, philosophies, concepts and cultural movements.

One of the relevant theories when it comes to studying this photography is that of framing and agenda-setting. These concern how can photographers and communicators use several methods or techniques to present their work with the intent of invoking a reaction from the audience. Framing and Agenda-setting theories elucidate how in mass communication, such as photography, the photographer decides what to communicate, what elements to highlight and the angle in which the message is shaped (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009). These aspects deployed by the photographers create an impact in society. It is therefore necessary to explore these theories to understand the context behind how documentary photography was used to create an impact. Framing explains that the manner in which an event is presented “the frame” affects how audiences perceive that information.

McCombs (2004, p.66) explains that an individual’s need to participate in the public affairs makes him/her align with the agenda set by mass media.

It deals with presentation of events and issues in a way that affects the people on how to think about the issues. Agenda-setting is a crucial aspect of this research because many

photographers make use of these principles in order to shape the public opinion and influence reform.

Another key element of communication is how the photographer can ‘other’ the subject. In exploring the politics of representation and making of the ‘other’, Edward Said’s *Orientalism: The Making of the Other* provides a key understanding into how historical processes create the ‘other’ — The ‘other’ according to Said was not only constructed by the west but also controlled by it (Burney, 2012, p.1).

Applying Orientalism to photography can shed light on how the difference between west and non-west regions are created through pictures and how these differences enhanced the construction of the other in several ways including photography.

By discussing and analyzing the above topics I would like to address a few key questions in this research. The main question I seek to answer in this research is: Does documentary photography have an impact on society?

Taking the cases of the Congo Reform Association and of child labor reform in America, it is clear that this impact can range from spreading awareness of crimes against humanity international to raising awareness domestically of the need for policy change. Studying these cases allows me to examine the nature of this impact and how it manifests bearing in mind the construction of the Other. Finally, I conclude with the role of documentary photography today with reflections based on photographs from Bangladesh.

### **1.3 Limitations of Essay**

Documentary photography is a complex genre of photography with a deep history. The genre is vast as it contains many nuances depending on the perspective it is observed from.

Something like the “impact” of photography is hard to measure as there could be several ways a photograph can affect its audience. I have chosen to limit my research to two aspects of

history where documentary photography played a clearly demonstrable role in creating societal impact. The impact can be both direct and indirect. The role of photography in these two historical events was widely discussed, allowing a study not just of the impact but also of the nature of discourse around humanitarian photography. It is therefore difficult to generalize impact of documentary photography based on this essay alone. It should also be noted that the three different events that I chose to analyze have taken place in different timelines and therefore cannot be compared. The Congo Reform took place at a time where photography was emerging but where human rights had not yet been granted to the majority of the population. There was little international supervision or awareness of the activities in the Congo. Similarly, the child labor photographs in the United States took place in a world where photography was established as well as democratic tendencies towards human rights, but where the process of improving these rights hinged on greater public awareness in an increasingly media-dominated world. The light on garment industry and Rana plaza took place in a globalized world where several NGOs and government organizations work to protect labor rights. It is therefore difficult to point that only documentary photography created an impact.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

According to Abbot and McKinney (2013, p.23,24), theory is the foundation of social sciences and helps us collate the different means in which we can analyze how things work in cohesion. In simpler words, theory helps us understand how concepts go together with another. Theory also plays a crucial role in answering one of the most fundamental aspects of scientific research, which is the ‘why’ question. Theory not only helps us understand the ‘why’ but it also helps us answer the ‘why’ questions.

Furthermore, the authors Abbot and McKinney (2013, p23) elucidate that “theories provide us with strategies or directions to get what we observe and have it make sense. Theories tell us

*what to look at, when to look, and what to expect to see.* Theories are more than just common sense; they should be parsimonious, explaining the most phenomena with the least amount of theoretical assumptions.”

Bryman (2016, p.18) explains that in order to draw the connection between theory and research two key points must be taken into consideration. First and foremost, it is important what theory one chooses to apply to the research and secondly, theories either put the research to the test or build on the existing research.

This essay aims to explore the impact of documentary photography in reform. This raises more questions on how different photographs are portrayed in order to create that impact. There are innumerable ways of constructing a photograph to convey a certain message and in regard to this essay, how were the photographs in by Alice Seely Harris, Lewis Hine, and Talsima Akter created? Were the people shown in the photographs portrayed as the helpless ‘other’, or were they portrayed as ‘heroes’ that question authority? So what kind of role is ‘the other’ given through documentary photography?

To address these questions I have chosen framing theory and agenda setting theory. Apart from these two theories, I will also bring in orientalism and discuss their relationship with representation and construction of the other.

### **3.1 Framing and Agenda-Setting theory**

Documentary photographers use several methods in photography and carefully choose the manner in which the photographs are presented. Every photographer has his/her way of doing this. This is done to invoke the reaction in the viewer that the photographer intends to.

Different frames are used in different situations to create a strong compelling argument that tries to invoke a reaction from the audience. But framing theory also suggests that the manner

in which information presented to the audience can affect the way the audience perceive the information.

Foss, Littlejohn (2009, p.32) infers that framing theory has several roles and one of its key components is that it helps understand the context of different topics in different mediums of communication. Viewed within the context of mass communication framing is the process of how a story is arranged, organized and presented.

Although debated quite intensely, many scholars consider framing and agenda-setting theories to be under the same process of how what is being conveyed can affect the viewers or readers. In addition, what is being conveyed and the manner in which it is presented also becomes an essential part of framing. What is being presented and how much prominence is given to different elements play a role.

According to Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee (2009, p.83) “by some accounts, agenda setting and framing are part of the same broad tradition of research on how news can influence audiences through the choice of what stories to feature and how much prominence to give particular elements within these reports. The news reports and their internal features are thought to shape the nature of cognitive responses, the mechanism through which agenda-setting and framing effects occur”.

The author elucidates that the frame is the focus on an issue or event and incorporating that within a certain discourse. The audiences’ ability to comprehend the information given hangs on the frame. In other words, framing is a means in which the ‘how’ of the message is constructed has a direct impact on how the receiver interprets the message (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009, p.83).

Following the discussion on framing theory we need to also take a close look at agenda setting. There are many factors to consider when it comes to agenda setting. The authors

(Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009, p.84) infer that “factors such as need for cognition, need for orientation, and political involvement were found to increase agenda setting effects through media surveillance”. Information/photographs crafted to create social and political awareness goes through the purview of agenda-setting. Agenda setting is done to determine how the audience will think about a specific issue.

In other words, the strength of agenda setting is reinforced through several means such as how the story or issue is conveyed, how the public and political sphere is involved play a crucial role.

McCombs (2014, p.2) adds more on this. The author says that “The agenda-setting role of the news media is their influence on the salience of an issue, an influence on whether any significant number of people really regard it as worthwhile to hold an opinion about that issue”. What the author means that it is left to the communicator and in this case, the documentary photographer to pick an issue that is of great importance, a one that also demands public opinion about the issue. It is not always necessary to have a particular agenda but it is crucial that the photographer highlights the importance of the issue (McCombs 2014, p.2).

According to McCombs (2014, p.3) “the agenda of the media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public.” “Establishing this salience among the public, placing an issue or topic on the public agenda so that it becomes the focus of public attention and thought – and possibly, action – is the initial stage in the formation of public opinion.” This aspect of agenda setting can be related to documentary photography and its role in channelling attention of the public to a specific cause by making any particular issue the centre of attention.

The first level agenda setting is the ability of a story to be available. Creating the notion of being important determines the attention the issue receives from people. Entman (1989) elucidates that “an interaction between media messages and what audiences make of them”, inferring that media not only influences the viewers or reader on “what to think about,” but “what to think”. (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009)

In mass communication, photography and documentary, framing theory for example refers to how a particular set of images are packaged and presented to the viewer. In other words the information is packaged in a certain way and then presented to the public. The theory suggests that whatever the medium, and in my case, photography, the aim of the photographer is to highlight a certain issue, event or anything that needs attention and presenting them in a context that would affect the viewer’s positively or negatively. This has a direct impact on the manner in which people interpret reality.

Chong & Druckman (2007, p. 15) argue that “*frame* could be photographs, text, presentation styles etc that can be used by a media outlet to convey a specific message.”

Moreover, the authors Chong & Druckman (2007,) look back at Goffman (1974, p.21) as he elucidates that frames also address the “cognitive understanding of a given situation”. Frames play a crucial role in influencing the audience as to what they believe is an important part of the issue.

Scheufele (1999, p.293) argues that framing theory consists of four main parts: “frame building,” this aspect focuses on what the communicator is trying to convey by choosing making use of frames in communication, “frame setting,” this part determines the psychological aspect that are in play; “individual-level effects of frames,” this aspect addresses how the frames use affect the behavior of the audience; and “journalists as

audiences,” this aspect reflects on how people react and how their reaction affects the frame building process.

The pioneers of framing theory Erving Goffman explained that life could be interpreted by the frames given to people. He concluded that frameworks people are accustomed to play a role in interpreting life. In ‘frame analysis, he writes: Primary frameworks vary in degree of organizations. Some are neatly presentable as a system of entities, postulates, and rules; others/indeed, most others- appear to have no apparent articulated shape, providing only a lore of understanding, an approach, a perspective” (Goffman, 1974, p. 21)

He also discusses that primary framework has two aspects, a natural occurring one and a social one. He argues that it is the natural and social aspect that allows the public to determine and interpret an event, issue or data (Goffmann, 1974, p.22).

Although framing and agenda-setting are posed as similar theories, many scholars and researchers beg to differ on subtle differences. Perloff (2017, p14) argues that with regard to policy change and debates on police in various new media platforms, though agenda matters to a great degree, many other factors cannot be overlooks like how people argue for or against a policy by the words they use, by the use of different metaphors, and their perspectives on different issues that are being debated. Here the authors (Scheufele & Tewskybury, 2007, p.14) argue that “Agenda-setting examines whether we think about an issue whereas framing explores how we think about it”. The author describes that framing also plays a role in analyzing the different ways people tend to look at a particular issue. It also deals with relating to the viewers’ preconceived ideas about a particular issue. Agenda-setting explores a specific message or a story conveyed by the media emphasizing that the spotlight on a particular issue by adding value to the problem, or by creating a belief that the issue is of great importance to be dealt with. In other words, framing deals with what the manner in which a



photographer or a journalist covers a particular story than the particular issue that s/he is covering (Perloff, 2017, p.14).

The authors also argues that though many scholars and researchers hold an opinion that framing is different from Agenda-setting, a few scholars think that framing, agenda-setting work together in a larger framework of analysis. The authors (Maher, 2001; McCombs & Ghanem, 2001) argue that framing is another aspect of agenda-setting, a significant theoretical aspect that has a huge influence ‘political relevance.’

From the above authors it is understood that framing theory can be examined from different angles, however, a simple way to understand framing theory in terms of photography is to assume that everyone has a lens that they use to view the world or to view the external stimuli from what’s around them. And in this regard, every person has his/her own unique point of view by having a unique perspective. We have photography and framing theory applied in many instances by photographers to alter public opinion on a particular matter.

## **2.2 Framing theory in Photography**

Emerling (2013, p.48) explains that when it comes to photographic discourse, one of the most important aspects is frame. Even though it appears simple, it has deep complex role of diverting view and shapes our point of view. The author recalls ‘The Photographer’s Eye’ written by John Szarkowski (2007) and elucidates that “Photography has clear discrete edges. These edges would define it as a distinct medium. Photography is a unique medium with a discursive practice and aesthetic criteria. The frame is a metaphor that nonetheless operates in a very real (material) manner: it separates and divides photography from other visual media thereby creating a formalist history of photography that disavows the sheer multiplicity of uses, techniques, and discourses that are the field of photography”.

### 2.3 Orientalism: Representation of the 'other' and its reflection in documentary photography

Pieterse (2002) argues that the construction of 'the other' can be witnessed through history and the differences that was attributed to the others were carried out in several ways, one of which is photographs. The author Pieterse (2002) elucidates that it is the history of 'western humanism' that is responsible for constructing both the notion of universality and the notions of differences.

Founder of the academic area of post-colonial studies Edward Said (1978, p.48) argues that the imperialistic west that colonized several nations rooted itself with the construction of differences between the west and the non-west. Said argues that every society whether the west or non-west has the tendency to shape its own identity based on how they interpret and rediscover the idea of 'self' and the idea of 'other' which maybe present within the society or outside the society. These concepts according to Said (1978, p.40, 41) 'others' are constructed because of several aspects such evolving history, social and political perspectives.

Said in his book Orientalism (1978, p.40, 41) throws light on how the Oriental was viewed by the West. He says the others are seen as helpless, like children whereas the European is seen as a rational and successful.

Said (1978, p. 40) reflects that the non-west is represented as "something one judges (as in a court of law), something one studied (as in a curriculum), something one disciplines (as in a school or prison)". Said explains that the non-west is viewed through existing frameworks and questions its origins.

The author then reflects on the nineteenth and the twentieth century of the West's (mostly Europe) domination of the non-west. He argues that the idea of the Oriental was confirmed by the fact that the West controlled many countries around the world. He says that the rise of Orientalism and the rise of European power in the world happened simultaneously. Said

further explains that between the period of 1815 to 1914 European control of the world exploded from a “34 percent of the earth’s surface to 85 percent of it”. He explains that most of the world was affected by this colonial domination especially Africa and Asia (Said, 1978, p 41).

There are fundamental sets of questions or problems relating to Orientalism that Edward Said addresses in his book ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’. According to Said (1985) “the most important are: the representation of other cultures, societies, histories; the relationship between power and knowledge; the role of the intellectual; the methodological questions that have to do with the relationships between different kinds of texts, between text and context, between text and history.”

Said explains that the representation and the construction of “others” has to do with identity. The “others” according to Said (1978, p 332) is built upon the construction of “opposites” and the “other” is often left to reinterpretation. The author also argues that by allotting different people into different categories gives rise to wrongly interpreting ideas such as West and non-west (Said, 1978, p 324). The author also implies that these ideas of superiority that emerges from the West have enabled propaganda that the West needs to force their system on other countries that are developing.

Said (1978, p.46) in Orientalism also discusses how putting people into these categories gives rise to ideas such as “*West*” and “*Eurocentrism*”.

The reign on colonialism and the start of the photography revolution coincided in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Colonial documentary photographers painted a picture of colonization through their cameras. This history of photography played a crucial role in constructing the ‘Other’ in the non-western world.

In his book 'The Burden of Representation' John Tagg (1988) argues that the camera plays a significant role in establishing power. About the camera Tagg (1988) says that it acts as an evidence of truth and shapes perspectives on the 'other'. Burke (2008) further adds that while photography played a role in allowing the colonial powers to look at the 'other' and learned a great deal about them whereas the same cannot be said about the 'other'. It is therefore important to note that photography played a key role in establishing the 'other' as either victims, or weak and powerless. It represented the 'other' as weak, vulnerable and needing intervention. Based on what Tagg and Burke (1988) (2008) explain, it can be argued that photography played a role in shaping colonial identities.

### **3 Methodology**

#### **3.1 Historical analysis**

The academic essay has two primary purposes. The first aim one is to address whether or not documentary photography had an impact in society (with the examples of Congo Reform Association and National Child Labor Reform), and if so, of what kind — and the last aspect of the essay is to reflect on how documentary photography of today affects society in raising awareness about issues such as the garment industry in Bangladesh. The work of documentary photographer and activist Taslima Akter and other photo-journalists will be used to analyze this aspect of the essay. I aim to explore the historical context behind the photographs that caused an impact. How were the photographs used and how were the people in the photographs represented? For this I will make use of theories such as framing and agenda-setting theories and use Edward Said's Orientalism as an approach to look at representation of people in the photographs.

I will take a qualitative approach to this research and make use of historical content analyses to answer the research questions I have raised. Framing theory will also help me understand more about the context and perspectives employed by the photographers to communicate their

messages through images. Agenda-setting theory will help me understand how the messages were constructed and propagated to engage not just people but also have an impact in policy change.

Among the many approaches in qualitative method, I will make use of qualitative content analysis for this research. In this method, the text is analyzed and becomes the object of scrutiny which makes use of work that has been published. The text is then carefully analyzed.

Hsieh, Shannon (2005, p.1278) explain that content analysis have three fundamental approaches: “conventional, directed and summative”. For this research a historical directive approach would be ideal since I will analyze research articles that are addressing the history of particular events that involve photography.

Berg (2000, p.210) argues that historical research can be explained as scrutinizing events of the past to elucidate the happenings of the past. The author also argues that this method is not limited to just gathering facts and data but interpreting text and analyzing the implications of what happened in the part of history we are looking into. So for this essay, a historical look into the history of Congo and the rubber trade will be analyzed. Furthermore, I will also be analyzing briefly the historical background to the work of Lewis Hine.

### 3.2 Disadvantages of the method

Some authors (Snow, Porta, Klandermans, McAdam 2013) argue that one of the main disadvantages of analyzing historical events is that the past can only be presented how or reveal the way it is still present today. This according to the authors causes issues with validation as the authors argue that researchers often try to test theories instead of analyzing important social events. Furthermore, content analysis can also be limited to the availability of material on a particular matter. The reality illustrated by a few authors can be questioned and different perspectives of reality can be illustrated by different authors. For example, King

Leopold II can be portrayed as a villain who played a role in mass murder in Congo but he could also be presented in positive light by some authors as someone who put an end to the Arab slave trade in the Congo region.

## **3 Historical Background of Documentary Photography and Impact**

### **3.1 A historical look into the role of documentary photography in Congo**

To understand the atrocities of the rubber trade in Congo a historical background of the Ivory trade leading up to imperialism is necessary, so as to understand the different factors that led to exploitation and imperialism. The African continent was plundered for both its natural and human resources. The ivory trade in Africa was an ancient one and many geographers and travellers remarked that the ivory trade more important than the slave-trade. For a long time, power in Africa resided with the Arabs and Arab merchants exported ivory in humongous quantities. There was a huge demand for ivory in Europe. (Beachey, 1967, p.282)

In early nineteenth century, the Ivory trade hit monumental heights with its development. As the demand increased in America and Europe so did the exploitation of resources in the east-African region. Ivory trade dominated throughout the nineteenth century. (Beachey, 1967, p.269)

The transportation of the ivory was carried out by slaves who were either children, women, hired slaves from other masters. The fight for ivory was perpetual and this fueled the atrocities against slaves in Africa (Beachey, 1967) The ivory trade was viewed as a free for all sort of opportunity there to be exploited. This would play a significant role in the future of the Congo Free State and the onset of European Imperialism (Beachey, 1967, p.274) (Alexander 2001).

### **3.2 Imperialism in Africa**

Belgium's imperial tradition was nonexistent until the late nineteenth century. The Belgian king Leopold II took over the heart of Africa through what's been described by the author as

cunning and often forced treaties with the local authorities. He also engaged in armed conquests and diplomatic scheming in which he prevailed over other colonial powers. Leopold promised to embark on a civilizing mission in order to quell slavery and make way for free trade. He managed to successfully Conference of Berlin in 1884-1885 and the conference recognized him as the sovereign of a newly created independent country, which was came to be known as Congo Free State.

Jasanoff (2017, p203, 204) gives us an insight into what Joseph Conrad witnessed when arrived in the Congo Free State and what he eventually witnessed in Congo, *Heart of Darkness*. Heart of Darkness was published in 1899, in Blackwood's magazine. The grueling story takes us through what Conrad witnesses in the Congo Free State. During the period between Conrad's journey in Congo and the publication of *the heart of Darkness*, the imperial exploitation had wreaked havoc in Congo. The idealistic way of living had been brutalized by one of the most abusive colonial regimes of the world.

The Belgian King had been spending absurd amount of money on several infrastructural projects as well as establishing the *Force Publique*, a civil law enforcement and military force. Jasanoff (2017, p203, 205) After large parts of Congo was taken over by the government, the Congolese were asked to pay huge amounts of tax and during this time, Congo was still a no-cash economy. Europeans traded commodities in exchange for other commodities, mostly rubber and ivory. The Congolese obviously did not have money to pay but the government proposed that the people would work for the state to pay off their tax. As recruiting for forced labor started, many men tried escaping for while the *Force Publique* would take their women and children into custody until the men returned. They even raided villages and started taking people at will.

John Boyd Dunlop, a Scottish inventor had invented and patented the bicycle tire which created a huge demand for rubber. Leopold saw this as an opportunity to make profit off

Congo and rubber thus became the most demanded export from Congo (Jasanoff 2017, p203, 204). Rubber essentially bailed out Leopold from bankruptcy and he wanted to take out as much rubber as he possibly could and investigations of E.D Morel led to the realization that Congo had been turned into a slave state (Jasanoff 2017, p.208)

### 3.3 Humanitarian involvement in Congo

The colonial period in Congo in a one that was embroiled by mass murder, slavery, exploitation of natural resources and at the top of it all was the Belgian King Leopold II. As the demand increased for rubber so did the greed to make profits through supplying the increasing demand. The sporadic increase in the wealth of Belgium meant brutal working conditions for people employed in the rubber trade. The colonial rule in the Congo Free State started from 1885 and lasted until 1908. Belgium's harsh rubber industry exploited the Congolese people as slave workers. At least 10 million Congolese people died working for the Belgian rubber industry (Slade, 1962).

During the beginning of the twentieth century Belgian King Leopold II and his brutal regime in Congo became the basis to establish the first international human rights campaign. This saw the coming together of many players that would have impact in ending Leopold's regime in Congo. Among the many players was Alice Seeley Harris, a missionary and a documentary photographer that played a key role in helping the Congo Reform Association.

International political pressure caused by the Congo Reform Association forced Leopold to setup a commission of enquiry in 1904 to look into the atrocities that were inflicted upon the Congolese during his rule. This particular commission received enormous coverage in the media in the beginning of the twentieth century in Belgium, France, UK, Germany, and USA and so on. The commission provoked a crucial national and international debate and a significant number of people have described this commission as a moment of truth where the atrocities of Congo could no longer be denied. As political pressure from outside increased in



1906 and 1908 king Leopold was forced to handover his colony to Belgium (Bevernage 2018, p.203).

Among other things, Leopold was guilty of inflicting forced labor, violent and bloody military operations, mutilations of people, especially workers in the rubber and ivory trade. The author also points out how Leopold engaged in monopolistic economic policies which were a clear violation of the international free trade. Much of the atrocities came to light by a traveler's report, which was an open letter to king Leopold in 1890 by Afro-American civil war soldier George Washington Williams. Many other accusations by humanitarian activists and protestant missionaries followed this. Briefly after 1900 the protests gained prominence and in the in early 1903 Congo atrocities became the subject of an official report by British Consul Roger Casement and were fiercely disused in the British and Belgium parliaments. Subsequently E.D Morel set up the Congo Reform Association which focused on throwing light on the issue and bringing it to the public's notice in Belgium, US and other countries (Bevernage 2018, p.204).

#### 3.4 Photographic evidence in the report

What came as a shocker was that Leopold managed to fend off the accusations until 1903 and eventually humanitarian pressure led to a debate in the British House of Commons. The debate led to investigation in Congo. Roger Casements' report was published in 1903 after it had been edited by the British government. The main part of the report entailed an insight into oppression into Congo through several photographs (Sliwinski, 2006, p.334).

Slowly the decline of human and animal population came into the spotlight through the report. Several other key issues also followed. The heavy taxation of the natives, slave workers, forced hostage taking and the evidence of one specific mutilation that garnered a lot of attention was the chopping off of hands. The report also revealed that the Belgian officers demanded proof of the death of the Congolese and the Belgium personnel or the *Force*

*Publique* demanded proof of the killings by counting the number of right-hands. All the bullets allotted to *Force Publique* was to be counted this way. The Casement report and several other reports of many cases of atrocities against the Congolese and one report in particular: a young boy, Epondo and a girl Mola Ekilte whose hands had been cut off. The report also had a testament from Mola that is speculated documented by a translator. (Sliwinski, 2006, p.340).



(Mola Ekilite (seated) and Yoka)

The rare testimony from the Casement's report provided an insight into the violent nature of the Belgian rule in Congo. But one other aspect of the report remains etched in the memory of Congo. Mola's photograph. The missionary Mr Clark's efforts to appeal to the Belgian Central administration with the inclusion of Mola's photograph was hopeless as the Belgian authorities did not respond to this. The only response he received came from a Belgium newspaper and to his disbelief, the newspaper published a story on Mola's case but it claimed

that the American missionary had been circulating a fake photographs of a mutilated boy who posed as if he was Congolese (Sliwinski, 2006, p.339).

Casement included this particular photograph in his report, a picture of Mola sitting on a chair and beside him was a child named Yoka with her mutilated hand. The camera played a significant role in exposing the mutilation of the Congolese people. It was also used to document several such incidents. The children depicted in the photograph were dressed with white clothing and their mutilated arms in front in order to stand out.

Sliwinski (2006, p.339) argues that the documentation of the atrocities with the use of the camera played a significant role in exposing the story. The camera in other words became the key tool in the reform. Keven Grant (2001) recalls the Kodak dry plate and Alice Harris who documented the mutilations.

Alice Harris made all efforts to document any wrongdoings that the Congolese suffered under Belgian rule. Another one of her iconic photographs were taken in 1904. Upon hearing that the Anglo-Belgian India rubber company were responsible for the attacks in a neighboring village Alice made sure that this would be documented. The attacks were carried out due the village failing to collect enough rubber. Some of the victims who had witnessed the mutilation decided to go to the local authorities to protest the grotesque events that they had experienced. It was here that Harris asked one of the victims to reveal what they were carrying. A young man named Nsala had a bundle of leaves and he was carrying something. What he revealed from the bundle was a recently chopped hand and leg. It late came to light that the victims were Nsala's wife and daughter. Harris documented this by photographing Nsala looking at the freshly chopped off hands of his wife and daughter (Sliwinski, 2006, p.341).

The author argues that this particular photograph and the impact it had was of great importance. Alice Harris and John Harris expressed that “the photograph is most telling, and

as a slide will rouse any audience to an outburst of rage, the expression on the father face, the horror of the bystanders, the mute appeal of the hand and the foot will speak to the most skeptical.”

Both photographer Alice Harris and her husband John Harris expressed that the photograph demanded not just public outrage but viewed the tool of photography and the particular photograph as a tool that led to public judgement. (Sliwinski, 2006, p.342)

The author further argues that the photographs caused a massive uproar among the public. The photographs also served as evidence in Casement’s report. The outrage led to the coming together of the lobby group from Britain. “The group was made up of members of the Aborigine’s Protection Society, members of the Liverpool, Manchester, and London Chambers of Commerce and concerned citizens.” The pictures played the main role in setting the discourse. The newspapers in Africa (The West African Mail) printed several photographs by Alice Harris. E.D Morel also published several photographs in books that led to reform in Congo (Sliwinski, 2006, p.342).

### 3.5 A historical look into child-labor reform in America

While the impact of documentary photographer is debated and discussed over the years, a few photographers stood out more so than other. American sociologist and documentary photographer Lewis Hine’s work had a vast political impact. Hine’s work had a huge impact in changing child labor laws in America. Hine, who was a teacher by profession used photography as a tool to immigrants arriving in America between 1904 and 1909. It was here Hine learnt that documentary photography could be employed as a tool for social and political impact. (McCausland, 1992, p.102) From cotton mills in the south of America, sweatshops in New York, Coals mines in West Virginia, steel workers and their living conditions in Pittsburgh and photographing the workers who built the Empire State building, Hine’s work today is recognized as a masterpiece for modern day documentary photography.

Hine left his job in 1908 and joined the National Child labor committee where he documented child labor for a decade with a keen focus to end the practice. (McCausland, 1992, p.102)

Hine combined his intuitiveness with the technique of documentary to produce his work.

Talking about Lewis Hine, Florence Kelly, a social and political reformer known for her work in wage abolition recalls ‘The camera is convincing. Where records fail and parents forswear themselves, the measuring rod and the camera carry conviction’.

Hine’s work which included several photo stories that The Survey published was dedicated work aimed at enhancing lives of people through legislation and education. The author recalls that Hine did not give up on education when he quit his job but he turned towards ‘visual education’.

### 3.6 Context and impact of Hine’s work and

When Lewis Hine was born in 1874, the War Between the States had just concluded and the need for workers was enormous. Mass production demanded cheap labor and the dawn of industrialization and mass immigration led to a large exploitation of the workers. (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.33) A huge labor crunch in different factories, mines, mills canneries meant that owners hired children and old people. There were many instances where whole families worked and yet the parents made so little that they could not support the family. Low pay was also combined with long working hours and horrible working conditions and the state was not doing anything to prevent it.

The author (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.34) recalls a Fall Mill River owner’s account on how he viewed workers as bodies that did work for him: “I regard my people just as I regard my machinery. So long as they can do my work for what I choose to pay them, I keep them, getting out of them all I can. When my machine gets old and useless, I reject them and get new, and these people are part of my machinery.” (Doezema, 1980).

### 3.8 Photography and Reform

Social injustice grew larger with the growth of the industrial revolution in America and several authors took to new theories in science to address the social injustice (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.31). Reformers also contributed a great deal to better the working conditions of laborers and to provide education to children. While reformers took to working towards social injustice, artists also employed this theme and created several bodies of work illustrating through painting, the shoddy working and living conditions that laborers endured in America (Smith-Shank 2015, p.31 Doezema 1890). On the other hand, literature also played a role in throwing light on the issue. Several writers took to writing short stories, poetry and novels to shed light on the terrible life of the workers.

While all of the above issues were of great importance, it was child labor that drew the emotions of the masses. In the beginning of 1900, the American people addressed child labor as ‘child slavery’ and were pushing to end the practice. Few years later, in 1904 the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC) was founded to put an end to the child labor. The NCLC wanted evidence of child labor to present it to the people to raise awareness about the issue. Furthermore the NCLC sought after banning involving children below the age of 12 in the dawn of commercialization and industrialism. (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.32)

Lewis Hine got involved in the project in 1906, to aid the NCLC to make a policy change to ban child labor. The NCLC along with Hine decided to use documentary photography as a tool for social reform which is considered by the author as a ‘stroke of brilliance’. Some of the children working during this time were between the ages of seven and nine working in mills and cotton fields. (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.31)

Hine produced around 5000 photographs working for the NCLC before 1918. His photographs documented how children were being abused in workplace and these photographs that child labor laws were enacted. His photographs revealed how children

working in different factories, fisheries, farms and so on were demanded to withstand the workload and behave like adults. His work also included accounts from the workers. He documented the plight of the workers and children by writing about them to remove any notion of ambiguity involved in the horrid child labor (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.31).

Hine managed to produce a body of work that persuaded the adult readers and viewers to vote for reform and put an end to child labor. One of Hine's iconic photograph was 'Manuel' photographed in 1911. Hine portrayed the child as a victim of child labor and he used several techniques and text in order to convey that. Hine's engaged the viewers through a series of methods. The little kid was photographed staring into the camera with a strong gaze, contrary to most children who wear a smile when being photographed. The kid's dirty clothes and the background plays a very important role in allowing the viewer to realize the horrors of child labor. Hine also uses text to remove any sense of ambiguity and give the reader an exact picture of what Hine wants to convey (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.36).

The caption of the photograph goes like this "Manuel, the young shrimp-picker, five years old, and a mountain of child-labor oyster shells behind him. He worked last year. Understands not a word of English." By assigning a name to the boy, Hine gives the viewers a harsh sense of reality. The boy is not an anonymous child anymore. He has a name and a story and it makes the viewer connect more with the issue of child-labor. By divulging the age of Manuel, Hine also engages the emotions of the viewer and makes them ponder what a 5-year-old kid must be doing instead of standing barefoot on sharp shells. The fact that the caption tell the viewer that Manuel speaks no English gives the viewer an insight into how immigrant children were being exploited and why educational reform was necessary (Smith-Shank, 2015, p36).

It is important to note that the photograph is guided in great part by its caption here. This further allows an agenda to be set through an image, one that may not be apparent through the visual alone.

Photographing child labor was anything but an easy task. Hine had to employ several tricks in order to even make it inside the factories. He sometimes posed as a person interested in the machines inside the factories and photographed the children working inside. He also learnt the names, the age and the size of children in order to write about them. 'Little Fanny' was another iconic photograph by Hine. Little Fanny's photograph was taken in a mill showing that the child was working at the mill. Unlike the picture of Manuel, little Fanny is seen with another woman that Hine opted to crop out. The dark image of the girl coupled with the industry scene behind her gave the viewer a sense of a terrible childhood. Although this photograph is ambiguous, the viewer gets a sense of how young the girl is. She was seven years old "Little fanny" worked and was treated like an adult. She started work at 6 in the morning and did whatever she could. These photographs proved to be of great importance to the NCLC for advocating for child labor laws and urging people to vote for reform.

### 3.9 Impact of Hine's work

Hine is regarded as one of the pioneers of using documentary photography to create an impact in policy change and creating an impact in the minds of the people. The author Smith-Shank (2015, p.35) says that Hine was responsible for crafting a 'visual culture' to bring about a huge change in child labor laws and the rights of children. His work is credited with causing an impact and allowing children to regain their childhood during the industrial age of America. Hine's work has taken deep roots in peoples' conscience and his strong photography depicts a ruthless picture of child labor. The author (Smith-Shank, 2015, p.36) claims that without Hines's work the NCLC would have had to work much harder to implement child labor reform-



3.10 Reflection into the current state of documentary with the work of Taslima Akter  
The role of documentary photography has never been more widespread than it is today.

Modern technology has given photography a global reach for content of all kinds, including stories of social inequality. The author argues that this kind of availability of the documentary way of photography and storytelling is an advantage for democracy and the civil society.

The author argues that the genre of documentary photography has had an impact in society.

Though human rights exists in the modern day, how does these human rights fair in reality?

With human rights as a central focus the author examines the challenges faced by documentary photography in creating an impact today. This leads into the discussions about human rights issues that plague the workers in the garment industry in Bangladesh (Franklin, 2016, p.109).

A school of photography called *Pathshala* and the South Asian Media institute in Bangladesh have wielded the camera to bring awareness into the challenges faced by the workers of the garment industry. Photography has been used to question both big companies and local governments concerning human rights. The challenges faced by the garment workers and environmental concerns were the key areas of focus for these photographers.

Activist Taslima Akter used the tool of documentary photography to fight for the rights of garment workers in Bangladesh. Taslima's work on the garment industry and particularly those from the Rana plaza tragedy has created a huge impact in creating awareness on the horrors of working in the factories that produce clothes for big brands. Franklin (2016, p.109) argues that Akter's work has raised awareness and made it hard for people to ignore the atrocities that take place in the garment industry.

On May 2013, Time magazine published Taslima's iconic photograph called 'A Final Embrace' which depicted two victims who appeared to be embracing each other in the rubble after the building (Rana plaza) collapsed. A structural default led to the collapse of the

building that was housing clothing factories working for many European clothing brands. It was not just Time magazine but several news organizations, magazines and NGOs around the world that published the work of Akter, creating not only awareness about the issue but also showing the dark reality of cheap clothes that are brought in the non-western part of the world. Franklin (2016) elucidates that Akter's work had caused an impact to the people in the West as they could no longer ignore the people who make cheap clothes in Bangladesh.

The photograph that garnered worldwide attention was that of a couple in their final embrace under the rubble of the building. Franklin (2016, p.110) refers to another photograph that drew attention to the issue. A photograph of a mother grieving for her daughter looking at an image on the wall. Franklin (2016, p.109) argues that the documentary photography that came out of this tragedy resonates with history. He says the work connects with "evidential, questioning and accusatory reportage of the German Arbeiterfotografie (worker photography) movement in 1920s." This movement's key principle was to support the workers by taking their side to capture industrial problems.

Orgeret (2018, p.997) discusses how one of the most horrific accidents in the garment industry was covered in newspapers in Norway and in Bangladesh. The research article focuses on how media and photo-journalism plays roles in connecting audiences and victims. The author argues that action must spurge out of the suffering that's been documented. The articles includes a detailed analysis of how mass media played a role in creating an impact. Around 1134 people succumbed in the building collapse and more than 2500 were reportedly injured. The people working in Rana plaza produced clothes for around 40 global brands. The articles provide an important angle to the story which is relevant to this essay: it reevaluates theories that exist today and questions the relationship between "us" and "others" in journalism and mass communication along with portrayal/representation of victims being a key focus area. (Orgeret 2018, p.998)

The author also explores a fundamental question that is relevant to this essay, she asks “can a fundament for compassion be created through mediated texts, through words and images?”

### 3.11 Impact of photographs from Rana plaza in Norway

Although newspapers published new stories of the incident on the same day it happened, the photographs from the tragedy reached Norway through the internet via several websites and social media outlets. The shocking images of people under the rubble of the building collapse and other such horrendous sights reached Norway and although the images reached the people in Norway, there was no means to act or help immediately. But this changed quickly as photographs of the tragedy and the victims were presented in newspapers. Several newspapers carried photographs: for example, Dagsavisen carried a photography of victims being carried by rescue workers. The scene depicted was of two men carrying a wounded girl away from the collapsed building. Aftenposten also carried a huge story about the building collapse with a photography of a rescue workers in front of the debris of the building collapse. The photographs, the news stories and the event caused a huge uproar among people and suddenly there the spotlight was on the living and working conditions of workers in the garment industry. The story also revealed some crucial information about the brands that were associated with clothing manufacturing in Rana plaza. Several Europeans brands were under scrutiny. (Orgeret 2018, p.980).

The photographs fuel off a debate among several NGOs including the “European clean clothes Campaign, Human Rights Watch and the Norwegian Initiative for Ethical Trade”. These NGOs along with the newspapers provided much needed critical examination of the situation. The impact of photography and journalism in Rana plaza could be gauged in several ways. It created awareness, debate, drew help to the victims and so on. The Minister of development from Norway at the time took stock of the situation by travelling to Bangladesh and donating NOK 14.5 million to enhance the working conditions of garment workers.

Though the coverage and the photographs garnered attention and donations to the cause, this created a notion that the victims could be helped but the Bangladeshi people were often portrayed as the “poor victims” that needed help from others. This created a representation of “us” and the “other” according to the author. (Orgeret 2018, p.981)

### 3.12 Representation and construction of the ‘other’

Photography along with text played a role in painting the picture of reality by presenting workers in way that would invoke sympathy among people. In another example, Norwegian newspaper Aften Posten carried a story about child labor describing the age and how little the workers earned. The author (Orgeret 2018, p.982) argues that though donations were made, the representation of the victims was in a manner that portrayed the workers as the poor victims that needed money and the donators as the rich “rich and generous helper”. Though the representation could be interpreted in several ways, the text that went along with the photograph changes how the story is perceived. The author argues that the photographs presented with a reflection showcasing workers as capable employees doing their best and still going through difficulties that are underserved. The author argues that this form of representation portrays the workers in better light rather than just victimizing them (Orgeret 2018, p982)

In this particular example, a photograph of 15-year-old girl was presented with text that read “This is where your cheap clothes are made”. Instead representing the girl as a victim, the girl was pictured working along with her colleagues. Quotes from the girl was used to create a connection with the viewer and the author argues that photographs such as these coupled with texts that help viewers understand the hard-working individuals shows a humane side of the story which could help create a better understanding and a personal relationship with the viewer and the represented individual. (Orgeret 2018, p.983).

Furthermore, the author argues that by photographing life situations such as living conditions of workers allows the audience to connect with the workers and the consumers may take necessary action against the big multinational companies that could mean better conditions for the workers. The power of photography and journalism cannot be undermined when it comes to representing violation of human rights. The photographic stories not only inform the viewers about the horrors of the other side of the world also makes them proactively protest for human rights and against the violation of human rights (Orgeret 2018, p.983).

The author argues that the Rana plaza tragedy and the powerful photographs that came out of it has urged people to address poor working conditions and dreadful consequences. Looking at the attention the memorials gathered for the victims of the incident, the author argues that a psychological change has occurred in the minds of the consumers. The author explains that the consumers now see the “unfamiliar others as others with humanity.”

## **4 Analysis & Conclusion**

### **4.1 Analysis**

The primary object of this research is to answer whether documentary photography has an impact society. Because of the vague nature of what constitutes as impact and due to the vastness of the genre of documentary photography, I have decided to look at just two main historical cases and reflect briefly on the modern documentary photography. In order to assess impact of documentary photography, I intend to explore the following details; background behind the photographs, tone of the photographs, presentation and representation of people in the photographs and the frames that were made use to paint a picture about people being photographed. I will also look at technical aspects of photographs such as how subjects were framed and how photographs were cropped to create a certain agenda for social change. Through the use of historical content analysis methodology, framing, agenda-setting theory and the construction of the ‘other’ I aim to answer my research questions.

This essay aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

*1: What was the relationship between photography and societal impact in the Congo reform?*

*2: How did photography play a role in child-labor reform in America? Did documentary photography have an impact on child labor policy change?*

*3: What is the role of documentary photography today — reflecting on the context of Taslima Akter's work.*

#### 4.2 Role of Photography in Congo Reform

The historical part of the essay reveals not only imperialism, the plight of the Congolese under King Leopold's regime but it throws much needed light on the importance of documentary photography in creating a huge impact to create awareness on the issue. To answer the question of what was the relationship between photography and societal impact in Congo reform we need to analyze the photographs using framing and agenda-setting and priming theories that has been discussed in the essay. We will also look at representation of the people through the lens of Orientalism and the construction of the other.

The photographs that emerged from Congo through Alice Seeley Harris did create a ripple effect on in the public eye and photographic evidence was a foundation to tackle the atrocities against the Congolese. Kevin Grant (2001) argues that the photographs that were used in the Casement report and other photographs that emerged from Congo showed a humane side of the Congolese people and an inhumane side of imperialism that had severe consequences for the people of Congo. Reporting through several sources and documentary photography set the ball rolling against the Congo Free State. A group of lobbyists gathered in England (Liverpool) and it was later determined that E.D Morel would be the main spokesperson for the group. It was here that the Congo Reform Association was set up and its core mission was to spread information about Congo through various publications. The association also

determined that photographs would be the central tool of strategy. E.D Morel published several photographs of Alice Seeley Harris in the journal *'West African Mail'*. Photographic evidence was also used to create books called as *"King Leopold's Rule and Red Rubber"* and several authors were requested to contribute towards Congo reform (Sliwinski, 2006, p.334).

In both framing and agenda-setting theories mentioned in this essay we understand that focus on an issue with a specific discourse is frame. The frame alters the ability of the audience to interpret information. Documentary photography in this regard can be viewed through framing theories because photographs are presented in a way that sets the tone and highlights the context behind what is being communicated (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009).

As we understood from the theoretical framework, framing, focuses greatly on the issues at hand rather and photographers draw attention on specific events and later apply them in a context of meaning. In a nutshell, the manner in which images and information are presented to the audience plays a role in influencing how people decide to process the information given to them. Framing and agenda-setting is closely linked. In a way, framing and agenda-setting informs the audience on what to think about and how to approach the information given to them (Shah, McLeod, Gotlieb, Lee 2009).

In the case of Congo Reform, the agenda set by the photographers is quite clear. The Congo Reform Association's primary objective goal was to create awareness about the atrocities that happened to the people. And by doing so they wanted to influence dethroning King Leopold's regime in the Congo Free State. Photography was deployed for this exact reason. When we take a closer look at how photography influenced the audience, Sliwinski (2006, p.334) gives us an overview on this. The context provided through photography was not just a summary of the atrocities inflicted on Leopold but a 'propaganda' of sorts, portraying the violence as a "crime against humanity". When we view this in the periphery of the agenda-setting theory, it is evident that the tone of the photographs, text was structured in a way to create alter notions

of people and make people react against the atrocities. The agenda used in the Congo reform was to educate people about how the atrocities could be viewed as an attempt to not just undermine humanity but to ‘eradicate the concept of humanity’ (Sliwinski 2006, p.335)

The author also reflects on how though Leopold’s regime had devastating effects on the Congolese people both psychologically and physically, it meant much more than that. The actions of his regime was according to the author “an organized system of terror”. It therefore became necessary for the reform association to communicate a deeper underlying message to the people. This message of course reflected deeply that Leopold’s regime broke all legal systems and created a campaign against humanity and the reform association along with other people who protested against the regime used photographs to strengthen their case. The photographs showed the horror but also paved way to create a notion of the need for “a new organization of human responsibility.” (Sliwinski, 2006, p.336)

But context alone did not help cause the humanitarian campaign. It was E.D Morel’s appeal for political intervention along with his book ‘Red Rubber’ that aimed at appealing to the emotions of the viewers. These two factors were however achieved by presenting text along with making use of the photographs that depicted the atrocities in the Congo Free State. The inclusion of visual proof of atrocities is something that appealed to the hearts of people and not just their minds. The author quotes E.D Morel (Cline, 1980) “For six years I have appealed to the head” and with the pictures included in red rubber “now I am appealing to the heart, the head having been captured”. The photographs that were included in the book *Red Rubber* depicted the horrors that the victims suffered photographs of men, women and children being mutilated for not producing enough rubber was depicted. Several other photographs emerged such as villages being burnt down. The author argues that it is through these photographs that a massive impact were created. All the written testimonies from the Congo Free State now had a visual proof, setting the ball rolling for reform in Congo. Morel



(1907) in *Reb Rubber* makes an appeal to the people in the conclusion of his book along with a photograph. The appeal was as follows: “Nothing impractical, nothing unrealisable is being demanded on behalf of the Congo natives. No grandmotherly legislation, no sentimental claims are being urged in their interest. Only justice.” (Morel, 1907, p. 212–13)

Interestingly the photographs that were used in these final pages of the book belonged to Alice Seeley Harris. Alice’s photograph of a victim named Nsala seated on a porch looking at the limbs of his wife and daughter summed up the emotions of the Congo Reform Association.



(Nsala looking at the hand and foot of his daughter. Photography by Alice Seely Harris)

This particular photograph in a way set the agenda for the Congo Reform Association to appeal to international bodies and take action against Leopold's rule. Sliwinski (2006, p. 341) remarks that the photograph emanated a sense of deep silence, a deeper meaning that was not possible to explain by mere words. According to the author, the photograph affected the psyche of the viewers. Though the impact of the photographs could be questioned in terms of arrests made based on this photograph, the author points out that the image had more of psychological impact and a social impact that would reinforce the notion of 'crimes against humanity,' the agenda set by the photographers and the reform association in Congo (Sliwinski 2006, p.341). This goes on to show that, agenda-setting in photography is of monumental value to create a social and a psychological impact.

Viewed in the context of framing and agenda-setting theories, the photographs used in the Congo reform were direct, targeted to appeal to the psyche of the viewers. It not only caused an uproar among people but it played a huge role in propagating the message that the reform association wanted to send out; the message of 'crimes against humanity'. The agenda set by the Congo Reform Association was used not only by E.D Morel but several other authors as well. While king Leopold made use of several false promises to take over Congo, photographers and writers set the agenda to prove the reality of what the Congo Free State had become.

Twain (1905) in his book *King Leopold's Soliloquy* remarks that it was the involvement of photographic evidence that changed the course of action in Congo Reform. He argues that photography set off an outrage and urged for moral judgement and leaving a mark on the audiences' conscience. Twain argues that it was the agenda set by the reform association through the photographs that formed the basis for the youngest and one of the most important human rights abuses in history.

#### 4.3 The making of the other through Congo photographs

Said's (1978) Orientalism and the making of the other explains how the 'West' structures the non-west as the 'other'. Said's key argument is that though colonialism is reported to be over, the manner in which the Orient is thought about, representation of the non-west and discourse about the non-west which allowed the colonial power into their lands still exists in modern times. When we look at the representation of the Congolese in the photographs that emerged from the Congo reform, many theorists and scholars argue that the concept of 'other' was also created through these images. Exoticism of people and portrayal of primitive races and so on led to the construction of the other.

The images from Congo were used to represent the 'other' as someone who is helpless and in need of Christianity to instil values in the culture. Missionaries who presented the story of Congo through the lantern slide lectures reported usually showed the landscape of the region and then moved on to praise king Leopold's efforts in philanthropy and European exploration in the region. They then represented the people of Congo as a tribe of savages that practiced polygamy, cannibalisms slavery and so on. These talks and representation constructed the 'other' as someone who needed religious intervention and fueled the propaganda that they need to be 'Christianized' (Grant 2001, Sliwinski 2006, p.335).

Given the complexity of the Congo Reform movement, photography (Grant 2001) argues that photography of Alice Seely Harris "changed the course of Congo Reform". It not only appealed to Christian conscience but Grant argues that photography was indeed the right tool to aid in reform.

#### 4.4 Role of photography in American child-labor reform

Through the historical background of Lewis Hine and his photography, it is evident that Hine was a key player in the National Child Labor Committee that was established to curb child-labor. Hine's work was described as "positive propaganda by (Smith-Shank 2003, p.34) and Hine along with the NCLC carefully set the agenda for the photographs and the message that

they were communicating. On the other hand (McCausland 1992, p.104) debates that Hine dedicated a great deal of time to photographs people at work to educate the public about the different social issues that were present after the war. Much has been debated about Hine's work in terms of positively portraying and negatively portraying the victims in his photographs.

The backdrop of Hine's work was to urge people to vote for the implementation of child-labor laws. When we view this motivation through framing theory, it is evident that the manner in which people had interpreted the information presented to them was based on the manner in which information was presented to them. In photographic terms, the manner in which Hine presented the photographs had a great influence on how people decided to perceive the photographs.

Goffman (1974) in 'Frame Analysis' elucidates that audiences interpret what is going on around them usually through their primary framework and he argues that people usually are unaware of the primary framework. He adds that this primary framework has two separate factors which influence the audience; natural and social factors. Both these factors affect how audiences interpret information. The 'natural' factor is what drives the social factor.

Goffmann (1974, p.21) argues that this form of framework takes into consideration the physical world and its occurrences without paying much attention to what drives the events and on the other hand, social frameworks are guided by the social situations, manipulations of the social participants and goals of these people. Framing and agenda setting theories are closely intertwined as both these theories determine how photographers attract the attention of the audience and because of this factor, the frame also sets the agenda. In other words framing in photography can be viewed as how photographers arrange and present their images that they want to cover.

Wanta (1988, p109) argues that while media has no influence on what people think about but through agenda-setting media has influence on what people can think about.

Smith-Shank (2003, p.34) discusses how Lewis Hine intentionally manipulated his photographs in an effort to create a 'positive propaganda' for child labor reform in America. Agenda setting factors can be applied to Hine's work as he constantly worked to create a propaganda for reform through his photographs. Hine's photographs and the National Child Labor Committee influenced the importance on child-labor reform in the public domain by showcasing stories of children working in factories.

Hine not only documented through photography but also experimented with the manner in which his photographs were presented. He carefully crafted images for his 'positive propaganda' by combining photographs along with texts. Hine played with the images such that it would have a psychological impact on the viewers. His photographs were aimed at influencing how people think about child labor laws which correlate with the agenda-setting theory that is discussed above.

#### 4.5 Techniques deployed by Hine

The collaboration of images and text was the primary manner in which Hine presented his work. One of Hine's most known and most influential photograph was photographed in 1911 and it was called Manuel. In this photograph, Hine victimizes the child and he uses text to reinforce that message that Manuel is one of many children who are victims to child labor. The manner in which Manuel looks at the camera does not paint a picture of a 'normal' child. Manuel does not smile but instead he has a bold stare right into the camera. This creates a sense of sympathy and connects with the audience. Manuel is not pictured as a happy child but a child who is working and wears a face of wisdom.



(Manuel, the young shrimp picker, 5 years old, and a mountain of child labor oyster shells behind him. He worked last year. Understand not a word of English)

Hine deploys many symbolisms with his photographs. When we look at the photographs through the theories discussed above, it is plausible that Hine wanted to engage the audience in a manner that they would think about child labor reform. In a way, Hine's photographs informs the audience what to think about and in this case, it reinforces the implementation of child labor laws. When we observe the photograph of Manuel carefully it becomes evident that other children too have worked in the place where he is pictured. He stands alone, without anyone there to help him in front of a pile of empty shells holding his oyster buckets. The child is also barefoot. (Smith-Shank 2003, p.35) Hine provokes the audience to react emotionally and this is one of Hine's primary goals. The photograph of Manuel demands people to protect children from the perils of child labor. Hine also describes in the caption that the child does not speak English and that he is 5-years-old adding factors that influences the audience. Through this text, it becomes evident that the child is an immigrant who is being

exploited. It also raises several questions in the minds of the audiences about what an average 5-year-old is ought to do. This photograph among many others became the a beacon for not just child labor reform but also educational reform (Smith-Shank 2003, p35)

The agenda of photographers is something that requires mentioning. The author (Smith-Shank 2003, p.36) argue that photography is not just a way of documentation of what seems to be reality. The power lies in the hands of the photographer and it is he/she that decides what needs to be photographed and chooses specific frames to portray stories the way he/she sees it. The authors argues that Hine crafted photographs in a certain way in order to make a strong case against child labor and to fulfill the mission he was commissioned to photograph. Hine focused a great deal on making his photographs seems like the actual reality. He did this by carefully choosing the aesthetics of photography to suit his reform agenda. Hine work with the knowledge that photographs' aesthetics matter if he were to create a strong propaganda.

While Hine maybe regarded as a pioneer for child labor reform in America, the photographs reveal that altering and manipulating photographs is something that most photographers do in order to set an agenda with what they are showcasing. The agenda in this case, is not only set by the message from the photographs but also from a predetermined motive of delivering the message of the child labor committee along with Hine's own personal style of photography.

Many scholars and academicians argue that Hine's work was pivotal for child labor reform. Hine's managed to shape a visual identity to fight against the atrocious child labor problem. The author (Deborah, Smith-Shank 2003, p37) argue that Hine's photographs are strong pictures that dictated the discourse for the National child labor committee and without Hine's work, the authors claim that the implementation of child labor laws would have been more difficult. The authors also infer that the impact of Hine's work was a psychological, social one where it altered people to act quickly.

#### 4.6 Representation and making of the 'other' in Taslima Akter's work

This section will examine the role of documentary photography today with reflections on Taslima Akter's work.

In the two previous cases, documentary photography seemed to play a significant role in highlighting atrocities against people and campaigning for better reform. More than a hundred years later documentary photography is still relevant even with the surge of various media platforms today. In the case of documentary photography that emerged from Dhaka in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the rana plaza tragedy, photography was yet again wielded to campaign for human rights and better laws. Though is it difficult to point out that it was photography's impact that caused a social change and policy change, it can be argued that a certain few photographs played a key role in setting the agenda for social change.

Taslima Akter's photograph, 'a final embrace' was described by Time magazine as "the most haunting photograph from Bangladesh" and "capturing the entire county's grief in a single image". The photograph showing two deceased victims who appear to be embracing each other left a mark on discourse on atrocities against people working in the garment industry in developing countries. The media coverage including photographs not only raised funds for the disaster victims but also created a psychological impact on people who readymade garments (Orgeret 2018, p.982).

The coverage of the event through photographers led to funds and this led to the notion of 'action could be taken' among people. The interconnection between the context and the agenda created by photographer and journalists can be noticed. Though the visual impact of the story drew funds, it also led to the construction of the 'other' that was poor and who needed help.





(‘A Final Embrace’ photograph by Taslima Akter)

Exploring the theme of exploitation and representation, the ‘other’ was represented in a ‘victimized’ manner, someone who needed to be helped from the rich generous helpers.

Orgeret (2018, p.982) elucidates the work of Samuelsen from Aften Posten who painted a different picture of the garment workers. Here making of the other from Orientalism comes into play. Said’s Orientalism argues that even though imperialism may not exist, representation of ‘other’ is crucial to because representation may still keep the imperialistic ideas alive. Samuelsen’s work however was a different kind of representation. Instead of victimizing the people, she portrayed the workers as able people who work hard and who deserve better.

The author (Orgeret 2018,p.982, 983) argues that one such example, the representation of Nazma, a 15-year-old girl who works at a factory was done in a different way. Her voice was the core of the story. A picture of her was complimented with her quotes. A color photograph

of Nazma was used and the headline read “this is where your cheap clothes are made.” There were two photographs that were presented for the audience. On the first one, Nazma is placed centrally, with her colleagues in the work environment. The work place setting, the clothes in front of her and the colleagues show that she is engaged and is busy at work. This particular image represented a humane version of the other. It represents a young, able girl who is working hard. The audience have the room to relate with this picture of a young girl working to achieve her dreams. The second picture of Nazma was a one outside the factory where it is very evident that Nazama is a really young girl. The photographer Sameulsen has created a context behind what the viewers are looking at. By giving the worker a name and an identity, a close-up of her face that compels the audience to understand the story. The author argues that such visual representation given to workers is crucial to determining whether the audience feel sorry for the victims or whether the audience relate with the challenges that the workers face.

It is important to note that the author (Orgeret 2018, p.982, 983) argues that the context and history is extremely important to be able to understand the story. She argues that the context and history may not necessarily be long and detailed but just providing a frame to view the story can be compelling. More importantly, the representation of the young girls not only portray them as vulnerable but also victims of demand and pressure from multinational clients wanting cheap clothes (in this case, Nazma was making clothes for a Norwegian brand named Cubus). The representation also sends a clearer message that is the greed of someone else that makes these young girls victims. The photographer in this case has placed many aspects of agenda –setting through the news story and the pictures. The viewers can not only connect with the young girl but the images also remove the problem of distance or proximity. Portrayal of living and working conditions means that the viewers not the reality of people how make cheap clothes for them. The author argues that this enables the viewers to take be

aware of where they buy their clothes from and pressurize the multinational companies to offer better conditions for the workers.

Photographic stories of exploitation presented with a wider context of international trade not only allows the viewers to sympathies but also react in a proactive manner. This fundamental change in the course of action can be determined by the frame and the agenda-setting processes of photo-journalists or documentary photographers.

## **5.0 Conclusion and Scope for research**

Power of photography resides in educating people and compelling images of atrocities are of immense social and political importance. A few photographs may spark discourse, a few may spark a social change of sorts, a few maybe used for propaganda as we have learnt through this essay. As we have also learnt from this essay, photographs of atrocity can fuel humanitarian campaigns, work as propaganda tools and push for better law. To sum it up, this essay gives evidence that the role of photography in the events discussed in this essay cannot be undermined. Furthermore, photography has also created visual representation and understanding between different cultures. Based on the historical survey and the analyses the essay aimed to answer questions on impact of documentary photography in Congo Reform, Child labor Reform and impact of modern day documentary photography. A recurring question throughout the essay was whether documentary photography had a role to play in reform. The historical analysis and enables us to understand that without the involvement of photography, the course of action in those events would perhaps be different. In the case of Congo Reform, we learn that it is the involvement of photography that set off one of the largest humanitarian campaigns in history to protest and over throw Leopold's colonial regime. Photographs from Congo was the final piece of the jigsaw to appeal to international players about the atrocious happenings in Congo. Alice Harris and John Harris, the two missionaries who produced the photographs expressed that the pone particular photograph of

Nsala demanded a not juts moral outrage but also judgement and action. After the involvement of international lobby groups, photographs were considered as vital tools or the core of the strategy to lobby against Leopold II. Photographs appealed to not just the judiciary but also the psyche of people. Mark Twain argued that it was the intervention of the camera that change the course of Congo Reform by evoking emotions of moral judgement, and showcasing a crime against humanity.

As in the case of Congo Reform, Lewis Hine used photography to create a propaganda to implement child labor laws in America. The National Child Labor Committee realized the importance of photography and engaged Hine to create visual proof of child labor. The result of this work was that Hine created not just photographs for propaganda but he created a ‘visual culture’ to aid child labor reform and through his photographs, became a pioneer for the rights of children and for children to be children. Smith-Shank (2003, p.37) sums it up but saying “His photo stories remain powerful images that describe and document child labor. And without them communicating so effectively to the emotions and consciences of the audience, the NCLC’s goal of child labor reform may have been much harder to attain.”

When we reflect on the idea of photographic reform today, it is hard to leave out the involvement of powerful compelling images to set a discourse for reform and change. As in the case of Taslima Akter’s photograph and Samuelsen’s photographs, it is evident that photography played a role in not just attracting funds for the disaster victims but also creating awareness about the tedious garment industry. The fact that we live in a media saturated world, the presence of activism and several NGOs working for the labor rights does make it difficult to point the finger at photography as key elements of social change. However time and again and in the case of Dhaka, a key tool was indeed photography to influence people and draw attention to issues. No medium captures human suffering as vividly as photography

does and Time Magazine sums up the power of Taslima's photography "capturing an entire country's grief" in single image.

Images from Dhaka also show the importance of representation. As we have observed in Congo, the ability of photographs to construct the other in poor light cannot be ignored.

Photographs tend to victimize people as needing aid but contrary to this, a few photographers have also dedicated time and effort to construct the image carefully so that the other is represented in a responsible manner. The three cases to a certain degree answer itself.

Photography's did have a strong role in Congo Reform, Child Labor Reform and continues to have an impact in portrayal of garment workers' plight in Bangladesh.

### **Scope for Future Research**

There is however significant scope for future research. The frame in which the 'non-western' other is viewed continues to be a challenge. Representation of victims continue to be an ongoing debate and this is why there is enormous scope for future research in this field. The images from Congo, America and Bangladesh does have its biases and subjectivity in the creation of the 'other'. The topic could be studied further to understand the need for reformed image culture.

As mentioned earlier, the essay only covers two historical events and one event from recent time. While there are numerous instances of documentary photographers covering untold stories of human rights and the like, there are not many that have been studied in terms of the resultant impact of the produced image. There is scope to further examine the interplay of photography and social action in our history.

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