

Mother Teresa and Media Mayhem

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The media and society tend to distort and oversimplify accounts of events and peoples lives to make them appeal to audiences. Joan Didion's essay "Sentimental Journeys," analyzes how "sentimental narratives" have "personalized and ultimately obscured" (260) the actual problems that are at the root of society's dilemmas. According to Didion, sentimental narratives are the distorted, erroneous, biased accounts of events that serve to oversimplify the problems at hand in order (whether it be consciously or unconsciously) to avoid the complexities of the actual case and to disguise the objectionable reality. In "Handicapped by History," James Loewen presents a similar idea regarding how heroification distorts the real lives of our idolized role models and makes them into "pious, perfect, creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest" (463) so "we cannot think straight about them" (464). Sentimentalization and heroification both involve a fabrication of the facts, causing us to lose sight of the real issues we should be recognizing. One person that the media has extensively confused is the Yugoslavian born nun, Agnes Goxha Bojaxhiu, more commonly known as Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa and, by association, her organization have been heroified and sentimentalized as "saintly." This image and publicity, which renders them largely immune to criticism has very real consequences in terms of donations but is problematic because it draws so much attention away from the honorable (and perhaps more effective) work of other mission organizations,

limiting the available services to the poor, especially in Calcutta.

Didion claims that we personalize our heroes and heroines, and Mother Teresa is a fine example of a person who has been exceedingly personalized by the media. The legend of Mother Teresa is well known throughout the world. After being born in what once was Skopje, by age twelve, she had already decided she wanted to serve the poor. By the time she was eighteen, she joined the Loreto order, which was a missionary group that teaches Indian girls in Calcutta. While she was teaching there, she "became increasingly disturbed by the wretchedness of the poor" (Felder 115) and was granted an exclaustation to leave the convent and start her own congregation. After some basic missionary training, she ventured out into the slums of Motijhil. There she started a school under a tree with only five children in attendance, and the lessons were scratched out in the dirt with a stick. When she wasn't teaching, she was tending to the sick, comforting the dying, and doing whatever else she could do to alleviate the suffering in a city of disease, death, hunger and hopelessness. She started her order in the home of Michael Gomes, a Catholic Indian Teacher, and this served as the Missions of Charity Headquarters until Teresa and her nuns moved into a three storied building bought with money from the archdiocese (Lattin). The Missions of Charity started as a small order, with just a few nuns and volunteers, but by her death had expanded to over 5,000 members whom operated over 2,500 orphanages, schools, clinics and hospices in 120 countries. Her work did not go unnoticed as she was the recipient of the 1979 Nobel Peace Prize; the first Pope John XXIII Peace Prize; India's Nehru Award for her efforts in Bangladesh; the US Presidential Medal of Freedom; the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion; and the Congressional Gold Medal (Mukherjee).

These many awards given to Mother Teresa are evidence of how she has been heroified by society, and her widely known life story serves as an example of how she has been personalized.

The familiar narrative of Mother Teresa depicts what the media has called “a living saint” (Felder 114) “whose message of peace and compassion went beyond the boundaries of creed and nationality” (Bryson). Mother Teresa was the first living Catholic nun to appear on the cover of *Time*, in 1975. The caption was “Living Saints” and the article describes Mother Teresa as a flawless, perfect person. The late Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, once said of Mother Teresa that “to meet her is to feel utterly humble, to sense the power of tenderness and the strength of love” (Le Joly 47). When President Ronald Reagan presented the Medal of Freedom to Mother Teresa, he went as far as to call her “a heroine of our time” (Lattin). By Gandhi and Reagan (who have also have been heroified to some extent) making these powerful statements in reference to Mother Teresa’s character, she becomes even more of an idol than before. The media has built mother Teresa up so that all evidence and allusions to her flaws, prejudices and imperfections were wiped or excused out of her records, turning Mother Teresa into what Loewen describes as one of many “wartless stereotypes” (475).

So many people are accustomed to the familiar narrative of Mother Teresa that they tend to overlook her methods of serving the poor in Calcutta. Mother Teresa’s Catholic doctrine which she so strictly follows is largely responsible for the choices that she makes. Every charitable service that Mother Teresa involves herself in is carried out with the will of God in mind (Le Joly 167), but is not necessarily in the best interest of the people of India. She tends to let people die natural deaths, and she values human life so much that she

wouldn’t want any person, regardless if they have been born yet, to die (Chitkara 132). Mother Teresa’s moral values cause the Missionaries of Charity to have no hospitals, community health services, or any other type of advanced care facilities (Chatterjee 281). It is Mother Teresa’s Catholic beliefs that set her apart from the other major charities in India that offer these health services and more. Therefore, the funding that she receives from donations is used in a much different manner than the way other charities utilize their funding. Regardless of whether or not her way of serving the poor is the best, the public is largely unaware of the Catholic philosophy that Mother Teresa so strictly follows, which causes her work to differ greatly from the work other major charities in Calcutta are engaging themselves in. When the media presents Mother Teresa as infallible, other charities that may be doing better things for the people of India are being deprived of funding.

Mother Teresa has come across criticism despite her overwhelming praise by the media. Christopher Hitchens, author of *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* and Aroup Catterjee and his book *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict* both are critical of this “living saint.” They accuse Mother Teresa of using donations inappropriately, seeking wealth and fame disguised by helping the poor, disrespecting other religions, supporting communism, administering questionable medical care, courting the media, and being hypocritical. Whether or not these claims are valid, people have not investigated them. People are quick to dismiss these two gentlemen’s statements because Mother Teresa has become an untouchable icon of goodness.¹

¹ Chatterjee had a tough time finding a respectable publisher to print his book because Mother Teresa is so highly regarded by most people. The company that ended up publishing his book is called Meteor Books, and is based in India.

Because of all of Mother Teresa's extensive media coverage, people lose sight of what she really wants to be seen as: "A little pencil of God" who only wants to serve the poorest of poor. Mother Teresa even said herself, "If I got to heaven, it will be on account of all this publicity; I hate it. Why all this fuss about us? Others do the same work as we do. Do it perhaps better. Then why single us out?" (Le Joly 299). The media has so extensively covered Mother Teresa's work with the poor in Calcutta that people tend to lose sight of the other charitable work other missions are doing, particularly in India. There are a few thousand registered charities in Calcutta, some much larger than the Missions of Charity, yet Mother Teresa's mission arguably gets more coverage than all the other missions in Calcutta combined. Calcutta's largest charity by far is the Ramakrishna Mission. The Ramakrishna Mission cares for about 10 times as many people as the Missionaries of Charity (Chatterjee 283), yet receives roughly 84 times less media coverage.² This massive unbalance in media coverage, which turns Mother Teresa into a celebrity, leaves major charities largely invisible to the philanthropic donations from generous individuals and organizations.

One might think that all this media coverage is good because it brings the world to realization of the troubles in third world countries and compels people to donate money to the less fortunate. This is an admirable argument, but it has one flaw: the money people donate should be spread amongst all the charities. There were times when Mother Teresa had so much money that she didn't know what to do with it all and requested for a "Temporary halt to contributions until we have used up what we have" (Chitkara 15). A German newspaper

claimed that "Excessive support to a single charity leading to the needs of thousands of others being forgotten was probably behind the request" (Chitkara 16). Other charities of Calcutta could really put to use some of the unused money that has been offered to mother Teresa. Other large charities that few have heard of like the Child in Need Institute (CINI) and the Bharat Sevadhram Sangha both could use the money that Mother Teresa had available to her. Most charities of India offer different services, and the Missionaries of Charity offer very few practical services that cater to the needs of India's people. For instance in times of natural disaster and wars, the Missionaries of Charity were either absent from or playing a minor part in the effort to restore order while other charities were heavily battling for the needs of the Indian populace (Chatterjee 280). Other charities excel in other areas that Mother Teresa's order lacks in, such as providing medical care and education.

It is the heroification of Mother Teresa that makes her virtually immune to criticism, and the small amount of criticism that she does get is hurriedly dismissed. The personalized image of Mother Teresa created by the media causes us to overlook the actual work she is doing and causes us to not recognize the perhaps more effective work other notable charities are doing to help the people of India. Because of this, there are times when Mother Teresa's mission gets more monetary support than they can handle, while other worthy charities are deprived of financial support. It is through this process of media distorting reality, defined as sentimentalization that causes us to not realize that the well-being of the poor is being jeopardized by our biased views of Mother Teresa.

² For example a search ProQuest for articles relating to the Ramakrishna Mission produces 64 documents. A search for articles relating to Mother Teresa and her Mission produces 5381 documents.

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