
Media, Morality, and the Machinery of Justice: Re-Reading Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*

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ABSTRACT

This paper re-examines the evolving position of journalists as alternative investigators in Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects*. By focusing on the contrasting portrayals of Arun Advani and Bharka Das, it explores how journalism becomes a decisive force mediating crime, public sentiment, and moral responsibility in contemporary India. Swarup's narrative highlights the dual nature of the media—as a vigilant watchdog exposing corruption and as a sensational platform vulnerable to market pressures. Through its polyphonic storytelling and investigative strands, the novel critiques systemic injustice, elite privilege, and middle-class apathy. This study positions the journalists in the narrative as moral agents whose actions illuminate the ethical dilemmas embedded in media practice, ultimately suggesting that journalism in *Six Suspects* becomes a significant metaphor for democratic accountability. The novel raises pressing questions about the boundaries between truth and spectacle, justice and vigilantism, and the responsibility of the press within crime fiction.

Keywords: Crime fiction; Investigative journalism; Media ethics; Vikas Swarup; Indian English literature; Social justice

I. Reframing the Introduction: Media as a Battleground for Truth

In contemporary crime fiction, journalism has evolved into far more than a narrative accessory; it has become a pivotal arena where struggles over truth, power, and morality are staged. No longer confined to chronicling events from a distance, the journalist in modern fiction has acquired an investigative agency that rivals, and often supplants, the traditional detective figure. This structural shift reflects deeper cultural changes in the global information ecosystem, where, as Jürgen Habermas reminds us, the public sphere is increasingly mediated through institutions that shape discourse rather than merely report on it. Modern media, therefore, does not simply narrate reality—it actively constructs it.

Thus, when Murra Lee and Alice McGovern assert that “media coverage plays an integral role in which community frames and views issues of crime, law and order, and social control” (Lee and McGovern 45), their observation mirrors the broader theoretical claim that media functions as an epistemic filter. This aligns with Denis McQuail's communication theory, which positions the media as a “gatekeeper” that shapes public consciousness through selection, framing, and narrative emphasis. Media becomes not simply a reflection of crime but a site where crime is produced, interpreted, and moralized.

Globally, crime fiction has embraced this shift by foregrounding journalists as protagonists. Stieg Larsson's Mikael Blomkvist embodies the investigative journalist who exposes institutional

corruption, while Liza Marklund's Annika Bengtzon navigates the high-pressure environment of sensationalism and ethical ambiguity. These examples reaffirm how journalists in fiction serve as what Neil Postman might call "navigators of information"-mediating between fact and spectacle, truth and illusion.

Within the Indian context, this dynamic becomes even more complex due to historical constraints on free speech, the legacy of colonial bureaucracy, and contemporary political pressures. Writers like Madhumita Bhattacharyya, Kishwar Desai, and C. K. Meena capture the contradictions of a media landscape caught between watchdog functions and market-driven sensationalism. Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* stands prominently within this tradition. The novel's portrayal of journalism situates media as a terrain where postcolonial anxieties, democratic aspirations, and structural corruption collide.

Thus, in *Six Suspects*, the media becomes both a narrative technology and a theoretical lens—a means through which the novel interrogates the porous boundaries between truth and performance, journalism and power, legality and public morality.

This reimagining of journalism within crime fiction reflects a broader cultural reassessment of how truth is created, shared, and challenged in today's society. As audiences become more aware of media manipulation and ideological framing, the role of journalists takes on new significance and complexity. Crime fiction addresses these concerns by portraying journalists as both interpreters and creators of social reality. In this way, journalism serves as a literary metaphor for the tension between transparency and distortion, accountability and spectacle. The visibility of journalists in fiction parallels real-world discussions about media credibility, bias, and politicization. Additionally, this change suggests an increasing acknowledgment that the quest for truth is no longer solely the realm of detectives or law enforcement; it is now deeply woven into the fabric of mass communication. By incorporating journalistic characters into crime stories, authors like Swarup illustrate how media institutions shape our understanding of justice and morality. Therefore, this introduction paves the way for a critical examination of how *Six Suspects* employs journalism to reveal and question the challenging intersections of truth, power, and representation.

II. Critical Analysis

1. India on Trial: The Socio-Political Milieu of *Six Suspects*

At its heart, *Six Suspects* is deeply embedded in India's socio-political reality—a landscape shaped by caste hierarchies, patronage networks, and a legal system strained by political interference. The murder of Vicky Rai is not simply a crime narrative; it is a symbolic indictment of a postcolonial state still grappling with the residues of colonial-era authority structures. By modelling Vicky Rai's earlier crime on the Jessica Lal case (Swarup 12–15), Swarup foregrounds the entrenched culture of impunity that surrounds political elites. This resonates strongly with Ashis Nandy's critique of the postcolonial state, where violence becomes a tool for maintaining elite dominance, and legal mechanisms often fail to protect marginalized citizens.

The novel's polyphonic narrative spanning bureaucrats, tribal communities, tourists, film stars, and spiritual leaders exemplifies Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia, where multiple voices coexist without collapsing into a unified moral perspective. This narrative plurality dismantles the myth of a singular truth, foregrounding a fractured social reality.

From a postcolonial theoretical standpoint, the representation of Eketi and the tribal community reflects Gayatri Spivak's question: Can the subaltern speak? In Swarup's narrative, the subaltern cannot speak through formal institutions but gains representation through journalistic intervention. Journalism thus becomes the only conduit through which subaltern perspectives enter public discourse—highlighting the continued asymmetry of power.

The media's role in negotiating these asymmetries reinforces Jean Baudrillard's argument that modern societies live within "simulations" rather than realities. The version of India on display in the news, talk shows, and sensational broadcasts becomes a mediated construction—one that shapes how justice is imagined, demanded, or denied.

Swarup's portrayal of India as a nation grappling with modernity and deeply rooted traditional power structures enriches the socio-political commentary central to the novel. The persistent presence of elite privilege, particularly in criminal cases, mirrors the real-world shortcomings of the justice system that have ignited widespread public outrage. By intertwining actual socio-legal failures with fiction, Swarup compels readers to confront the unsettling continuity between narrative and national reality. The novel reveals the fragility of democratic institutions when faced with money, muscle power, and political patronage. In this regard, *Six Suspects* serves as both a reflection and a critique of contemporary India—emphasizing how ordinary citizens frequently depend on media activism for justice. The mediated nation illustrated in the novel portrays a public sphere where truth is continuously negotiated rather than established objectively. This emphasizes that India's legal and political institutions are under constant scrutiny—examined, challenged, and often found lacking. The outcome is a narrative that captures the tension between democratic ideals and systemic dysfunction.

2. Arun Advani: Journalism as the Moral Conscience of the Nation

Arun Advani embodies the normative ideal of journalism as envisioned by Habermas—a custodian of the public sphere and defender of democratic values. His column, "The Bare Truth" (Swarup 23), situates journalism as a rational, reflective domain that confronts systemic failures. His expose of Eketi (Swarup 102–104) reflects McQuail's model of "development media theory," in which journalism empowers marginalized communities by challenging dominant ideological structures. From a postcolonial perspective, Advani's work counters the state's narrative and resists the historical silencing of indigenous identities.

Narratively, Advani functions as the focalizer in Gérard Genette's terms—guiding readers through the moral labyrinth of political corruption. His narrative authority fosters trust and symbolizes journalism's potential to restore moral order in a dysfunctional society.

However, this model of ideal journalism is disrupted by the unnamed journalist who confesses to killing Vicky Rai: "I killed him because the law could not" (Swarup 309). This figure embodies

what narrative theorists call a disnarrated possibility—a character who violates the boundaries of professional ethics and destabilizes the narrative’s moral centre.

Their juxtaposition—Advani as democratic conscience and the vigilante journalist as ethical transgressor creates a dialectical framework through which Swarup examines the moral limits of journalistic agency.

Advani’s character embodies a nostalgic vision of journalism anchored in integrity, courage, and a sense of purpose that many feel the contemporary media landscape has lost. His investigative efforts illustrate how journalism can act as a counterbalance to state and corporate power when institutions fail to deliver justice. This idealistic view implies that journalism, at its best, serves as society’s moral compass. However, the presence of the vigilante journalist complicates this ideal by revealing the challenges journalists encounter within corrupt systems. When legal and political frameworks break down, even principled journalists may face insurmountable ethical dilemmas. This tension prompts readers to consider whether strict adherence to journalistic ethics always aligns with the quest for justice. Advani’s contrast with the vigilante figure underscores the dangerous appeal of moral absolutism in tumultuous political landscapes. Ultimately, these two figures represent two conflicting yet deeply interconnected models of journalistic agency: one rooted in democracy and the other arising from disillusionment with democratic shortcomings.

3. Bharka Das: The Marketplace of Sensation and the Theatre of Crime

Bharka Das exemplifies the transformation of journalism into what Postman calls an “age of show business.” Her “Breaking News” format (Swarup 76–80) aligns with Baudrillard’s claim that media produces hyperreal spectacles that overshadow reality. Her broadcasts transform crime into a visual commodity, reinforcing the belief that audiences increasingly prefer emotional stimulation over analytical depth. From a media-theoretical standpoint, Bharka represents the commercialization paradigm, where journalistic integrity is subordinated to TRPs and market demands. Her style mirrors what McQuail identifies as the “audience-driven model” of media where content is shaped not by civic responsibility but by the pursuit of mass appeal.

Narratively, Bharka functions as a counter-focalizer, offering a distorted lens through which events are dramatized. She embodies the tension between authenticity and performance, a theme central to contemporary discussions of media ethics.

Yet, Swarup does not dismiss her outright. Her sensationalism also democratizes information, making complex political scandals accessible to wider audiences. This paradox reflects the hybrid nature of Indian media, where spectacle and accountability coexist in uneasy alignment.

Bharka’s presence underscores the changing landscape of news consumption in a society rapidly embracing digital media, where speed often takes precedence over accuracy. Her approach illustrates how journalism can merge with entertainment, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction. By emphasizing spectacle, she taps into the audience’s craving for drama, shaping public perception in ways that may obscure reality. However, her popularity showcases the ability of modern media to engage and influence millions, irrespective of ethical considerations.

This raises questions about whether audiences themselves drive the demand for sensationalism, pushing journalists towards more theatrical presentations. Bharka thus embodies both a symptom and a catalyst of media sensationalism, highlighting the intricate relationship between journalistic supply and public demand. Her character challenges readers to reflect on how media not only informs citizens but also shapes their feelings about justice and crime. In this light, she serves as a critique of the very ecosystem that fuels her success.

4. Truth, Justice, and the Burden of Vigilantism

The anonymous journalist's confession - "I hid the gun in my shoe and ended what the law could not" (Swarup 310)—illustrates the collapse of the boundary between observer and participant. In narrative theory, this collapse produces what Genette calls "metalepsis," a violation of narrative boundaries that destabilizes ethical certainties.

From a postcolonial perspective, the act reflects a deeper crisis: when postcolonial states fail to deliver justice, individuals resort to extralegal measures. This aligns with Frantz Fanon's theory that violence emerges when structural injustice is normalized.

Swarup's depiction of India as a "nation of voyeurs" (Swarup 312) echoes Noam Chomsky's critique of media-enabled passivity, where spectators consume injustice as entertainment but do not act to correct it. This moral disengagement reinforces the systemic failures that produce vigilantism in the first place.

The vigilante journalist represents the profound consequences of losing faith in institutional justice. His actions shed light on the ethical dilemmas faced by those who observe systemic corruption but have no legal means to seek redress. While his behavior may seem morally justified at first glance, it brings up troubling issues regarding accountability and the potential abuse of journalistic power. By taking justice into his own hands, the journalist becomes both a hero and a criminal, blurring the moral lines that are essential to crime fiction. This complexity compels readers to consider the risks of individualistic justice in democratic societies. Moreover, his confession reveals the psychological burden of witnessing injustice without effective intervention from institutions. Swarup utilizes this character to explore whether vigilantism stems from moral courage or desperation and whether societies that fail to safeguard the vulnerable inadvertently encourage such behavior. In the end, vigilantism emerges as a warning sign of democratic decline rather than a viable solution.

5. Media, Morality, and the Spectatorship of the Middle Class

Swarup's portrayal of middle-class spectatorship captures the contradictions of India's mediatized democracy. Advani appeals to what Habermas would call the rational-critical public, while Bharka caters to the affective, sensation-driven masses. This duality mirrors the tension between public reason and public spectacle.

The middle class consumes both—and, in doing so, becomes complicit in the very injustices it condemns. This dynamic aligns with Chatterjee's theory of the "political society," where citizens oscillate between civic ideals and everyday pragmatism.

The novel thus becomes a commentary on how media not only reflects but also shapes middle-class morality, producing a society that critiques injustice yet participates in its commodification. The middle class in the novel appears as a powerful yet contradictory force, deeply invested in justice while simultaneously captivated by media spectacle. Their simultaneous engagement with Advani's rational critique and Bharka's sensationalist narratives illustrates the fragmented nature of modern identities. This fragmentation mirrors a society caught between democratic responsibilities and entertainment-driven apathy. By eagerly consuming sensational news, the middle class inadvertently strengthens the very systems that foster corruption and media distortion. Swarup implies that being a spectator is itself a political act, influencing which types of journalism flourish in the public realm. This raises significant questions about collective accountability in media environments where audience demand shapes content production. Ultimately, the middle class is depicted not merely as passive consumers but as active contributors to the formation of public morality. Their choices highlight the complexities of ethical citizenship within a media-saturated democracy.

III. Conclusion: Journalism as a Double-Edged Mirror of Society

Vikas Swarup's *Six Suspects* redefines crime fiction by making journalism its primary ethical and narrative engine. Through Advani's principled moral stance, Bharka Das's theatrical sensationalism, and the vigilante journalist's radical transgression, the novel engages with major theoretical debates in media studies, narrative theory, and postcolonial critique.

Journalism in *Six Suspects* emerges as:

- a democratic institution (Habermas)
- a spectacle-producing machine (Baudrillard)
- a narrative focalizer of truth (Genette)
- a tool for confronting subaltern silencing (Spivak)

Ultimately, the media becomes both mirror and catalyst—reflecting society's moral fractures while influencing its collective conscience. Swarup's novel challenges readers to confront the dangers and possibilities of journalism in a world where truth is both constructed and contested. The conclusion of the novel encourages readers to reassess the ethical standards they hold for journalism as an institution. By showcasing various journalistic figures, Swarup demonstrates that the media is not a singular entity but operates on a spectrum of intentions, pressures, and responsibilities. The differing paths of Advani, Bharka, and the vigilante journalist illustrate that journalism can both support democratic ideals and contribute to their decline. This dual role highlights the vulnerability of truth in an age filled with mediated narratives and conflicting realities. Additionally, the novel invites a deeper examination of how societies pursue justice when public faith in institutions diminishes. The media's ability to influence collective perception acts as a double-edged sword—capable of exposing wrongdoing while also distorting events for dramatic effect. By emphasizing these complexities, Swarup situates journalism as a key metaphor for the ethical challenges present in contemporary democracy. Consequently, the conclusion reinforces the novel's main argument: that the quest for truth in modern India unfolds

not only within courts and political arenas but also within the dynamic and contested realm of media representation.

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