



Afflatus Creations

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Page – 3-6

The Psychology behind the Increasing Sexual Violence

It is often said that literature is the mirror of society. When sexual crimes not only fail to decrease but continue to rise and become a societal illness, it becomes essential for literature to engage in serious discussions about the causes and solutions of this malady. Films are a powerful visual and auditory extension of literature, so it is important to examine how much work has been done in this medium on this psychological issue. Have the religious and social rules and values, which were created to control such behavior, become weak and ineffective? The most serious concern is the continuous rise in child sexual abuse cases. Very few films have addressed the issue of child sexual abuse, and even the few that have, did not receive the extensive discussion they deserved. *Monsoon Wedding* and *Highway* are the films that have tackled this issue in a highly impactful manner. Here, we will discuss *Highway*.

Written and directed by Imtiaz Ali, the Hindi film *Highway* was released on February 21, 2014, with Sajid Nadiadwala as the producer. The film was selected for the Panorama section at the 64th Berlin International Film Festival, held from February 6 to 16. The central theme of the film is the pervasive issue of child sexual abuse in society, which the director has successfully depicted through dialogue in just two scenes.

The story begins with preparations for the wedding of Veera Tripathi (played by Alia Bhatt), the daughter of a wealthy businessman. Tired of the wedding rituals, Veera calls her fiancé and sneaks out with him at night for a drive, away from the prying eyes of her family. Despite her fiancé's reluctance, Veera insists on driving on the highway. While they stop at a petrol station, they encounter a gang of criminals led by Mahabir Bhati (played by Randeep Hooda), who had come with the intent to rob the station. The gang ends up kidnapping Veera for ransom.

After the kidnapping, the abductors confine the film's protagonist, Veera Tripathi, in a truck and take her along the highway, thus beginning an unexpected journey. Initially, Veera attempts to escape their captivity but fails. Gradually, she starts to enjoy the journey. She compares this life to her previous one, which now seems artificial and suffocating to her. It was to escape this suffocation, even for a short while, that she had gone with her fiancé on a drive along the highway, where the kidnapping incident took place. She expresses her frustration with her fiancé, saying, "These rituals, the constant greetings, the traditional attire... Please, let's get out of here... just for an hour."

During the journey with the kidnappers, Veera begins to feel safer with them than she ever did in her own home. At one point, the truck is stopped at a police checkpoint for inspection. However, instead of seizing the opportunity to escape, Veera hides inside the truck, and the police inspector, finding the truck empty, allows them to pass. Later, Mahabir Bhati and his accomplice, bewildered, ask her, "Why did you hide? This was your chance... Why did you

hide?" Veera responds, "I don't know." They press further, "What do you mean, you don't know?" Veera replies, "I don't know means... I don't know."

This is the human emotion that psychologists have termed "Stockholm Syndrome," where the abducted person begins to empathize with their captors, sometimes even justifying their actions. The FBI's Hostage Database System shows that 8 percent of abducted individuals fall under the influence of this syndrome. A similar psychological state is depicted elsewhere in the film when Mahabir Bhati and Veera stay at a house on a mountain side. Veera's innate feminine instincts awaken, and she tells Mahabir, "Get out of the kitchen, this is my domain. I'll cook for you." Mahabir, who hasn't experienced such respect and affection since his childhood, is moved to tears. He is reminded of his mother, who used to show him the same kind of love.

The purpose for which the film was made is depicted at a certain point in the journey. When one of Mahabir Bhati's accomplices tries to molest Veera in private, Mahabir catches him and slaps him, saying, "This is a deal, not a girl...", and then, in anger, he turns to Veera and says, "And you, can't you behave properly?" This incident deeply affects Veera. The accomplice who harassed her then runs away, and they leave that place. Later, they stop somewhere to eat, and it is here that a scene unfolds, expressing the film's theme. In a lost, reflective state, Veera begins to recall her past and says,

"I was nine years old... at home... my uncle used to bring imported chocolates... "...He would hold me in his lap and show me affection... and then, alone... inside the bathroom... he would continue to show me affection... I would scream... but he would silence me with his fingers... closing my mouth in such a way... that my screams wouldn't escape... It was very painful."

"Shh... Shh... that's enough... enough... it's over... my doll... the most beautiful in the world... then he would come... coming repeatedly... I would scream inside... Shh... Shh... Don't tell anyone... alright? One day, I told my mother... I told her... and she said, 'Shh... Shh... don't tell anyone... alright?' So, I didn't tell anyone... After that, it all stopped. Still, he would come... bringing chocolates for me... even today, he comes... I sit in his lap... he shows me affection... I laugh... My doll... the most beautiful... a nine-year-old child... wow... filthy animals... scoundrels... etiquette... greet them... touch their feet... they are everywhere... you have to live among them... laugh... be friends... love them..."

The portrayal of child sexual abuse perpetrated by close relatives, acquaintances, and those whom the victim trusts the most is effectively depicted in this brief dialogue. The second part of the dialogue, which serves as a complement, is the final scene of the film. The situation is that Mahavir Bhati has also developed feelings for Veera and wants to set her free. However, Veera has fallen in love with him and wants to stay with him. When he tries to leave her, she tracks him down, and they then rent a house together. Veera is working inside the house while Mahavir Bhati is outside in the grassy field when she hears the sound of a gunshot. She sees that the police have surrounded Mahavir Bhati and have shot him.

Veera runs to save him like a mad woman. She screams at the police, hurls insults at them, and becomes distraught. Her father takes her home, where she receives treatment. One day, when her family members, her fiancé, and the uncle who abused her in childhood are all present at home, Veera descends from upstairs and joins them. Seeing her in better health, her parents are relieved, but she speaks intermittently in a dazed manner, saying: "I also cleaned

the house... then the gunshot went off. I used to say to them that I would run away from home... everyone says that, but who actually runs away? I wouldn't have left if Mahavir hadn't kidnapped me and taken me away... but now, it's too late... I am gone now. I can't come back."

"It's strange... I was kidnapped, but I was free there... and now I'm in jail here?"

Mother says, 'Veera, come on.'

Veera responds, 'Is this my home?'

Mother says, 'Yes.'

Veera then addresses the elderly man sitting in front of her, 'Shukla Tauji, didn't you bring chocolates today?'

Shukla, the elderly man, replies, 'I will give them to you later.'

Veera asks, 'Where... yes, where will you give them? Here or in the bathroom?'"

Mother, alarmed, tries to quiet Veera, but Veera says, "Yes, Mommy... Do you want to say something?"

Veera then looks at the elderly man named Shukla and says, "I can't remember... let me remind you... My doll... the most beautiful child in the world... Yes, I remember... You used to cover my mouth with your hands... so that my screams wouldn't escape... Oh... so I would scream... the screams that I made wouldn't get out... that's why you pressed my mouth hard... so, you know... the bathroom... turning on the tap repeatedly?"

Shukla, the elderly man, says, "She has gone mad."

Veera responds, "I used to scream... I would fall over... scream... but the scream was muffled by his hand over my mouth."

Shukla, panicked, says, "Ma'am... she was mad."

Veera shouts, "Shut... up... aaaaaa..."

Shukla, in a state of panic, quickly exits the room.

Veera says, "It's pathetic... this kind of thing happens... it keeps happening... so what? I'm not okay... This world is full of such things... I don't know anything? It's all confusion."

Father says, "Veera, you need to be sensible..."

Veera replies, "No... I'm stupid... I will remain stupid. Veera, when you go outside, be careful... There are very bad people outside... A girl should always remain a virgin... So why didn't you say that I need to be careful inside the house too... that I need to be cautious of you people as well... Why didn't you say that? Here, I was completely exposed... It was a home, right? So I'm not supposed to be sensible... I'm foolish... I'm bad... but I am not one of you."

The film concludes by conveying its message here. The Ministry of Women and Child Development of the Government of India conducted a study on crimes against children, and the report was released in 2007 under the title "Study of Child Abuse: India 2007." The report, based on research conducted by the RAHI Foundation, revealed that out of 2,211

children surveyed, 42% had been victims of sexual abuse. Among these, a majority of the abused children were from upper and middle classes, with very few from lower and lower-middle classes. The study found that 48% of the victims were boys and 39% were girls. Most instances of sexual abuse were committed by acquaintances, with very few cases involving strangers.

The study found that 31% of children were abused by their uncles or neighbours, 29% by their friends or classmates, 10% by their cousins, 9% by their employers, and 21% by strangers. It is noteworthy that 72% of the victims of sexual abuse kept it secret and did not report it. In the light of these facts, if this film inspires children and their guardians to stand up against sexual abuse and raises awareness to prevent such situations at home, it will be considered a success. The rules and institutions established in society are intended to curb human primal instincts. If these instincts are not regularly checked, the situation could become explosive. The film did not receive the encouragement it needed from the government, social workers, and women's organizations. Therefore, it is still crucial that it be discussed broadly, similar to how an epidemic is discussed. The proper approach would be to free such films from amusement tax, treat them as a source of creating social awareness and not mere entertainment.

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