

Sexual Harassment at the workplace - In Real Life, and in Reel

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Abstract- Some scars heal. Some never do. Harassment is one of the latter. No matter what you do, no matter where you go, the memories will haunt you forever. And so will the pain.

Call it gender bias, or simply over sightedness, the word 'harassment' has always been associated with an image of a woman undergoing torture at the hands of almost any section of society, family, in-laws, husband, boyfriend, colleagues and seniors at work, and the public at large.

Not for a moment does it appear to us that there could also be a man at the receiving end of harassment.

In this paper an attempt is made to bring to light the dark side of society, dark because no one expects it, no one speaks about it, no one writes about it. But it exists. And pretty rampantly at that. And this paper endeavours to bring to the forefront, the issue of harassment of men, specifically at work, with special focus on sexual harassment, and how realistic its depiction is on screen.

However, not many films have been made on this sensitive issue. Yet, there are still a few notable ones that are remarkably well made, and poignantly depict how the 'superior' sex too faces harassment, and the trauma it entails. Amongst them, one can immediately recall Fatal Attraction, where a married man gets harassed by a woman who is obsessed with him and tries to sabotage his marriage. But that's against a western setting. Back home in India, a similar issue has been highlighted pretty deftly in Inkaar and Aitraaz, and both were pretty successful.

This paper looks at the various aspects that lead to conditions wherein male employees are subject to harassment at work, and the portrayal of this predominant but barely highlighted social issue on reel.

Index Terms- Accuse, Harassment, Men, Pain, Workplace.

I. INTRODUCTION

On October 10, 2017, the very charismatic and popular Brooklyn Nine Nine star, Terry Crews, made an unexpected revelation that even his wife had had no knowledge about: he admitted to the world about allegedly being groped by a very well known and powerful Hollywood executive. His admission was the result of a fit of rage at the taunts and scepticism of certain people on knowing about sexual abuse against women in Hollywood.

People believed that women were coming out with their sordid tales only to gain their five minutes of fame.

And that is when Crews decided to come up and out with his story about a hotshot Hollywood party where he was groped by the powerful agency executive, William Morris Endeavor's Adam Venit. The latter had had the audacity to laugh when Crews protested. But the people at large sympathised with Crews, and many victims of sexual abuse in Hollywood felt a kind of solidarity with him. But there were also those few who said a guy as big as him and as well built, couldn't be sexually abused, due to his size and physique. How absurd could that be!

So you see, sexual harassment is not about women alone. Men suffer too. Especially rampant at the workplace, sexual harassment of men is a serious issue. Humiliated, violated, usually they prefer to keep it in the dark. For, men like Terry Crews are few.

II. RESEARCH AND IDEAS

If we look at the core of any harassment incident, the basic underlying emotion is that of power more than pleasure, especially in cases of sexual harassment. The tormentor is mostly a person in power with the belief that he/she can exercise this power on a subordinate or peer without much harm to self. This power provides a challenge and a thrill to the tormentor to check how far the boundaries could be pushed. In our society, males have been provided the role of a protector, which implies that the power balance is tilted heavily towards the "strong" gender. With such a pretext, it becomes very difficult to envisage a situation wherein this "strong" gender could be in a vulnerable position of harassment. Such a notion, provides further power to the perpetrator to indulge in the acts of sexual harassment in the workplace with complete knowledge that the incident will not be reported, and even if it is reported, will not be believed or pursued strongly. In many cases of such assault, the men feel a strong sense of inadequacy because they were not able to protect themselves in spite of being the "stronger" gender. Male harassment in the workplace could come from either of the gender.

The rules and definitions of sexual harassment at workplace is not very clear. These blurred lines make it difficult to report the

incidents of sexual harassments at workplace. The problem manifolds when the gender of the victim in concern is male. In a lot of workplaces, the idea of male harassment is not defined neither considered. Societal beliefs assume that any kind of sexual advances towards a male would mostly be welcomed and hence the concept of male victims of sexual harassment doesn't hold much ground. Further, it becomes little difficult for the males to prove cases of sexual harassment. Any complaint of such behavior, is also ridiculed in the office circuit among seniors and peers likewise which makes it much difficult for the males to deal with such assault. Workplace harassments adds another constraint to the situation wherein the male victim will have to face their perpetrator on a daily basis, which will make it difficult for the victim to deal with the situation.

Harassment in any form leaves a scar. In cases of sexual harassments, the scars are deeper. Male counterparts of sexual harassment struggle to even discuss cases of harassment due to the huge burden of being strong that they carry on their shoulders. The inability to report or discuss such incidents leaves a stronger dent in their emotional wellbeing, and sometimes even affects their physical wellbeing.

However, since time immemorial, the term sexual harassment tends to get associated with women. This harassment encompasses both personal and professional lives of women. However, it should not be misconstrued that men do not undergo any sort of harassment. The value system of the society may insinuate the absence of harassment on the family front. Surprisingly, innumerable instances point out molestation of men also at different ages by family members and acquaintances. It continues in school and college. It does not stop there. Harassment of men continues at workplace too. It can be meted out by the seniors, majorly, peers, business partners and even juniors; with the executioners being both men and women. Movies have been made based on real life cases, where women, in the garb of feminism, have created situations to abuse their male counterparts in front of an audience. The Hindi movie, *Aitraaz*, and the English movie, *Disclosure* were two such popular depictions of the extent to which a woman, with or without the help of other men, could go to, to love as well as harass the male peer.

Harassment can be dispensed in different ways. This has been aptly displayed in the movie *Aitraaz*. The movie is centred around a male, Raj Malhotra, and the extent of harassment he has undergone in his personal and professional life. It starts with his live-in relationship with a highly ambitious female, Sonia. The female bears his baby but refuses to marry him and give birth to their baby, as she feels this shall be an obstacle in her journey to fame, power and wealth. The heartbroken Raj takes much time to recoup from his trauma and tries his best to move on. He starts doing well professionally and also settles down on the personal front with Priya. He moves on to become the CEO of the Company and is liked by all in his office. Fate dishes out a cruel hand when one fine day he finds out that he has a new Chairperson to report to, who is none other than Sonia, married to the owner of the Company who is double her age. A marriage which is clearly not out of love but as a ladder for her to tread on her journey to fame. However, Sonia decides to add love to her life and tries to get Raj back into her life. Raj portrays a loyal and committed husband and this costs him his job and almost ruins

his married life. The movie shows the harassment he has to endure by Sonia, in public. He almost loses his job, but is supported by his wife who proves his innocence and exposes Sonia. Unlike most Indian movies which have reflected harassment of women, this movie has shown how vulnerable a man can be at the hands of a woman. *Aitraaz* breaks the typecast of a career oriented man who can go to any extent to attain whatever he wants. That a man can be actually vulnerable and helpless in situations, is very fittingly revealed in this film.

Sixty-three years back, Akira Kurosawa's ever-popular classic, *Rashomon*, distinctively highlighted that truth is slippery, subjective and ultimately unknowable. In Sudhir Mishra's *Inkaar*, we find a similar take on sexual politics in the workplace, through a fast-paced intriguing narrative that focusses on two highly ambitious and careerist professionals working in an advertisement agency. Maya, and Rahul, the two protagonists share an intimate moment, following which a dispute arises, with Rahul saying it was harmless flirtation, and Maya flinging an allegation of sexual harassment at him.

Flashbacks from both perspectives highlight the gradual progress of the relationship from mentor-protégé, to intimacy, to 'sexual harassment'. Politics, greed, insecurity – all come into play, with Rahul facing most of the brunt because he is male.

The Hollywood film *Disclosure* that inspired the Hindi *Inkaar*, offers a gripping storyline unfolding a similarly awkward situation, with a lover, Meredith, from long ago resurfacing, and getting the promotion the male protagonist, Tom, thought was his. What's worse, she becomes his boss, is drop-dead gorgeous, and is passionately interested to pick up right where he left off. It holds no significance to her that he's living a life of marital bliss and has not the slightest bit interested. She sets up a meeting for the end of the day, chills a bottle of his favourite wine, dismisses her secretary, and sets about seducing him with all her charms. Tom keeps refusing, forcefully, and repeatedly, and without ambiguity. But she just will not deter. She knows he wants it. He's a man, isn't he? But he does manage to escape, and unaware of what lies in wait for him, he arrives the next morning to find Meredith accusing him of sexual harassment.

What follows is a whooping satire on cut-throat corporate ambition, power and career advancement, and how sex, now that women have become major corporate players, can be used as a weapon for getting ahead.

Even a powerful movement like *Me Too* witnessed claims by women mostly. Well known personalities reported cases and most complainants were women. Very few personalities like Terry Crews and James Van Der Beek came up with their experiences. In fact, the *Me Too* movement became a voice for women, whether allegations were true or not, and the word "me" itself became gendered. Reported cases pertaining to women are much higher than those pertaining to men. Men show a much lesser inclination towards reporting cases of harassment. The reasons can be attributed to a fear of losing employment, fear of being talked about with sarcasm and ridicule, fear of their manhood being questioned, ego problems, embarrassment or even due to very less importance being accorded to such instances. Men also fear that the environment becomes hostile once they report such a case, thereby creating discomfort to perform as required. Of special mention is the belief of men that

such instances are less threatening to them than it is to women. It is also pertinent to mention here that sometimes, when professional stakes and risks are lower, men find it flattering when they are approached by the opposite gender and the behaviour gets converted into an accepted relationship.

Prevention of Sexual Harassment Act, popularly known as POSH was passed in 2013 and this Act originated from sexual harassment towards women. But over the years, POSH is also being used to deal with sexual harassment towards men and members from the LGBTQ community as well. In spite of this campaign, hardly any case has been registered by the male workforce. Moreover, in India, gender neutrality came much later as compared to other countries. This could be due to the stereotyped behaviour we have associated with different genders. We still associate the emotion of crying and suffering with women rather than men. Even today, amidst sexual harassment of men, Hindi movies like *Badrinath ki Dulhania* has amassed popular appeal and has been branded as a comedy. Male abuse has been showcased in this movie and this itself has made people laugh. The concept of male abuse is perceived and regarded with low levels of seriousness. The impact of the same has not been felt, in the absence of voice raised by men and in the absence of the voice raised by the society in response.

III. CONCLUSION

There has been in the last century and the present an outrage and men in high positions have been brought down and demeaned for so much as a single indulgence, case in point President Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky. History will reveal that even in the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, it was Sita and Draupadi who were the cause of much harassment to the men on both sides of the wars. Men have been harassed all along, whether it was Mark Antony on account of Cleopatra, or King Paris for Helen of Troy.

The lesser fortunate of the male species have had to succumb to demands of women at workplace at homes and other places of society. This harassment has hitherto always gone unnoticed because it was not macho or manly for a man to squeal on a woman.

Today the world is different. Gigolos find a place in society alongside their female counterparts. Women indulge in the carnal pleasure as equals. Homosexuals coming out of the closet is not uncommon. All this has resulted to demands being made on the man, both, at work, and out of it. Demands of the sexual kind are made, both, by men and women. Non fulfilling these demands can lead to blackmail or worse.

On July 3, 2019; the Indian Central Government firmly opposed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) asking for the laws pertaining to rape to be gender-neutralized. They did so keeping in mind that victims of sexual harassment in India are predominantly women, and the perpetrators mostly men. The laws framed by the Indian Constitution does not include anything specific for the harassed man. But the fact is, harassment is not limited to the women community. If men do not start reporting in a serious manner, there shall be increasing cases of silent mental health problems in men, which shall owe their existence to the gender itself.

Cinema has always been the reflection of society, as well as a responsible medium to guide the youth whose real life is much inspired sometimes by the reel. It is a fair task of the silver screen industry to dive a little deeper into this malaise of male sexual harassment, a fair portrayal will not only bring to surface a hitherto subject of shrouded silence, but also help in contributing to an aware society... A society that will, hopefully, in times to come, will come closer to, and eliminate the gender divide.

Finally, it has been an age-old dichotomy, the face that launched a thousand ships, the root cause of many a war, such as those in *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*, have portrayed women in a state of vulnerability, while simultaneously giving them power over the most powerful of men. The term, Sexual Harassment, is a woman's way of keeping women subjugated and termed as the weaker gender. And this in the backdrop of the adage, "Hell hath no fury as a woman scorned."

Let us rise to the occasion and create true gender equality.

Amen.

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