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## India – Rape and the Prevalent Culture of Silence in Indian Cinema and Television

Nidhi Shrivastava

Sacred Heart University, [shrivastavan@sacredheart.edu](mailto:shrivastavan@sacredheart.edu)

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## Chapter 7

# India – Rape and the Prevalent Culture of Silence in Indian Cinema and Television

*Nidhi Shrivastava*

### Abstract

In this chapter, I explore two media texts, Imtiaz Ali's *Highway* and Alankrita Shrivastava's Netflix original series *Bombay Begums* (2021). I contend that recent filmmakers have begun to arguably reframe the narratives of rape victim-survivors and disrupting the cultural of silence described above. They offer progressive and multi-faceted representations of these experiences, such that there is an opportunity for a dialogue within both private and public spheres. What I mean when I say that they are 'progressive representations' is that the rape victim-survivors are not merely reduced to helpless women in distress, nor painted as vengeful, aggressive characters. Instead, their characterisation shows that they have agency and autonomy, but at the same time struggle with the repercussions of speaking out against their perpetrators in a society that does not support them wholly.

*Keywords:* #MeToo movement; India; caste system; class; honour; silence

In a thought-provoking article, [Krupa Shandilya \(2015\)](#) calls attention to the construction of Jyoti Singh Pandey aka Nirbhaya, the victim of the 2012 Delhi rape case 'both as "everywoman" and as a middle-class, upper-caste, Hindu woman' (p. 465). She then furthers her argument that 'despite feminist interventions that call attention to the intersections of caste, class and gender, the bodies of lower-caste, lower-class, non-Hindu rural women are excluded from protest movements' (p. 406). For Shandilya, the reason for their exclusion is that 'mainstream Indian feminist demand for legal reform is premised on a normative subject – the Hindu, middle-class women. Subjects who fall outside this category

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Gender Violence, the Law, and Society, 131–141



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have struggled to navigate the structural inequalities of the legal system' (p. 466). According to her research, the media channels have reported rape cases all across the country but 'within a few days each specific case disappeared, only to be replaced by yet another story of sexual assault' (Shandilya, p. 479). Her study, thus, makes 'evident that none of these cases have captured the public imagination in the same way as the Nirbhaya rape case' (Shandilya, p. 479). Shandilya's study underscores that contemporary Indian rape culture rests on the intersection of caste, class, gender, honour and shame, but that mainstream movements and popular culture tend to exclude lower caste/class women and rape victim/survivors who exist on the margins. [Debolina Dutta and Oishik Sircar \(2013\)](#), in agreement with Shandilya, further observe, 'location and identity thus seem to be essential qualifiers in determining whose rape is worth being the subject of urban, middle-class concern and rage' (p. 298).

Shandilya, Dutta and Sircar convey the notion that rape discourses in the Indian public privilege certain narratives – such as the Nirbhaya gang-rape case – in the mainstream media and popular culture. While they are correct in pointing out that the narratives of rape survivor-victims who exist are silenced, I would further add that their analysis demonstrates that by the proliferation of the Nirbhaya rape case in the national and international mediascapes, there is a problematic circulation of the notion that rapists and perpetrators primarily belong to the downtrodden, economically disadvantaged and less educated classes. Here, we see the culture of silence manifest on mainstream media channels where urban, upper and middle-class rapists and paedophiles are protected from being held responsible for their crimes. This type of silence exists especially in private spheres; there is often no recognition or acknowledgement of the rape and/or sexual assault by the families of the rape victim-survivors, as if the crime never occurred at the first place. In turn, the rape victim-survivors are re-traumatised again after the incident. Often, family members persuade and coax them to remain quiet, and, if they choose to speak up, they blame them for bringing dishonour and shame to the family. Because of this, the perpetrator's crimes never come to the forefront and, thus, they are not held responsible for their crimes.

In this chapter, I contend that recently filmmakers have begun reframing the narratives of rape victim-survivors and disrupting the cultural of silence described above. They offer progressive and multi-faceted representations of these experiences, such that there is an opportunity for a dialogue within both private and public spheres. What I mean when I say that they are 'progressive representations' is that the rape victim-survivors are not merely reduced to helpless women in distress, nor painted as vengeful, aggressive characters. Instead, their characterisation shows that they have agency and autonomy, but at the same time struggle with the repercussions of speaking out against their perpetrators in a society that does not support them wholly. The two media texts I explore are Imtiaz Ali's *Highway* (2014) and Alankrita Shrivastava's Netflix original series *Bombay Begums* (2021).

There has been a noticeable shift in the way in which rape victim-survivors are represented in mainstream popular culture. In the 1970s and 1980s, rape victims were either depicted as archetypal poor, helpless, lower class women or as

vigilantes who sought violent revenge for their trauma (Gopalan, 2008; Karki, 2019; Viridi, 2003). These films also saw the creation of the main protagonist who was fighting the system (government, rich and corrupt landlords and bandits) for social justice and represented the ordinary/everyday man or woman. Pascal Zinck (2019) observes that such films are

located in remote rural areas governed by zamindar/thakur [Hindi: feudal landlords]. In these films, the message is to frame violence against women as a critique of patriarchy and feudalism versus modernity. The danger with this binary is to consciously or subconsciously manufacture a consensus in middle-class viewing audience that avoids antagonizing masculinity, and ultimately, *exonerates urban sex abusers*

(p. 273; emphasis added).

In the two media texts that I examine in this chapter, we see that the filmmakers focus on the figure of the urban rapist and perpetrator and shifts away from the common representation of gender-based violence as an issue that is faced by people who exist on society's margins. By doing this, both Shrivastava's and Ali's messages remain that child sexual abuse and gender-based violence are not relegated to the poor, lower class parts of the society. Rather, they take place in both the public and private spheres of the elite and upper middle classes. At the same time, both filmmakers also re-imagine the rape victim-survivor, who is characterised with complexities and nuance as she confronts the perpetrator in both media texts. It is apparent that these filmmakers are trying to shift the conversation to draw attention to the culture of silence surrounding rape and gender-based violence that exists within the upper and upper-middle class spheres. While the filmmakers do not elide the viewers from the violence that women from lower-class experience and encounter, they are not afraid to show that upper-caste/class men are equally responsible but are often able to escape conviction or recognition of their crime because of the culture of silence that protects them.

### **Re-imagining the Vengeful Rape Victim-Survivor: Imtiaz Ali's *Highway***

Imtiaz Ali's *Highway* paints a multi-layered picture of rape victim-survivors. The film begins with Veera Tripathi (Alia Bhatt), a rich tycoon's daughter, meeting secretly with her fiancée to escape the ongoing wedding celebrations in her home. They drive too far and bear witness to a robbery. In a frenzy, the criminals kidnap her and take her with them to the crevices of India's poor neighbourhoods. His fellow criminals reprimand the kidnapper – Mahabir (Randeep Hooda) – for abducting Veera, and fear reprisal from her wealthy family. Mahabir is an angry and frustrated man, tired of the atrocities he had to face because he belongs to the lower class in India. He sees Tripathi as a consignment – a method by which he

can make the rich class suffer. As their relationship develops, he reminds her that he is a man with a criminal past who has committed three murders and is on the run. Although initially Veera makes desperate attempts to escape from Mahabir's grip and is accosted sexually by one of the kidnappers in his group, we see a strong bond develop between Mahabir and Veera as the plot thickens. Towards the end of the film, Veera and Mahabir escape the society that has caused them trauma and grief and create a utopic home for themselves in the mountains. Their happiness is short-lived as the police team is able to locate Veera and shoot Mahabir on the spot. He is declared dead upon arrival at the police hospital. Veera, in a shock, begs her family members to allow her to see Mahabir but she is given a tranquilizer and brought back to Delhi to recover.

At the heart of this powerful film is a very sensitive issue that many people fear to speak about. Unfortunately, rape and sexual abuse of young children are unspoken commonalities in India. No one speaks about them publicly because it can tarnish reputation and honour of families. The perpetrators are not held accountable for their criminal offense and in order to protect the honour of families rich or poor, women and men grow up traumatised, unable to comprehend the contradictions that are before them. Both Veera's and Mahabir's mothers are victims of such a society. Veera's uncle and family friend had raped Veera since the age of nine, luring her with chocolates and gifts. Her own mother stops her from speaking the truth and forces her into behaving as if everything is normal. Mahabir, on the other hand, bears witness to his mother's abuse when she is prostituted by his own father to cater to the needs of rich men. While we hear of Mahabir's upbringing and his mother's sexual abuse, we do not hear from her and can only access her through Mahabir's memories.

The film alludes to a glaring issue that rarely gets taken up in the socio-political fabric of India: it suggests that rape and sexual abuse over-rides class complexities within India because women and young girls are subjected to it *regardless* of their class status. Perhaps the most powerful moment in the film is when Veera confronts her family. She says, 'growing up, you told me to be careful of strangers outside our home but you never told me that I should be careful inside my home too' (Ali & Nadiadwala, 2014, 1:58:56–1:59:31). This is a defining moment because Veera's confrontation takes place within the home when her family is re-introducing her to her fiancée in the hope that she will marry him regardless of the trauma that she experienced. At that moment, she realises that her perpetrator, Shukla Uncle, is also in the same room. She is not afraid to speak of the abuse she suffered by his hand as a child and shares with her entire family and friends that he used to rape and molest her by tempting her with imported chocolates. When her rapist is put on the spot, he calls her crazy and flees from the house. The most touching moment is when she screams in pain as her childhood trauma manifests and breaks the silence that she is encountered all her life. Yet, her family is shown to be lost and confused – unable to handle the truth that she has confronted them with. This is a significant moment because it shows that due to the culture of silence within the upper classes, there is ambivalence and confusion about how to confront this sensitive subject matter. Eventually, Veera shares her decision to leave her family and start a new life working a regular job

and leading an independent life where she, rather than her family or society, dictates the course of her life.

This is a significant shift in the representation of rape victim-survivors who, in the 1980s, belonged to the tradition of avenging women genre in Bollywood. The films *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* and *Pink*, which I discussed at length in the chapter on law, still explore the figure of the avenging rape victim-survivor. [Isha Karki \(2019\)](#) rightfully points out that although the rape-revenge device ‘provided actresses with dominant roles’ (p. 91), at the same time, ‘a world of female agency was imagined where women became powerful, and utilised what is coded as masculine power, because of their violent initiation into victimhood – and even then, their rage had to be justified by their identity as a “good victim”’ (p. 91). Unlike in the earlier films, *Highway* approaches the concept of rape revenge in a different manner. Rather than physically attacking or killing him, Veera shames and confronts her perpetrator in front of her family members, her fiancée and his family. Given the taboo and cultural silencing that exists within the Indian society, this is the first time we see that the rape survivor-victim is demanding justice vis-à-vis a conversation with her family members and relatives who have been quiet throughout the sexual abuse she suffered as a child. As mentioned earlier, Uncle Shukla quickly removes himself from the scene and disappears from the narrative so that as audiences, we do not know if he was punished for his pedophilic and criminal behavior. Interestingly, the film received mixed reviews from critics. [Anupama Chopra \(2014\)](#), for example only gave it a 2 and half stars and called it a ‘problematic film’ that left her ‘dissatisfied’ in her review. For Chopra, while the narratives of the ‘damaged’ characters is compelling, she fears that the film promotes the idea that ‘kidnapping is therapy’. [Ronnie Schieb \(2014\)](#), on the other hand writes, ‘abduction paradoxically results in liberation for both the sheltered daughter of an industrialist and her hardened criminal...’ but he is more optimistic and suggests that the film ‘should score with Indian aud [iences] globally, with arthouse cover as a distinct possibility’. From their reviews, it is apparent that the theme of kidnapping and abduction superseded the characterisation of both Veera and Mahabir. However, I do not agree with Chopra shows that kidnapping is an acceptable form of therapy – rather the abduction transforms both the characters and forces them to reflect on their respective lives. While Veera recognises that she does not want to depend on the wealth of her family members and wants to become autonomous, Mahabir softens and confronts his own demons that were caused by his father’s horrifying actions.

*Highway*, therefore, portrays the rape survivor-victim as demanding justice by confronting her perpetrator in front of her family and even questioning her mother for silencing her. Veera’s depiction is unlike other rape survivor-victims, who sought legal action and had no choice but to take the legal justice on their hands, as can be seen in films like *Insaaf ka Tarazu*. Rather, here, Veera is facing a situation that would have left her ostracised from her family members and brought shame to them. Instead, the film encourages rape survivor-victims to speak up and even confront family members who may have protected their rapists. Although a mainstream film, *Ali* speaks to a very current social issue that needs our attention. Honour and reputation are used as tools to silence voices of

the innocent boys and girls who grow up in traumatic situations, not only as street kids who witness atrocities but also in the luxurious homes of the rich where sexual abuse and rape are kept under the rug to prevent shame and recognition of their trauma.

### **#MeToo, Politics of Choice and Subjectivity in Alankrita Shrivastava's *Bombay Begums* (2021)**

In the last decade, feminist filmmakers such as Alankrita Shrivastava, Anvita Dutt, Reema Kagti and Zoya Akhtar have produced and released movies like *Made in Heaven* (2019), *Bulbul* (2020) and, most recently, *Bombay Begums* (2021). Sharma and Sharma refers to the filmmakers who made the film *Bulbul*. These filmmakers and directors use the web-streaming platforms Amazon Prime and Netflix to represent social issues such as male rape and homosexuality in *Made in Heaven* and a re-telling of the *chudail* (female demon) myth – calling attention to sexual violence and child marriages in the colonial Bengal during the British Raj – in *Bulbul*. *Bulbul*, the main protagonist of the latter movie, is transformed into a demon after her brutal rape, then returns to her village to murder and kill the perpetrator to demand justice and better treatment for women. It is clear that Bollywood is moving towards a new direction with these recent feminist filmmakers who are not bound by the same censorship regulations as filmmakers in the earlier decades. Furthermore, these shows are not limited to primarily Indian audiences but make the stories accessible to audiences worldwide.

Released in March 2021, Alankrita Shrivastava's *Bombay Begums* focuses on the #MeToo movement and centers around narratives of ambitious women who have different struggles and desires as they come together to work at Royal Bank of Bombay. The television series is centered on Rani (Pooja Bhatt) who is the CEO of the Royal Bank. She is married to Naushad Irani and stepmother to the series' narrator, Shai (Aadhya Anand). The women in this show belong to various classes, including Lily (Amruta Subhash), a prostitute who desires a better life for herself and her son. We also meet Ayesha (Plabita Borthakur) who has moved from a small town to Bombay to pursue her dreams; as well as her boss Fatima (Shahana Goswami), who struggles with infertility, IVF, marriage and career ambitions. Although the television series deals with relevant issues such as bisexuality, stigma of menstruation and realisation of womanhood, it is an incident of workplace sexual violence and harassment between Ayesha and her boss, Deepak Sanghvi (Manish Choudhary), that brings these women together. Deepak has a fierce competition with Rani and wants to become the bank's next CEO. His family is also close to Fatima and her husband. These web of relationships also further complicate the events as they unfold when the issue of sexual violence and harassment come to light. The television web series also demonstrates how female friendships are tested when the issue of sexual abuse becomes apparent in a work place.

As audiences, we meet Ayesha when she is fired by Fatima in the first episode, after she miscalculates numbers that hinder Fatima's meeting with foreign clients. From a small town, Ayesha is a young, determined and enthusiastic career girl

who wants to make it in the finance industry in Bombay – a cosmopolitan city akin to New York and London. The city culture does not favour single women living by themselves, best illustrated by her experiences living as a paying guest in a small home. After she is fired, she smokes and drinks to grieve and make sense of her job loss. Her landlady angrily throws her out of her home in the middle of night. Forced to find a place, Ayesha seeks shelter in her former office. In the morning, she encounters Rani in the bathroom. Being reminded of her earlier days in the city, Rani takes pity and re-hires Ayesha. She is put on a project to help create a scheme to help women like Lily, the sex worker, have a financially stable life and helps Lily realise her dream of opening a factory. Although Ayesha is initially happy with her job, she dreams of working with her mentor, Deepak Sanghvi.

When she meets Deepak at office party, she shares her desire to be mentored by him. Initially, he does not take her seriously, observes that she is drinking champagne, and treats her like any other colleague. As the series continues, Deepak and Ayesha encounter each other again at another party. This time, Ayesha once again drinks and accepts the offer from Deepak to drop her off at her place of stay (her colleague Ron's place, where she is temporarily staying). When they are in the car, Deepak takes advantage of the situation and starts to touch her inappropriately. Lily, who by coincidence walks by, recognises Ayesha and witnesses the entire incident take place. At this time, for the audience, the extent of sexual violence that has occurred between them is unclear. We see Ayesha shakily coming out of the car. The next day Lily reports of the incident she witnessed but Ayesha denies any wrongdoing and tries her best to move on so as to not destroy her chances of moving up in the company. As she remains quiet about the events, Fatima suspects that Ayesha was having an affair with Deepak and shames every time she sees her. Then, Ayesha is notified that Deepak has asked for her to be transferred into his department. Shocked and uneasy about her job placement, she reaches out to the HR to withdraw her application, but the HR officer in charge is surprised and questions her decision. Ultimately, after another meeting with Deepak when she is out on a smoke with him, she is unable to keep the trauma in. In a panic, she runs into the bathroom where she hastily tears the sexual harassment posters and finally goes on a website where she reports the incident. To her surprise, another anonymous woman reaches out to her and validates her experience with Deepak. Being aware that Lily is her only witness, she gains courage to file a formal report in her company against Deepak. Fatima is still in denial about the incident, knowing Deepak and his family intimately, and shows reluctance to believe Ayesha.

In episode five, titled 'The Golden Notebook', Ayesha files the report, causing the floodgates of investigation to open and transforming the relationships that were already fragile. In her testimony to her colleagues, she reveals that Deepak has forced her to perform oral sex on him and says that she had no choice but to give into Deepak's demands. She informs that she had resisted but it had been no avail: 'I was scared of upsetting him. I was scared of what else he might do. I just wanted it to be over' (Shrivastava, 2021, 10:29–11:01). Fatima and Rani deal with Ayesha's testimony in strongly diverging ways. Fatima behaves in a passive-aggressive manner, questioning Ayesha's motives and character for not



coming forth earlier. In a conversation with Rani (who is insisting on following due process), Fatima shares her doubts that Deepak could be a sexual predator (Shrivastava, 2021, 12:14–12:16). In fact, she then starts to doubt Ayesha and accuses her of changing her story, saying that everyone’s life is at stake (Shrivastava, 2021, 12:41–13:29). Rani, on the other hand, faces pressure from the board committee members who want the issue to disappear. They see the entire situation as a PR disaster and want Deepak’s position to be restored. It is clear that the upper echelons of the bank do not consider Ayesha’s case a significant issue but merely a case of reputation. Initially, Rani tries to coax Ayesha to retract her case, even asking Ayesha to move on and threatening her job for speaking up. Deepak’s wife, Nalini, also harasses and tries to silence her in this episode. Ultimately, however, in the final episode we see that Rani reckons with her own experience of sexual harassment and pressures she faced from her own mentor when she shares her experience publicly at the end of the series. When Deepak’s crimes come to light, he is arrested and taken to the police station, where he is shown finding ways to reveal secrets about Rani’s past. Like *Highway*, this web series too highlights the privilege that upper-class perpetrators have. The protection they receive from their families and peers makes it extremely difficult for rape victim-survivors to fight for justice. However, unlike Uncle Shukla whose narrative fades at the end of the film, we witness Deepak’s arrest before our eyes.

In the final episode titled ‘A Room of One’s Own’ (the feminist filmmaker’s nod to Virginia Woolf), the private space – which is usually where a woman’s traumatic sexual experiences are silenced – transforms into a space where a mother shares her experiences of sexual assault and rape with her step daughter. Once again, we see filmmaker’s refreshing approach to this salient issue. In this pivotal scene, Rani openly asks Shai to share it with her if boys at a party had touched her inappropriately. She then emphasises that her daughter must share it with her if she ever faces such a situation (Shrivastava, 2021, 33:04–33:21). Then, we see a rare scene in which Rani opens up about her own sexual assault and expresses her regret for not opening up and sharing this with anyone sooner due to shame. Rani says,

I had just joined JDR bank. I was relatively new in Bombay. My boss – he expected me to spend time with him after work...and then he started touching me. When it happened the first time, I was really confused. I was really scared but I thought maybe that’s just the way it is. I wanted success at any cost. No matter what. So, I kept shut. Just...But, then it didn’t stop. It just went on and on and on. My husband thought I was having an affair with him. I just let him think that way. It was horrible, Shai. I can still feel his breath on my face. I can still feel him inside me. There is not a single day when that nightmare doesn’t come back to haunt me!

(Shrivastava, 2021, 35:38–38:00)

In this pivotal scene, we see a strong bond that develops between Rani and Shai. This is also the first time that a filmmaker has shown a mother not silencing

her daughter, but encouraging her to talk about an issue that is typically considered tabooed. In *Highway*, for example when Veera was facing her perpetrator, her mother had attempted to shush her. But here, the filmmaker draws attention to the private space, showing that rape victim-survivors need to have the support of family members and loved ones rather than face the trauma by themselves. Once again, unlike the typical rape-revenge devices that have been used previously, here again the rape victim faces the society and her perpetrator.

While the television web series focusses primarily on the narratives of elite and upper/middle class men and women, Lily's narrative also deserves equal attention. Unlike the similar character in *Highway* – Mahabir's mother, whose trauma is shared through her son, and who herself is never seen or heard throughout the film – Lily is assertive, ambitious, a business owner and strives for a better future for her and her son. However, throughout the web series, she meets with obstacles that prevent her moving up on the social ladder. When Ayesha finds comfort with Lily after her traumatic experience, and says that they are both alike, Lily reminds her of a reality: 'you have a choice... I don't have the privilege. My destiny forbids it' (Shrivastava, 2021, 26:53–27:18). Initially, Lily who is the sole witness to Ayesha's traumatic experience of sexual assault, agrees to testify against the perpetrator to protect Ayesha. However, she changes her mind when the company offers her a chance to open a business. When Ayesha confronts her, Lily explains that for her survival supersedes the notion of social justice. In the wake of the #MeToo movement, *Bombay Begums* starts a crucial conversation: who can speak up against the perpetrators? Who is able to make themselves vulnerable? Who has access to resources and privilege to speak out? Whose story can be recognised in the public spheres?

This show was also well-received by audiences. Shubra Gupta (2021) writes, for instance, that 'Alankrita Shrivastava has been consistently pushing boundaries with her portrayal of women's sexuality... Flawed, real, hurting, laughing women who make you stay with them, and root for them'. V.S. Arvind (2021) calls the series 'a step in the right direction. Despite the flawed nature in which its story is presented the series has its heart in the right place and its representation of women is something new, even radical by Indian standards'. Ultimately, the show suggests that the rape victim-survivors – Ayesha, Lily and Rani – are complex and flawed characters. Because of this, the filmmaker shows that the big social changes necessary to subvert the structures that enable wide-spread sexual assault to persevere in a society like India are not easy to produce because of the repercussions that the rape victim-survivors face. Sometimes, despite being victims of sexual assault themselves, they are pressured into silencing others who may have suffered as well, because of career and societal expectations.

## Conclusion

Although there has been a noticeable shift in the way in which rape victim-survivors are portrayed in both Hindi commercial films and television web series, I do want to underscore that these visions by the filmmakers are equally a

desire for a change that these filmmakers *want to see* in the society and arguably represent a utopic vision of what the outcome of the #MeToo movement would look like if it worked in the favour of the rape victim-survivor. Yet, at the same time, both Ali and Shrivastava should also be recognised for trying to start a dialogue with their show and film. This is an important effort to break the culture of silence (which continues to remain pertinent).

We also see that the filmmakers are no longer constructing a one-dimensional, helpless, rape victim-survivor who is unable to take charge of her situation. Rather, the rape victim-survivors are complex, multi-faceted women who are asserting their choices – Veera confronts her rapists and shames him in front of his entire family; Ayesha files charges against a man whom she considered her mentor; and Lily, who witnesses Ayesha's sexual assault, chooses to speak up against the crime but retracts it later.

Finally, both *Highway* and *Bombay Begums* represent the rapists/perpetrators as upper/middle class men who are of privilege and usually shielded from the crimes that they have committed. This is an important decision made by both filmmakers to go against the traditional representations of rapists as men who belong to the lower class. Their cinematic and television representations *shift* the conversation away from the perpetrators who belong to lower class/caste in the mainstream discourse, which continues to silence women who have been sexually assaulted and raped by upper-class men. To sum up, it is important to recognise the power and value of these media texts and the resulting conversations they create.

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