

Heaven On Earth

A Study Guide

WARNING: This film contains scenes of abuse, which may be disturbing and shocking to some viewers. Those presenting the film should be mindful of this warning and ready to deal with questions from viewers as well as reactions ranging from indifference and shock to upset and hope.

The Film

In *Heaven on Earth*, acclaimed director Deepa Mehta highlights the isolation and disappointment faced by a family of Punjabi immigrants to Canada. When Chand (played by Bollywood superstar Preity Zinta) arrives in Brampton, Ontario, to meet her new husband, she leaves behind a loving family and supportive community. Now, in a new country, she finds herself living in a modest suburban home with seven other people and two part-time tenants. Inside the home, she is at the mercy of her husband's temper, and her mother-in-law's controlling behavior. After a magic root fails to transform her husband into a kind and loving man, Chand takes refuge in a familiar Indian folk tale featuring a King Cobra. – National Film Board of Canada

Preamble

In our multicultural society, ethnic groups in Canada are heterogeneous. Yet while immigrants' experiences are varied, some of the struggles they face touch a cross section of society. In this film, we get valuable insights into the real experiences one woman faces at the hands of her abusive husband. We witness her dream of a better life and happy marriage turn into a nightmare. In this lead character Chand, we also see tremendous strength and the important roles both mythology and the imagination play in helping her to cope with abuse.

Who can use the study guide?

This study guide is intended for educators teaching students age 13+, service providers, agencies and families dealing with immigrant and women's issues. It should empower women and men facing similar situations. It assists in raising sensitive questions about diversity, relationships and domestic violence to explore how they are shaped by individual and larger historical/societal/political issues. It is not intended to focus solely on one culture, thus eliminating the risk of feeding into negative stereotypes. The study guide can be integrated into the classroom in a number of ways and is not limited to any one subject. It can be incorporated into English classes focusing on mythology, Social Studies classes focusing on societal/cultural issues, Family or Gender Studies classes looking at relationship issues, and History and Culture classes looking at the importance of folk stories throughout history and their impact.

The guide is divided into sections with discussion questions and group activities, allowing individuals to contribute. The format is designed to be interactive.

The film (DVD) is 104 minutes 55 seconds in length; it can be integrated in the class as a unit, or over a 1–2 week period – with a new section being focused on each day. The sections and subsequent large group discussions would be ideal for short essay-type questions on a test or exam.

Pre-Screening Discussion

Before showing the film, prepare the viewers with these questions:

What are common experiences for new immigrants to Canada?

Do you know anyone who has recently moved to Canada? What issues have they faced?

What profile comes to mind when you think of immigrant families? (Think about gender, age, social class, ethnicity and family structure, i.e. nuclear and extended.)

What has influenced and shaped your views about immigrants? Consider media, family, peers, etc.

How could one's culture be a source of strength?

What are common characteristics of "dysfunctional" non-immigrant families in Canada? What social issues do they experience?

How to Use this Study Guide

The guide is organized into two sections:

Section 1 contains three main themes: Domestic Abuse, Immigration, and Mythology and Empowerment.

Section 2 contains discussion questions and solution-focused group activities.

SECTION 1:

DOMESTIC ABUSE

Domestic violence crosses all cultural and socio-economic groups. This film offers us a rare glimpse of some of the root causes that can trigger violent outbursts and how they intersect with stress caused by economic hardship, gender-role pressure, overcrowding, issues of family honour and attitudes towards violence within the family. Focus on these issues is paramount and should provide students with a better understanding of the root causes of domestic violence.

Patriarchy

How does patriarchy – a society in which men dominate women, justified by the ideology of sexism – play a role in legitimizing violence against women?

How does sexism legitimate perceptions and beliefs about gender in the film? The issue of power is relevant in examining spousal abuse, and, according to some research findings, abusers abuse because they can (without sanction).

What are some of the attitudes in the film about gender role expectation? Give examples. How did you feel when you saw these attitudes displayed?

Did you identify with the segregation of roles? Were you taken aback?

To what extent do the examples reflect male privilege in the home?

Examples:

- Chand is expected to serve drinks to Rocky the first night she arrives from India. She must make proper roti shells and cook regardless of how tired she is.
- Rocky's sister, who works all day in a factory, prepares and serves him dinner, and passes him a towel to dry his hands (even though the towel is near him).

Family

The family plays an important role in enabling the victim to seek help. This is especially true when victims are new immigrants and do not know the laws of the land or the resources available to them. The film offers many examples of how the family was complicit in Rocky's abuse of Chand.

Examples

- "In our community we deal with problems in house," says Chand's sister-in-law to Chand and others working in the factory.
- When Chand makes an odd shaped roti shell she is scolded by her mother in law. Out of frustration, Chand pushes her mother-in-law who falls to the ground. In response to this, Rocky, says to his mother: "Take a rolling pin and break her legs." Rocky's mother replies, "She's your wife!"

How does preserving family honour play a role in sustaining spousal abuse and why is it kept silent?

What factors discourage Chand from disclosing her situation to others?

What might she fear? Consider the possible fear of the police, retaliation by her family, her employer or the government.

How might Rocky be feeling trapped in his position to uphold prescriptions of masculinity imposed by his family?

Discuss and illustrate how Chand bears the brunt of Rocky's frustrations.

Do you think Rocky was obligated or pressured to beat his wife to preserve his mother's self respect and honour?

The film points out a number of stressors that compound abuse. These include, but are not limited to, low family income, overcrowding, dysfunctional dynamics, financial pressure, lack of privacy, assigned roles and obligations, and attitudes towards violence. How do these factors increase stress and impact relationships?

Why is Chand's economic contribution not recognized?

Discuss how economic violence plays an important role in Chand's abuse.

Rocky physically assaults Chand and threatens other members of his family. Why does he not act against them in the same way?

After Rocky hits Chand on their honeymoon, his mother states that abuse in marriage is “normal.” What are the implications of this type of attitude?

To what extent does Chand learn to deal with this treatment? Does she accept it as normal?

How has abusing his wife affected Rocky? How does he react and feel after abusing Chand? Consider scenes in which his bad temper is triggered.

How does abuse affect Chand both physically and psychologically?

Consider how the film depicts the “mental landscape” of Chand and the function of her imagination and mythology as a means of survival. How does this help her function and cope with her situation? Discuss the scene in which Rocky mirrors a cobra and how this act interfaces with her real world.

How is Chand’s nephew affected by the violence? In one scene he helps Chand walk to her room after she has been physically assaulted, then pushes her and leaves. Consider the issue of devaluing women, and Rocky’s view of Chand as a burden. How might Chand’s nephew internalize similar attitudes towards women?

Chand’s niece witnesses Chand being abused on several occasions. She cries once upon seeing the abuse, and her grandmother says, “The girl is always crying.” How has the girl been affected by witnessing the violence? How could this affect her later on in life?

How can some of these examples illustrate an intergenerational transmission of violence where kids learn from the behaviour of their family and perpetuate a cycle of violence? A focus on this question will help us to understand why violence continues over generations and will motivate people to break the cycle.

IMMIGRATION

How is Chand’s social class affected by her immigration status? What has changed for her?

Examples:

- In India, Chand had her own bedroom and a better chance of getting a job linked to her qualifications.

In the film we see the hardships and struggles that some immigrant families face in trying to make ends meet, but we must be careful not to generalize the adverse effects of economic hardships to all families. What sacrifices due to economic struggles are depicted in the film?

Overcrowding is a common living condition experienced by new immigrant families and low-income families. The implications of overcrowding include insufficient space for couples to grow and forge intimate bonds; a lack of privacy for newly married couples and no private space for students to do homework in.

Examples:

- Chand's niece is moved to another room when her parents want to be intimate.
- In the bathroom, Chand turns on the water tap so no one hears her.
- Rocky announces that Chand's brother's immigration papers went through and that he will be arriving from India.
- How does his nephew react and why? What does this illustrate?

Isolation and Loneliness

Feeling isolated and alone is a common experience for some new immigrants who have left behind their homeland and families. Provide examples from the film that reveal Chand's loneliness and how much she misses her loving family. How is she deprived of social intercourse? Why? How is the abuse she experiences intensified by loneliness? You may choose to expand the focus to women living in isolated communities or to women who are feeling isolated and alone.

Examples:

- Throughout the film Chand asks her husband "Can I call home?"
- Chand makes several unsuccessful attempts to call home from work.
- The statement "The boat can't take you home."
- Chand writes "India" on a bathroom wall.
- Chand's family targets her friend Rosa with racist put-downs.
- The use of black and white photography to convey mood.

Cultural Identity and Racism

Canada is a multicultural society where individuals have the freedom to express their cultural identity. Although some youth enjoy participating in several "worlds," other young people struggle and find themselves trapped in a double life of tradition and Western values. This juggling act may result in feelings of alienation due to a disconnect between themselves, their parents and society at large.

How can this be understood from the perspective of the two young kids in the film?
How has this affected Rocky?

Examples:

- Consider the scene in which they are shopping, and a youth butts in line. What does Rocky's reaction to the youth reveal?

MYTHOLOGY AND EMPOWERMENT

The film exposes how psychological and emotional abuse can destroy the human spirit. Yet it demonstrates the profound power of the imagination to construct what we desire to overcome challenges. Imagination and mythology can liberate us. Chand creatively finds a way out through life-affirming cultural traditions and knowledge, and strength passed on from her mother, ancestors and homeland. The cobra myth that helped save her is a valuable heritage from her community.

Consider the following questions: What coping mechanisms did Chand resort to in order to deal with her harrowing life? In the film there are several examples to illustrate alternative narratives of what is real and what is imaginary. How does the power of the imagination help Chand endure the reality of a shattered dream, live in a dysfunctional family and withstand abuse?

Very early in the film Chand has a discussion with her mother about a cobra. What role does that play in her ability to withstand the abuse? Why is it important for Chand's mother to know that Chand understood the lesson of the cobra myth? What are some of the foundational pieces that are passed on through mythology in the film?

Examine the meanings and function of Chand's imagination and fantasy world. Consider the following questions to guide your discussion:

What do Chand's fantasies reveal about the psychological effects of abuse? Can Chand distinguish reality from fantasy? Discuss the outcomes of this with reference to scenes from the film. How does Chand find love? What role does Rosa play in helping Chand empower herself? What message did you get from the ending of the film? Consider the theme of empowerment.

Examples:

- Chand's statement "Can our desires be so powerful that they take on human form and walk right into our lives?"
- After being assaulted, Chand says, "Please take me to the land where my mother waits for me."
- The cobra says "Tell me everything about yourself."

Debunking and Deconstructing Stereotypes about Immigrant Families:

A stereotype can be defined as a generalization made about a particular group of people. How can stereotypes of immigrant families negatively influence perceptions, attitudes and behaviour towards certain ethnic groups or families? What are some of the real consequences?

Do you have a different understanding of the challenges some immigrant families face and underlying causes of their struggles after having viewed this film?

Why is it important not to generalize spousal abuse to a particular ethnic group, in this case, to South Asian families? Some academics have pointed out that it is a "culture of

patriarchy” that is the root cause of violence against women rather than “culture” itself. Discuss this viewpoint.

How can the case of spousal abuse in the film relate to a new immigrant of a different “ethnic” background? What is the importance of this, given the message of the film that these issues transcend “all” ethnic groups?

Section 2 Questions and Solution-Focused Activities

QUESTIONS

Educators, service providers and parents can use the following questions to generate discussion:

How could relationships between mothers, fathers and children in the film be improved?

How is Chand’s relationship with her mother connected to the cobra and safety?

What is Rosa’s role in the film? Discuss similarities between Chand and Rosa.

Why do you think men abuse women?

Why do women stay in abusive relationships?

How do gender stereotypes make women more likely to be targets of violence?

What are the signs of abuse? Define a healthy relationship.

What are the consequences of woman abuse?

What can you do if you or someone you know is being abused?

What laws are in place to protect victims of violence?

How can exposing the real experiences and struggles that some new immigrant families may face be part of the solution?

What message do you get from the film about the theme of living conditions and well-being?

What important conditions do people generally need to develop as healthy human beings? What should parents do? What can husbands do? What role can institutions play?

Define folktale. List as many folktales as you can with a partner. Describe the positive effects they can have.

ROLE PLAY

In groups of 3–5, do the following road map exercise:

Draw Chand at the center of a page and illustrate the roadblocks she faced in stopping the abuse or leaving the abusive situation.

Draw her strengths or areas in which she is empowered to deal with the abuse.

Draw the various community resources that can help her to overcome roadblocks.

GROUP ACTIVITIES

Divide students into groups of 4–5 and assign each group one of the following topics:

Identify the link between three root causes and domestic violence. Then propose some strategies through the lens of an educational institution, parent, service provider, child, abuser or woman who is being abused.

What do you think parents and schools can do to assist children raised in homes similar to the one depicted in the film? What resources should be made available to help them cope? Where can individuals go for help?

Consider this quote: “When you are a spectator, you are part of the problem.” What can you do to become part of the solution?

How can exposing the consequences of spousal abuse, which often occurs behind closed doors, be part of the solution? How can the film function as a catalyst to spark dialogue?

Points to consider in the discussion of solutions:

- Culturally sensitive services.
- Bridging the generation gap.
- The impacts of “gendered restrictions.”
- Links between diminished self-esteem and abuse.
- Empowerment models and techniques.
- Knowledge translation: being creative in for the dissemination of information about domestic abuse, for examples using film, theatre, art etc.
- Greater collaboration with community and educational institutions.
- Diverse models and services for dysfunctional families and some diasporic issues.