

A Literary and Psychological Study of Saurabh Mukherjee's: The Highway Murders

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ABSTRACT

Saurabh Mukherjee's "The Highway Murders" deftly transcends the boundaries of traditional crime thrillers, masterfully intertwining psychological realism, incisive social commentary, and groundbreaking genre elements. This paper examines the complex psychological profiles of the characters, particularly the killer, and the symbolic importance of the highway as a liminal space. It also critiques institutional failures, such as those found within the police and media, while situating the novel within the broader context of Indian English literature. Using a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates trauma studies, postmodern narrative theory, and criminological psychology, this study asserts that "The Highway Murders" is not merely a genre novel but a significant literary work that reflects contemporary Indian realities. The novel stands out in the Indian thriller genre for its psychological depth and social realism. This paper explores the narrative structure, thematic richness, and character development, demonstrating how Mukherjee redefines genre fiction in the Indian context. Through a close reading, the study investigates how Mukherjee portrays societal trauma, institutional failure, and the complexities of justice through the motif of a serial killer on Indian highways.

Keywords: Indian Thriller Fiction, Psychological Trauma, Highway Symbolism, Serial Killers in Literature, Postmodern Crime Narrative, Contemporary Indian Fiction

INTRODUCTION

Saurabh Mukherjee's "The Highway Murders" (2023) masterfully weaves together two compelling narratives: one that delves into the chilling realm of crime and another that embarks on the relentless pursuit of justice. The story of the crime, steeped in the shadows of the past, remains shrouded in mystery until the present comes alive with the unfolding investigation, bridging the gap between what was and what is.

In the context of real-life serial killers, the adage "truth is stranger than fiction" resonates powerfully. These individuals, who have ruthlessly claimed countless victims over time, expose a troubling side of human nature that is both captivating and horrifying. The most notorious serial killer cases in history serve not only to captivate the public's imagination but also to underscore the depths of depravity to which some can sink. These harrowing narratives stand as stark reminders of the necessity to stay vigilant for our own safety and to confront the darker, more insidious corners of society.

Though marketed as a thriller, "The Highway Murders" transcends the genre, revealing the depth of serious literary fiction. It intricately weaves together suspense, ethical inquiry, and character complexity, drawing from the traditions of Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment", Gillian Flynn's "Gone Girl", and Camus' "The Stranger". Literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov posits that detective fiction must evolve

beyond formula to achieve true literary merit, and Mukherjee meets this challenge by crafting a narrative that serves as a captivating crime puzzle, a nuanced psychological study, and a mirror reflecting societal issues.

"The Highway Murders," a compelling true crime novel by Sourabh Mukherjee, delves into the chilling activities of serial killer M. Jaishankar, infamously known as "Psycho Shankar." Across the regions of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, he perpetrated a series of brutal rapes, murders, and robberies. This gripping narrative follows a dedicated police officer as he navigates the harrowing ten-year quest to bring this merciless killer to justice.

Mukherjee's work presents a profound exploration of the investigation into these serial killings, shedding light on the countless challenges faced by law enforcement in capturing such an elusive criminal. The unfolding investigation serves as a powerful vehicle for revealing the dark and thrilling truths hidden within the case. Employing a skillful narrative that alternates between the mind of the criminal and the detective, the book maintains a taut balance between the intricacies of crime and the pursuit of justice. It intricately weaves in themes of secret plots, conspiracies, and innovative criminal tactics, all of which test the limits of the investigator's skills. Ultimately, "The Highway Murders" offers a masterful portrayal of the relentless struggle between good and evil, captivating readers while maintaining a powerful balance between the themes of crime and detection. This unsettling but compelling tale will leave an indelible mark on anyone who dares to uncover its chilling truths.

The physical and symbolic setting of the highway is pivotal to the novel's impact. In India, highways represent liminal spaces—caught between the urban and the rural, simultaneously governed yet lawless. In literature, liminality describes a transitional state often laden with danger, ambiguity, and potential for transformation (Turner, 1967). The killer deliberately selects highways for his crimes, not only for their strategic anonymity but also because they mirror his inner turmoil—isolated, disconnected, and dangerously erratic. The haunting imagery of dark, fog-laden roads and desolate rest stops evokes an atmosphere thick with foreboding and alienation, drawing readers into the depths of his unsettling world. "The Highway Murders," an enthralling true crime novel by Sourabh Mukherjee, plunges readers into the dark and unsettling world of serial killer M. Jaishankar, ominously dubbed "Psycho Shankar." With a chilling string of atrocities spanning Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, he embarked on a horrifying spree of rapes, murders, and robberies that left entire communities in fear.

The narrative follows a tenacious police officer as he embarks on an arduous and emotionally charged decade-long pursuit of this remorseless predator. With each twist and turn of the investigation, Mukherjee paints a vivid picture of the relentless challenges that law enforcement faced in their pursuit of justice. The journey is not just about catching a killer; it's a harrowing exploration of the psychological toll that such evil takes on those who confront it. Through rich, immersive prose, the author skillfully reveals the layered complexity of the investigation, exposing the intricate dance between the criminal mind and the investigator's resolve. As readers navigate this gripping tale, they are drawn into a landscape filled with secretive plots, cunning conspiracies, and evolving criminal strategies that continuously test the detective's skills and instincts.

"The Highway Murders" captures the relentless struggle between light and darkness, intertwining themes of morality, justice, and the depths of human depravity. This captivating work not only unravels the chilling truths behind the murders but also invites readers to ponder the very nature of evil itself, leaving an indelible impression long after the final page is turned.

The Highway Murders intricately examines the profound societal divisions that arise from individual status and circumstance. The police department, propelled by an escalating urgency to identify the killer, embarked on their investigation amid a growing clamor for justice. This inquiry emerged in response to a tragic case that had captivated and horrified the community, drawing attention to the dark underbelly of crime that often goes unnoticed.

Swaminathan engaged in discussions with law enforcement officials, focusing on the disturbing trend of unresolved rape and murder cases that had surfaced in recent months—most of the victims being vulnerable sex workers, whose lives were often shrouded in neglect and stigma. In his conversations with individuals from the affected neighborhoods, he gained profound insights into the harrowing realities that these women faced daily. Despite enduring relentless hardships and societal marginalization, many of the prostitutes exhibited remarkable resilience, clinging to hope as if it were a lifeline. Police were not notified when prostitution vanished, but when "one of their sisters went missing, they came forward in troops, hopeful that justice would be done" (Mukherjee 19). This collective action not only highlighted their immense courage in the face of adversity but also underscored an urgent call for societal change and accountability, shining a light on the need for greater empathy and understanding toward marginalized individuals.

A considerable number of the killer's victims are women, and the novel powerfully critiques gender-based violence in India. Rather than eroticizing or diminishing the brutality, Mukherjee confronts societal apathy and entrenched institutional misogyny. Feminist interpretations of the text reveal that women occupy precarious positions in both private and public spheres, with their vulnerability exacerbated by the state's failure to ensure their safety. This negligence makes them prime targets for predators, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change.

One of the most compelling themes in the novel is the systemic failure of institutions designed to safeguard the public. In "The Highway Murders", the police are portrayed as overworked and undertrained, frequently exhibiting apathy or corruption. The glaring absence of inter-state coordination and robust forensic infrastructure mirrors the pressing issues within India's criminal justice system. Moreover, the media plays an equally culpable role, sensationalizing these murders while neglecting to address the underlying systemic problems they unveil. Furthermore, this narrative invites a thoughtful exploration of Foucault's concept of "biopolitics" in "Discipline and Punish", wherein power operates through institutional structures that claim to deliver justice but often serve to perpetuate control and surveillance.

The phenomenon of crime is societal. It's an individual doing a societal wrong. William Blackstone has defined crime in his book, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* as "An act committed or omitted in violation of public law forbidding or commanding it". Every crime has a whole process or steps involved when it is committed, especially when it is deliberate.

In "The Highway Murders", Sourabh Mukherjee delves into the compelling connections between serial killing and critical social, environmental, and economic challenges. To uncover the motivations behind serial murderers, researchers have crafted a variety of etiological hypotheses and typologies. Over the years, criminologists, law enforcement officials, mental health experts, and social scientists have united their efforts to establish a comprehensive framework for understanding the fundamental causes of these heinous acts. By categorizing serial killers into distinct typologies, we can gather invaluable data that empowers law enforcement agencies to more effectively identify, track, and ultimately apprehend these dangerous criminals, thereby enhancing public safety and justice.

The Highway Murders is a crime thriller based on a real-life incident involving the police hunt for a psycho serial killer. Serial killing has been defined as a series of three or more killings by the same perpetrator in the same way. Committing a string of killings with recurring features is known as serial murdering. Another description put out by the National Institute of Justice centers on the sexual cravings that drive offenders to perpetrate heinous and vicious acts. There are four categories of serial killers: "hedonistic" killers, who like killing people and are thrill-seekers. Second, "missions-oriented" individuals think that by removing some people, they are benefiting society. Thirdly, "visionary" individuals who feel that they have been given orders by a higher power to destroy certain individuals. Finally, there are some who aim to dominate their victims by pursuing "power or control." This description focuses on the criminals' psychology and how they use callous methods to satisfy their sexual cravings. It focuses on the need for sexual gratification and how that desire may lead someone to commit horrible and horrific actions. Swaminathan believes that,

"the perpetrator we are looking for belongs to the third category. He is someone who travels regularly up and down the highway between Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and possibly to other neighboring states, targeting vulnerable women along the highway... In every case, the body of the victim was found several miles away from where she lived. This means, he probably has his own means of transportation" (Mukherjee 21).

Systematic criminals engage in lifestyles marked by a stringent sense of order, a characteristic that is vividly reflected in their criminal activities. These individuals typically find themselves compelled to commit murder following specific triggers—intense emotional upheaval linked to personal relationships, a dire need for financial gain, or escalating tensions within the workplace. Research shows that these criminals often possess a formidable intelligence, frequently ranging from average to exceptionally high, and are usually well-educated, allowing them to manipulate situations to their advantage with remarkable skill.

Organized criminals exemplify a highly strategic approach to their unlawful endeavors. They meticulously plot their crimes, dedicating significant time to devising intricate plans that consider every possible scenario. When enacting their plans, they arrive equipped with carefully chosen weapons, which are methodically selected to fit the nature of their attack, and they take deliberate measures to dispose of these items afterward, leaving little to no trace. This level of premeditation not only highlights their intellectual capabilities but also underscores a chilling mastery of control. During the execution of their crimes, these individuals often restrain their victims, exerting dominance over them with a chilling calmness that amplifies their intimidating presence. In doing so, they maintain a calculated grip on the situation, transforming impulsive violence into a carefully orchestrated act, revealing the disturbing blend of intellect and brutality that defines their actions.

In the realm of crime fiction, authors often delve deep into the motivations that drive serial murderers, offering readers a compelling glimpse into their complex psyches. In "The Highway Murders," Sourabh Mukherjee skillfully weaves a fictional narrative that explores Shankar's troubled childhood. Lacking positive role models and supportive guidance, Shankar struggled to navigate his failures, which ultimately propelled him away from the confines of his family in search of his true self.

Mukherjee's novel delivers a gripping and deeply empathetic exploration of a serial killer whose motivations arise not from sadism, but from profound trauma and psychological disintegration. Through a series of haunting flashbacks and introspective passages, the narrative unveils the killer's past, aligning it with established criminological theories, particularly the trauma-control model articulated by esteemed

criminologists like Hickey and Ressler. This killer's childhood is marred by abandonment, emotional abuse, and systemic neglect, creating a psyche that embodies John Bowlby's concept of "disordered attachment" as described in "Attachment and Loss". This disorder leads to an impaired sense of empathy and identity. His descent into murder is not impulsive; rather, it is ritualized—a desperate form of control and an expression of repressed rage directed at a society that has failed him.

The psychological development of the killer resonates with the profiles meticulously documented by the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit, as chronicled in John Douglas's "Mindhunter". Furthermore, his internal moral justification for his heinous acts corresponds with the notion of "moral insanity"—an antiquated yet compelling term used in 19th-century forensic psychology to describe individuals driven by a distorted moral compass. Through this lens, Mukherjee's novel invites readers to confront the complexities of human behavior, challenging preconceived notions about the nature of evil.

From an early age, Shankar's relationship with his father, Muthu, was distant. Muthu spent most of his time driving along interminable highways, leaving Shankar to reminisce about his father as "the man with a moustache and hair flowing past his shoulders." Although their connection was strained, Muthu would occasionally share thrilling tales of his adventures on dark roads, while Shankar's mother remained quietly in the corner of their cramped room. Captivated by these stories, Shankar would often drift into sleep, enchanted by the allure of the highways. This fascination burgeoned as he matured, serving as a powerful catalyst for his journey into adulthood.

Research shows that the causes of crime are complex and varied, yet one of the most significant contributors is "trauma." Among the different types of trauma, childhood trauma stands out for its profound and lasting effects on individuals. This term refers to distressing experiences during early childhood that can severely impact both physical and mental well-being. Such experiences may include physical or emotional abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, and accidents. It is crucial to understand that while not every traumatic childhood experience leads to criminal behavior, these events often cultivate traits that may pave the way for it. Addressing and acknowledging the impact of childhood trauma is essential for preventing future criminal activity and fostering healthier communities.

Alternatively, early trauma almost always has an indirect impact on criminal conduct. Violent childhood traumas, defined as those that cause harm to others and include cyber bullying, domestic abuse, and school violence, typically lead to copycat behavior. Early childhood minors' psychological activity is particularly vulnerable to external object impact, and children learn behavior by imitating people around them. As a result, children raised in violent circumstances are more prone to develop into aggressive adults. In the same way, Shankar was impacted by his father's aggressive conduct and sought to emulate him.

Childhood trauma can indirectly influence criminal behavior by leading to mental and emotional illnesses. These issues are often not physical in nature. A child's mind can become distorted, their character may develop into something eccentric, and trauma may cast a long-lasting shadow over their life. All of these factors can contribute to future mental health challenges, especially after experiencing significant trauma or enduring a prolonged period of difficulty during childhood.

To evaluate the impact of childhood trauma on mental health issues among offenders, Tuscher and Retz conducted compelling research in their work titled *The Association between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Mental Health Problems in Young Offenders*. Their findings establish a significant correlation between childhood trauma and juvenile delinquency, revealing that mental health issues often serve as a precursor to future criminal behavior. The researchers skillfully analyzed survey data to

demonstrate the link between adverse childhood experiences and the emergence of both internalized and externalized mental disorders. As a result, it becomes clear that childhood trauma can profoundly influence future criminal conduct through its detrimental effects on mental health, underscoring the urgent need for early intervention and support.

The Highway Murders compellingly delves into philosophical themes, unearthing profound inquiries that challenge conventional thinking. It raises thought-provoking questions from a first-person perspective and through dynamic dialogues centered on critical metaphysical and normative commitments. The characters vividly articulate their anxieties regarding the various forms of authority wielded by law, religion, and societal structures—either as sources of guidance or as neglectful forces. They interrogate the foundations and justifications of such authority, grounding their reflections in nuanced contexts that invite readers to contemplate the far-reaching implications of these discussions. The novel's psychological characterizations offer a captivating exploration of the complexities of the human mind, aligning seamlessly with the philosophical pursuit of understanding the intricate features and processes that shape our thoughts and behaviors. Furthermore, the narrative grapples with significant epistemic dilemmas, manifesting in a persistent questioning of its ability to authentically represent reality. This introspective uncertainty enriches the narrative, compelling readers to reflect on the broader implications of perception and representation within literature.

Shankar is a profoundly conflicted character who grapples with the tumultuous chaos of his thoughts and the turbulent landscape of his mental state. On his journey of self-exploration, he deliberates over the depth of introspection required to achieve a comprehensive understanding of his own identity. As he navigates this complex terrain, he is forced to confront the unsettling truth that he often engages in self-deception, cloaking his true feelings and intentions from himself. Through Shankar's extreme experiences, Mukherjee artfully illustrates that we, as intricate and multifaceted beings, often struggle to attain authenticity and clarity in our self-perceptions. Shankar envisions an overwhelming force expanding within him, a tempestuous storm of emotions and thoughts that he finds impossible to contain. This internal conflict builds to a climax, culminating in an essential and haunting question that reverberates throughout his mind.

The novel's psychological characterizations align closely with this tradition, offering a rich exploration of conscience and inner conflict. In this context, Mukherjee's portrayal of Shankar resonates with Dostoevsky's use of interior monologue and fragmented narrative to communicate moral turbulence. Further, the narrative grapples with epistemic uncertainty—a self-reflective thread questioning whether any representation can authentically capture reality. This aligns with modern concerns in literary philosophy about the limits of narrative and perception, reminiscent of broader existentialist and postmodern questions.

Mukherjee vividly captures the desperation of a character trapped in the relentless pursuit of a genuine identity. In the throes of inner turmoil, Shankar instinctively reaches for a superficial imitation of self—an attempt to find solace that feels as fleeting as a mirage in the desert—compelled by an urgency akin to a person gasping for breath beneath turbulent waves. He grapples with a fragile and ever-shifting sense of self, undermining his confidence and leaving him haunted by a disquieting question that looms over him like an oppressive shadow. This inner tempest demands an urgent resolution, which he believes can only be achieved through bold, dramatic action that may defy reason.

Moreover, Mukherjee provocatively illuminates the deceiving nature of self-definition. Just before Shankar violently strikes a woman with a bamboo stick, he experiences an unnerving loss of control

over his actions, as if a primal force has seized him. He candidly acknowledges that the act felt almost instinctual, as though his body were functioning independently of his conscious mind. In that chilling moment of disconnection, he scarcely registers the gravity of his deed. Soon after, he becomes engulfed by the crushing weight of his decision, feeling a wave of terror rise within him, especially after committing a second, unplanned act of violence. The spiraling consequences of his actions take hold, suffocating him in a heavy shroud of isolation and despair, leaving him to confront the dark aftermath of his fractured identity. Through him, Mukherjee illustrates the universal struggle for authenticity—mirroring themes in works like Dostoevsky’s where murderers are themselves destroyed by their act. His vision of a storm of emotions within him draws upon this tradition: the violent internal conflict reaches a climax in a haunting, unanswered question echoing existential doubt.

Sourabh Mukherjee’s “The Highway Murders” emerges as a groundbreaking masterpiece in Indian English crime fiction, distinguished not only by its harrowing portrayal of a real-life serial killer but also by the profound literary exploration of psychological, philosophical, and sociopolitical themes. Through a penetrating examination of the fractured psyche of M. Jaishankar, Mukherjee transcends mere sensationalism, skillfully unraveling the intricate dynamics of trauma, identity, and violence. The highway, both a literal and metaphorical landscape, serves as a potent narrative device that reveals the moral ambiguities and lawlessness lurking beneath the facade of modern society.

CONCLUSION

Saurabh Mukherjee’s “The Highway Murders” is more than just a thriller; it is a compelling study of broken systems, wounded psyches, and moral ambiguity. Through its innovative narrative structure, psychological depth, and symbolic settings, the novel challenges both genre conventions and societal complacency. It demands to be read not only as entertainment but also as a serious literary work that speaks to the contemporary cultural, institutional, and emotional landscapes of India.

This analysis has illuminated how the novel redefines traditional crime thriller conventions by incorporating postmodern narrative techniques and drawing from diverse disciplines such as criminology, trauma studies, and philosophy. Shankar’s psychological portrait, rooted in childhood trauma and a desperate longing for control, reflects a troubling societal neglect of mental health and the urgent need for early intervention. Moreover, the portrayal of marginalized women, institutional apathy, and grassroots resistance speaks powerfully to the pressing social realities facing India today.

In essence, “The Highway Murders” transcends the confines of a mere crime narrative; it serves as a profound mirror reflecting the fractures of contemporary society—a contemplative exploration of justice, identity, and the dual capacity for both darkness and redemption within the human spirit. By challenging the boundaries of genre fiction, Mukherjee crafts a narrative that is as unsettling as it is illuminating, making an indelible mark on the landscape of modern Indian literature.

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