

**Freedom Interludes through Escape into Nature in Imtiaz
Ali's Highway**

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Abstract

Through the years, cinema has depicted nature's role in human existence in various ways. Films, both fictional and nonfictional, that deal with the environment in some way, shape, or form, whether through depictions of environmental destruction, depictions of human evolution within nature, or celebrations of nature's beauty, all serve to assess humanity's place in the natural world. In cinema, nature is viewed as the carrier of raw emotion. Nature, as if it is a conscious being that contributes to the production of meaning, reveals a new form of relationship with cinema. One of these movies that shows the unrestrained manifestation of human emotion in the presence of nature is Imtiaz Ali's "Highway (2014)."

The movie represents constrained consciousness fortuitously breaking free into the lap of mother nature and feeling at home. The film takes two characters, Veera and Mahabir, who do not fit in their worlds and take them far from their roots, unveiling specific serendipitous attributes they were not unaware of. It can be extended that they both discover the missing aspects of themselves out in the open,

where nature resides. This paper will examine the film's central premise, which urges viewers and the protagonist to overcome past traumatic occurrences by exposing themselves to nature, resume recognizing the beauty of life, and so appreciate the importance of Mother Nature as the ultimate healer. By analyzing the coming-of-age film Highway by Imtiaz Ali, the researcher will endeavor to show the significance of nature by demonstrating how one's connection to nature, the experience of travel, solitude, epiphanies, and revelation can serve as formidable weapons against the oppressive and terrible realities of life.

Keywords: Liberation/Freedom; Nature; Cinema; Introspection; Trauma

Humanity has always connected movies and literature. They both represent the aesthetic side of the human psyche. To further the enlightenment cause, man devises novel methods of sharing information about the human experience. Storytelling and character introduction are shared cinematic and literary functions. They transport us to realms the author has crafted that are fascinating and original. Similarly, literature and film have long assisted individuals in coming to terms with the complexities of life.

Cinema has influenced lifestyles. It has opened a way for people to share their stories, from the heartbreaking to the ecstatic, with an audience in an emotional and informative

way. It has instilled in us the importance of living in the present and savoring each moment. Through movies, audiences have traveled to new locations, re-lived past events, learned about new experiences, and connected with real people in all their triumphs and tragedies. Like literature, cinema has been a valuable tool for people to mark their journeys in introspection, self-discovery, self-analysis, and other behavioral aspects. It has represented individuals, regardless of their background, as well as their dire situation and contentment.

The process of learning your true self, including your beliefs, needs and wants, and even what you like and do not like, is called self-discovery. Some may have discovered these things about themselves naturally. Nonetheless, many people lose touch with their principles and hide their reasons and preferences, even from themselves. Life has taught many that one of the most important keys to a healthy and healthier life - physically, psychologically, and spiritually - may be found in nature. Mari shares a similar belief in one of her blog posts from 2020. For ages, monks, mystics, and various seekers have found solace and inspiration in nature's serene realms, such as forests, deserts, and mountains. Embracing the profound stillness and wisdom of the natural world, they have cultivated freedom, clarity, and compassion through meditative living. (Coleman, 2010)

Nature is one of the most aesthetically pleasing, tranquil, and awe-inspiring settings to help immerse oneself in. By delving into the essence of who we are and gaining important lessons, exploring the nature around us encourages

us to explore the nature within. (Ms, 2021) Pick and Narraway (2013) talk about the intersections between the natural world and the worlds of film in their book *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human*. Environmentalism and ecology are expanding rapidly in academics and culture. Many studies have categorized the wide variety of problems in the realm of film and the environment, as well as what might be referred to as "posthuman cinema." Originating in nineteenth-century photographic traditions before the emergence of cinema, nature filmmaking has undergone a rich and varied evolution, ultimately solidifying its current prominence as a genre celebrated most notably in the expansive realm of large-format cinema.

The natural world, which features prominently in all of our lives on a day-to-day basis, has frequently played a significant role in cinematic storytelling. Cinema has shown nature's impact on humans in many ways. Films representing environmental catastrophes, human growth in nature, or nature's beauty all examine humanity's place in nature. In movies, it is regarded as the source of unfiltered emotion. Nature as a conscious creature that creates meaning reveals a new relationship with cinema. In some movies, the characters set off on journeys that mirror their internal ones. These protagonists embark on some form of journey to "discover themselves," whether they are looking for experience, change, or healing. Road films often serve as a cinematic canvas that elaboratively explores the multi-layered themes of masculinity, catalyzed by a male protagonist undergoing profound personal introspection amidst a backdrop of

relentless movement and freedom. "Rebellion against conservative social norms" is the central issue of road films. There is an abundance of such films that follow the path of bildungsroman in the protagonist's story. A multitude of these works include films like *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* (2013), *The Kings of Summer* (2013), *All the Bright Places* (2020), *Wild* (2014), *Into the Wild* (2007), *Tracks* (2013), *Nomadland* (2020). Films like these offer captivating narratives that explore the allure of nature as an escape from societal constraints, inviting viewers to contemplate the transformative power of wilderness and self-discovery alongside the characters.

The 2013 motion picture 'The Secret Life of Walter Mitty' is adapted from a short story written by James Thurber in 1939. It follows the story of a regular man escaping from his mundane, monotonous life between shelves to a life of adventure, engaging with nature in sensational ways. While nature is not the story's central theme, it plays a significant role in Walter Mitty's daydreams and serves as a symbol throughout the narrative. Nature ignites Walter Mitty's daydreams, sparking his imagination and providing an escape from his mundane reality. It symbolizes the endless possibilities and experiences that exist outside his prosaic reality. Walter Mitty finds a means to cope with his dissatisfaction and the limits of his daily life by immersing himself in nature through his daydreams. 'Nomadland' (2020) (Director: Chloé Zhao) is a visually captivating film that serves as a cinematic epic, immersing viewers in the breathtaking natural landscapes of North America. Through

its powerful imagery, the film showcases the beauty of the wilderness and delves into profound themes of community, notions of 'home,' and the struggle to escape the entanglements of corporate influence within a consumer-driven society. With a moralizing approach, *Nomadland* confronts the audience with the realities of transgressing socio-economic norms and the challenges that arise when trying to find freedom and authenticity in a world defined by materialistic pursuits. *Into the Wild* (2007) (Director: Sean Penn) is a feature film based on the book 'Into the Wild' by Jon Krakauer. It dwells on Christopher McCandless, an American adventurer, in unwavering pursuit of the aspiration for complete solitude and isolation. This dejected young man gave his whole savings to charity after completing his bachelor's degree. Following that, he embarked on a journey to the western part of the country, searching for purpose in life and answers to his existential crises. He embraces minimalism wholeheartedly, abstaining from any opportunity that may result in materialistic gain. In his devotion to transcendentalist notions, he actively avoids making emotional ties with the people he meets. He sees human bonding as a distraction from achieving perfect autonomy and establishing an unparalleled connection with nature. Because of his unique experiences, he developed a deeper appreciation for the natural world and its delicate balance with the universe.

It is worse to stay where one does not belong at all than to wander about lost for a while and looking for the psychic and soulful kinship one requires." (Estés, 1995) Imtiaz Ali's "*Highway* (2014)" is one of these films that

displays the unbridled expression of human emotion in the face of nature. It is another road movie set in India. The montage of a truck driving across several states, territories, and landscapes opens the film. It portrays the story of an abducted girl, Veera (Alia Bhatt), who develops Stockholm syndrome. A day before her wedding, Veera is kidnapped by a common thug named Mahabir and his men. Veera finds freedom in nature, not fear of her kidnapper. In road movies, the internal development of the characters is explored. This film showed telltale signs: cross-country drives, runaways, macho men with a destructive streak, spiritual awakenings on the slopes of Kashmir's snowy peaks, and contemplative montage scenes. Highway demonstrates its excellence in this particular aspect, the film portrays how a nature trip with a goon changes the protagonist from a frail girl to a strong woman. (Kumar, 2019) This film needs to make more effort to stand out as it explores the themes of travel and environment, following a meandering path without a clear endpoint. The meeting of two intriguing persons while exploring this constantly shifting assortment of entrancing settings is entirely coincidental.

In several of Imtiaz Ali's other works, including Tamasha, Laila Majnu, Jab We Met, the Love Aaj Kal film series, and Rockstar, nature is significant to the characters' internal growth and healing. The Highway could be interpreted as two people's natural progression. Veera needed a change in her life, and Mahabir's wandering lifestyle brought it. He introduces her to a world with mountains and wide-open areas that she has never experienced before, in

contrast to the cramped environment she was confined in. To avoid being pursued by police, the men frequently move Veera through numerous metropolitan areas. The more time passes, the more bewildered and puzzled Mahabir becomes as Veera seeks serenity in natural surroundings and a newly discovered perspective. After being openly abused by her own uncle when she was nine years old, Veera grows to be content with her captors to the extent that she puts her trust in Mahabir. She perceives her abduction as an unexpectedly fortunate turn of circumstances because it gives her a chance to explore life and discover who she is. Veera ultimately covers up when police forcibly peer through the truck, much to her own surprise. She supposes she thoroughly enjoys the journey and has no desire to return to her family and previous lifestyle.

Mahabir, who burned his bridges, is also changed by Veera. Veera calms him, and as the story progresses, we see him smiling and freeing himself of his troubles. She aids in calming the internal raging storm and making him a calmer person. [9] We observe as she unravels the fragmented tale of Mahabir. As a child, his father subjected him to physical abuse, and his mother was a sexually enslaved person for the affluent masters. Mahabir managed to flee, and he has kept himself concealed ever since. As Mahabir begins to think about Veera and progressively relaxes his sternness, his umbrage gradually dissipates. He tries to leave her in a police station in one of the steep towns they stop in. To his surprise, Veera refuses to and insists on staying with Mahabir. Their journey in the film ahead, and he begins to feel deeply for her. They stay at a ridge house, and Veera reveals that one of her

natural desires is to have a small mountain home. As the movie progresses, the development of Veera's affection for the wilderness and her desire to live in such a setting increases, she desperately seeks consolation and purpose in nature, new experiences, and changing her routine as she prepares to leave her childhood traumas and insensitive parents behind. Which proves that Highway is Veera's self-discovery and independence quest.

One of the many beautiful elements that can be interpreted in the film is the movie's songs cinematographed amidst nature as they catalyze the character's journey. The song, Patakha Guddi, represents the protagonist's inner journey. The song talks about Veera and her budding relationship with God and Nature. Here, Veera's life takes a spirit-rejuvenating turn as she meets with nature. The lyrics beautifully depict her cycle of freeing herself from societal norms as she leads herself toward the openness of Mother Nature.

Maula tera maali O hariyaali jungle waali,

Tu de har gaali pe taali uski kadam kadam rakhwaali, Ainve lok-
laaj ki soojh soch ki kyun hai aafat daali, Tu le naam rab da,
naam saai ka Ali Ali Ali Ali (Highway 01:01:46–02:03)

God is your gardener, O greenery of wilderness,
You laugh at every misfortune as He(God) is
taking care of you every step of the way, Why
worry mindlessly thinking about (social) rights
and wrongs,

Chant the name of God, name of the Lord, Ali Ali Ali
Ali.

She goes around climbing trees, touching wild grass, eating food in the middle of a field, and falling asleep at the bank of a stream. She experiences a new sense of spiritedness that she never saw back home. Following are a few excerpts from the song that conveys the same:

Jugni mel mel ke, kood phaand ke,

Chakk chakaudd jaave... (Highway 01:01:39–01:45)

- The firefly (Veera) is leaping, swinging, jumping,
Fearlessly moving...

As Veera sings the song, Sooha Sooha, Mahabir remembers his happy childhood as just another innocent child whom his mother, happy and playful, loved. This is in stark contrast to where he is now, several years later, the lousy guy feared by everyone, lost, and lonely, which he believes is a point of no return. The song begins as a cradlesong about lush fields and starry beds, depicting a mother's unconditional love for her little child as she sits with the baby in the middle of mustard farms. [13] This realization dawns upon Mahabir, painting a picture of the untapped beauty his life could have embraced amidst nature, had he truly desired it.

Maina ne sooha saaha le jaana khoye kiMeethi meethi kheti mein khelan ho..

Totaa bole pedon pe, ped se, poodi se

Sooha saaha neendan mein okha na ho (Highway 01:12:41–12:54) Sparrow will take the red rabbit to play in the sweet farms of milk solids.. parrot speaks on trees, to tree, to food, that the red rabbit should not be finding it hard to sleep.

In one of the episodes of Highway, the crew team braves the cold to film the song "Kahaan HoonMain" amidst the snow-

covered Kinnaur landscapes in Himachal Pradesh. Capturing Alia's character journey of self-discovery, the track, composed by A.R. Rahman and written by Irshad Kamil, unfolds against the stunning backdrop of Kinnaur's picturesque scenery.

When wilfully returning to the Himalayas after a shattering episode of events at home, she pulls over and gets out of the car to break into tears. This moment is mixed with plenty of heartache but enough assurance that life will turn out fine. The music and lyrics of the song, Heera, effectively portray the feeling of catharsis for Veera as she sits amidst the vast tree and Ugly cries. It is a soulful and emotional song that reflects the inner journey and transformation of the protagonist in the movie. The lyrics portray a sense of liberation, self-discovery, and tenacity. Similarly, the repertoire of the film's songs feels like a grove experience to the viewer, creating a sense of catharsis and empathizing with the characters as well.

In the movie's concluding segment, Veera moves to the Valleys of Kashmir, where she starts a factory, symbolizing mountains and natural habitat in her catharsis. She exposes herself to nature and experiences optimism. She lives in a cottage by the cliff, standing and looking at the sky. She smiles as she imagines her 9-year-old self running around the hillside while a 9-year-old Mahabir follows her. They blow on dandelions, which represents revisiting the innocence they lost at a young age. She feels at peace imagining the two and feeling thankful for where she is. The highlight of the film Highway is undoubtedly the cinematic importance that the natural world plays in the story. Moments like the opening

scene of the mesmerizing truck ride can be intertextually analyzed with the scene where the filmmaker brings back the frame to reality. From farms to hills to mountains to valleys to snow peaks, viewers move from town to town, seeing nature's intensity increase every second. In a cinematic masterpiece, the director paints a visual poem exploring the stunning valleys of Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal's deserted mountain landscapes, and Punjab and Rajasthan's rustic charm. Each frame is a canvas, capturing the essence of these regions with breathtaking beauty. This calms the spectator as life travels further from the faux metropolis. The next shot returns us to reality, where Veera is having her pre-wedding film taken, meekly following society's rules but longing to break free.

Veera gets off the truck, walks on a damp dune, pauses, welcomes herself, asks how she is, and lies down to ponder it. She finds optimism after reconnecting with herself after a long time. Similarly, interludes like the pulled-over scene of Veera and exploring life and freedom amidst valleys showed the beauty of nature, both symbolically and literally. [11] When Mahabir exposed Mahabir to the Himalayas, Veera explored the green hills that provided life to the shepherds and farmers. This gives her a yearning to start fresh. She starts to act as if she belonged there and tries to convince Mahabir that he deserves another go at life. "To be strong means meeting one's numinosity without fleeing, actively living with the wild nature in one's way. It means to be able to learn, to be able to stand what we know. It means to stand and live." The final scene of the film depicts this. Veera emerges from her picturesque hamlet nestled among the hills, returning to the

embrace of the natural world. She embraces a book titled "Women Who Run with the Wolves" by Clarissa Pinkola Estés (1995). This self-help book focuses on helping women reconnect with their potent, robust, and forward-thinking inherent core. This scene discreetly portrays a woman's longing to live a life unrestricted by societal and materialistic conventions. In one of her articles, Amanda (2022) asserts that beyond being a romantic tale between Veera and her captor, it evolves into a love story with highways, open air, and mountains. Veera's desire for fresh air is central, and the film, in essence, provides a refreshing breath of air.

Likewise, many human moments are linked to natural elements and surrounded by natural landscapes. Imtiaz Ali's attempt to present this type of cinema with the power to overcome past traumatic occurrences by exposing oneself to nature was successful. It is a tale of two individuals who grew up in entirely divergent circumstances, where Mahabir warms to the idea of embracing his softer side, which he had long suppressed in order to deal with his harsh realities and Veera's shackles turn to dust by the end of the film when she reaches the peace that she never realized could be achieved. She resumed recognizing the beauty of life along with the beauty of the natural world. The film invites viewers to explore the connection to nature, travel/adventure, moments of solitude, revelations, and freedom. These elements emerge as enchanting weapons, empowering individuals to confront the daunting and oppressive facets of life's journey. Like so, Highway highlights the importance of how nature acts as a mother any lost child can turn to, the true carrier of raw

emotion, and that it can serve as the ultimate healer.

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