

**“Loving to Survive”: Master-Slave Dynamics and Hostage Identification**

**Syndrome in *Vidheyan***

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**Abstract**

The implications of the term ‘Stockholm syndrome’ in psychology and in popular usage is a bone of contention and the emotional and psychological effects of employing this response as a survival strategy is being extensively studied. The capture bonding occurs in diverse hostage situations where there exists a dominance hierarchy in which the captor utilises the mechanisms of power and control to manipulate the victim to submission. The complexities in the master-slave relationship have contributed to the development of psychological slavery and in turn Stockholm syndrome or Hostage Identification syndrome (HIS). The slaves employed submissiveness and passivity as a coping skill and survival strategy to prevent disastrous physical, emotional and psychological torture. The modus operandi of slaves to be compliant, subservient, and servile serves the avoidance of retaliation and self-preservation. The identification with the oppressor leads the marginalized class to become a docile and non-assertive personality devoid of individual traits and attitudes and puppet in the hands of the master. The slaves train their behaviour in satisfying the needs of the masters and minimizing the efforts of efforts thus gaining a position of privilege and at the same time at the receiving end of the masters’ violence. Victims of long-term trauma and suffering in captivity tend to show signs of Stockholm syndrome, and at times, controlling the behaviours of the masters topping from the bottom. This paper strives to analyze how traumatic situations unleash submissive behaviour resulting in the development of Hostage Identification syndrome as depicted in Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s 1994 film *Vidheyan (Servile)*.

**Keywords: master-slave dynamics, hostage identification syndrome, survival, appeasement, trauma**

Man is born to subjection. The proclivity of the natural man is to domineer or to be subservient. If there are sordid, servile, and laborious offices to be performed, is it not better that there should be sordid, servile, and laborious beings to perform them? (Chancellor Harper, University of Carolina, 1838)  
(Thelwell 137)

A 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, leading to a six day hostage crisis, forty six years ago, originated a surprising behaviour in the four hostages toward their captor Jan-Erik Olsson. The incongruous affiliation and bond developed between the victim and the aggressor shook the world as it evoked paradoxical emotional responses in the victim. The Swedish psychiatrist and criminologist Nils Bejerot christened this irrational psychological response wherein a captive begins to identify closely with his/her captor, as well as with their agenda and demands during captivity as a survival strategy as “Stockholm Syndrome.” The term gained currency as a mechanism for survival in traumatic, life threatening situations as the hostage employs it to manage their fear and consequently opened up studies in the field of psychology and in hostage negotiations.

In her phenomenal work *Loving to Survive: Sexual Terror, Men’s Violence, and Women’s Lives*, psychologist Dee L.R. Graham points out four hypothesized precursors of Stockholm Syndrome namely, “perceived threat to survival” and the belief that one’s captor is willing to carry out that threat, “perceived inability to escape”, “perceived kindness from the captor” within a context of terror, and “isolation” from perspectives other than those of the captor. (Graham xvi) William Lewinsky classified the diverse hostage situations as “domestic, economic, general manipulation, prison, circumstantial, and political” (28). It

comprises “hostages, concentration camp prisoners, cult members, prisoners of war, civilians in Communist China who were subjected to thought reform, battered women, abused children, victims of father-daughter incest, and prostitutes procured by pimps” (Graham xvi). Undoubtedly, there exists a partial activation of the capture-bonding psychological trait in conditions such as “battered-wife syndrome, basic military training, fraternity hazing, and sex practices such as sadism/masochism or bondage/discipline” (McCartney 51).

A master-slave dynamic is the most extreme form of relationship in which the slave gives complete authority to the Master over him/herself. The slave learns the Master’s habits and becomes able to anticipate and move to meet Master’s needs. The slaves train their behaviour in satisfying the needs of the masters and minimizing the efforts of efforts thus gaining a position of privilege and at the same time at the receiving end of the masters’ violence. The Master’s primary responsibility is to do everything within his/her power to maximise the potential of his/her slave. It involves being clear about the terms and conditions of slave’s service, including restrictions on the slave’s activities and Master’s rights to use the slave, ensuring the slave’s physical, social, emotional, and financial wellbeing, establishing effective lines of communication with the slave, and exercising care and judgment in the relationship. The primary responsibility of a slave is to understand the terms and conditions of his/her submission and restrictions placed upon him/her. It involves ensuring complete support for Master and Master’s household including acting to ensure Master’s health and wellbeing, being open and honest with the Master, appropriately communicating any change in the slave’s physical, mental, or financial state, and understanding the subjugation of his/her will to serve and please the Master.

The relationship between slaves and their masters could, at one and the same time, be governed by exploitation and affiliation, submission under the master’s authority and intimacy. It was characterised by what may be called a mutual dependency: the master was

dependent on the slave's loyalty and the slave dependent on the master's maintenance and humane treatment of him. While slaves had to bow to their master's wishes under the constant threat of punishment, they could also become indispensable to them, function as their confidants, and be party to their secrets.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* (1994) is an Indian Malayalam language drama film starring Mammooty and M. R. Gopakumar in lead roles. It is a cinematic adaptation of Paul Zacharia's novella *Bhaskara Pattellarum Ente Jeevithavum* which was inspired by a real-life character named Patela Shekhara Gowda alias Shiradi Shekhara. It explores the master-slave dialectic in a South Karnataka setting in which the protagonist Thommy, a Christian migrant labourer from Kerala plays an obedient slave of his aggressive, tyrannical landlord Bhaskara Pattelar. Thommi is displaced from his native place and his familiar surroundings to a non-native and unfamiliar terrain due to historical reasons. In this alien land stripped off his identity and freedom from his earlier life of comfort and safety, the weak-willed Thommi's encounter with a stronger and intimidating character of Bhaskara Patelar prompts him to enter into an uncomfortable master-servile relationship. The ambiguous and absurd relationship is a study of the psychology of power, power and powerlessness, and servility.

In the opening scene Baskara Patelar is introduced without much fanfare sitting upright on a wooden chair, legs crossed, surrounded by obedient and compliant men, looking at the unfortunate man in a torn dhoti. Thommi becomes the prey of Patelar's cruelty when he spits paan on his face and nearly guns him down. Patelar calls Thommi "naaye", "patti" while Thommi calls him "yajamanan" ("Master") with respect and reverence. When Thommi reaches home, he is greeted by his wife's sobbing as she has been raped by Patelar. Thommi is vulnerable and passive and is afraid to fight against Patelar and as a result sits in front of his hut and vents his anger as his wife looks on. The sudden shift from aggravation and resentment to affiliation and obedience happens when Patelar offers him a job and clothing

for both Thommi and Omana. Thommi looks on helplessly as Patelar selects a sari for Omana and states that she is beautiful. Thommi lets out a grateful smile when he is offered a job as a server at the local toddy shop. This confirms Thommi has already yielded to Patelar's tyranny. It is accentuated when Thommi becomes a mute spectator as Patelar regularly makes nocturnal visits to his home to have sexual relations with his wife Omana.

Even though there was initial anger, pain and reluctance, Thommi finds pleasure in this psychological slavery and adapts to each situation by appeasing his master. His obedience to his master is born out of helplessness and powerlessness and as a defense mechanism as he starts to identify with his abuser complying with his wishes. There are several incidents in which Thommi acts in accordance with the command of his master. Thommi obeys all the orders of his master, whether it is to make his own wife sexually available to his master or in killing Pattelar's strong-willed, pensive and kindly wife, Saroja. Thommi even finds his wife's sexual affair with Patelar exciting. In bed one night with his wife, Thommi tells Omana — "You smell of the Patelar's scent. I like it. But you are only mine. One day, I will be able to buy you the scent." He finds vicarious joy in appeasing his master even at the expense of sacrificing his wife for sexual pleasures. According to his master's orders, Thommi asks Saroja for some water, just so that Patelar can "accidentally kill her."

As Thommi follows Patelar like a servile respecting his mighty authoritative position as his master, Thommi is a victim of the psychological condition Stockholm syndrome. It is an overwhelming vision of human bondage in which "strong emotional ties that develop between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other." (Swanger and Petcosky 37). Stockholm syndrome or capture-bonding is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and sympathy, and have positive feelings toward their captors, sometimes to the point of defending and identifying

with the captors. These feelings are generally considered irrational in light of the danger or risk endured by the victims, who essentially mistake a lack of abuse from their captors for an act of kindness. The positive bond is formed as the individual's response to trauma in becoming a victim. The four precursors responsible for the development of this psychological phenomenon are present in the narrative of the film. There is a perceived threat to survival for Thommi as Patelar always threatens him with his gun or his goons. Thommi believes that his Master is willing to carry out that threat. Thommi sees Patelar inflicting violence upon the local people and gets frightened of having the same fate for him. Thommi as the victim of Patelar's aggression tends to prevent the conditions that draw the abuser into violent behaviour, thus minimalizing the chances of brutality and maximizing the chances of survival. There is also a perception of some small kindness from the captor within a context of terror. Patelar gifts him clothing and a job for daily sustenance, and at the same time, looks after his needs when he gets injured. Though he is dehumanized and abused by Patelar, Thommi still makes himself believe that Patelar is kind as he looks after Omana, Patelar had given him a job and also feels humbled and elated. Thommi is isolation from perspectives other than those of Patelar as his Master demands him to be constantly available for his wishes and commands. Thommi believes that it is incompetent in escaping from the chains of captivity as he fears the captor's wrath and violence.

Power, Patelar tells us, cannot exist without submission. Power is repressive so long as sycophancy becomes obsessive. Thus Thommi ends up as a symbol of pathetic human bondage. Thommi expresses sympathy for Patelar as he feels that the cronies surrounding him have made Patelar to lead an illusionary life of authority. At the same time he shows signs of resistance when he becomes a part of the group that plots Patelar's murder. The film does not deal with the plight of the oppressed, but on the dynamics of oppression and the notion of freedom within this bondage of oppression.

Adoor interprets the concept of freedom within the complex matrix of power relations portrayed through the master-slave relationship between Patelar and Thommi in the feudal setup of South Canara, Karnataka. In the film, Thommi's strange attractiveness towards Patelar serves merely as the starting premise and with the progression in narrative he goes on to become Patelar's faithful aide, collaborating in acts which even harm his own interests. The aggression displayed by Patelar becomes disturbing because of its sheer randomness and his authority upon Thommi turns oppressive as it is accepted without questioning. Patelar appears as someone who needs no pretext to attack and coerce obedience, who relishes in the sense of empowerment and control which such violent behaviour generates. Thommi who is a docile character is ready to sacrifice his freedom and liberty and embrace enslavement in the belief of receiving material security and protection from the authoritative figure, i.e., Patelar.

Victims of psychological slavery also control the behaviours of the masters topping from the bottom. When Pattelar escapes to a jungle, due to his own deeds, Thommy escorts him like a pet. There is a reversal of roles with regard to the image of the hunter and the hunted. The role reversal happens when both Patelar and Thommi are placed at an equal plane as fugitives in the picturesque forest, dressed alike, as they both sit on the ground and have food from the same leaf when they are hunted by relatives of Saroja, Patelar's wife. Thommi's obsession with servility prompts him to save his lord. In the initial part of the film, Patelar is portrayed as the hunter with his rifle in hand creating havoc in others' lives, but towards end of the film stripped off all his luxuries and status, Patelar in a worn out mundu becomes the hunted. It is only when Pattelar is killed that Thommy exults in freedom. The film ends with the death of Patelar at the hands of his enemies and Thommi's return to his wife and 'freedom'.

In the film, the ambivalent relationship between Thommi and Patelar could be compared to the relationship between Lucky and Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for*

*Godot*. Pozzo-Lucky displays an intriguing master-slave relationship and the play also traces the role reversal that occurs in their relationship towards the end of the play. A similar idea is developed in George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* in which fear and loathing transforms into a kind of affection and compliance.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Vidheyan* is an overwhelming vision of human bondage and the meaning of power stripped down to a violent and grim tale about a sadistic landlord and his squeamish indentured servant. The film provides insights into "the life of the servile narrator who lives his life to quench his master's ruthless thirst for violence and deprivation. In spite of his introspective awareness about serving the devil, the narrator cannot act as a conscientious individual until the master is murdered, which leaves the servile man rather perplexed by the newly gained freedom" (Joshi 24). *Vidheyan* is a perfect example of Stockholm syndrome and the intricate workings of Master-slave dynamics in which the victim forms a positive bond with the aggressor as a survival strategy. It also suggests that trauma bonding does not necessarily require a hostage scenario and can be witnessed in any abusive relationship.

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