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Lilya and Uncle Tom

A landmark work of the contemporary abolitionist movement.

By Donna M. Hughes

In the progress of every human-rights movement, there is often one story that transforms human consciousness. It is one story that puts a human face on atrocities that are committed on a larger scale. It is one story so powerful and heartbreaking, that touches the hearts and outrages the minds of enough people that society's perception and tolerance of this injustice is changed forever.

In 1852, the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the fictional, but realistic account of chattel slavery in the United States, is credited with raising the nation's consciousness about the horrors of slavery. This novel profoundly influenced public opinion about the cruelty of slavery and helped popularize the abolitionist movement. When Mrs. Stowe met President Lincoln, he reportedly credited her with starting the Civil War.

One hundred fifty years later, in 2002, Swedish filmmaker Lucas Moodysson has written and directed another consciousness-altering landmark work on slavery. *Lilya-4-Ever* is a film that tells the story of Lilya, a 16-year-old girl from "somewhere in the former Soviet Union." Betrayed and abandoned by family, friends, and societal institutions, Lilya becomes a victim of sexual slavery, also known as trafficking for prostitution. The contemporary slave traders and owners — the trafficker, the pimp, and the men who rent her by the hour — brutalize her until she is destroyed.

Lilya-4-Ever is the story of one girl trafficked to Sweden, but her story gives a face to every one of estimated 800,000 to 900,000 victims trafficked in the world each year. *Lilya-4-Ever* is the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of the anti-trafficking movement — the fictionalized, but realistic account of cruelty to one girl that is awakening the public conscience to the horrors of global trafficking for prostitution.

The abolitionists of the 1800s encountered apathy and public denial about the harm of slavery. In fact, in 1853, Harriet Beecher Stowe published a collection of documents entitled *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin: Presenting the Original Facts and Documents Upon which the Story is Founded; Together with Corroborative Statements Verifying the Truth of the Work*, to substantiate the events in each chapter of her book.

Today, anti-trafficking activists encounter the same kind of denial and disbelief about the dimensions of contemporary slavery. Opponents, including brothel owners and managers, governments who profit from legalized prostitution, and — amazingly — some people who work for human-rights organizations and aid agencies attempt to undermine the work of modern day abolitionists by claiming that sexual trafficking is a myth, overly exaggerated, or that the women and girls consent and accept the violence as the price they pay for a job or to migrate.

From my 15 years of research and advocacy for victims, I can say that every detail about trafficking and sexual slavery in *Lilya-4-Ever* represents something I know to have happened over and over to thousands of victims.

"Brutal" is the most common word used to describe *Lilya-4-Ever*. The reviewer for the *Guardian* writes, *Lilya-4-Ever* is an "extravagantly cruel movie: really cruel in a way that I

have hardly experienced in any other film." Yet, we see no gratuitous violence, no sensationalism, no pornographic sex acts. In fact, the audience is spared a direct look at scenes of brutality. We just see the vacant stare on Lilya's face after yet another rape.

In her documentary of facts about slavery in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe writes, "The writer acknowledges that [*Uncle Tom's Cabin*] is a very inadequate representation of slavery; and it is so, necessarily, for this reason, — that slavery, in some of its workings, is too dreadful for the purposes of art. A work which should represent it strictly as it is would be a work which could not be read. And all works must draw a veil somewhere, or they cannot succeed."

Portrayals of contemporary sexual slavery have the same limitations. A number of people who know what happens to victims of trafficking have remarked that although Lilya suffered many horrible attacks, they know of cases that are worse.

The scenes from *Lilya-4-Ever* that may have the most conscious altering effect on viewers are the scenes of the sex acts of prostitution. Moodysson presents a perspective we do not get from Hollywood, where prostitution is romanticized, glamorized, and eroticized. In *Lilya-4-Ever*, the "clients" — the men who rent Lilya by the hour from the pimp — are shown mostly from Lilya's perspective. Their anonymous, swollen faces and torsos pant and heave over her. When the camera focuses on Lilya, she is seen, at first, unconvincingly trying to smile, then cringing, and, finally, screaming. Moodysson's portrayal of a "commercial sex act" shows a dehumanized physical act, completely devoid of love, intimacy, passion, or human connection.

This honest treatment of trafficking and prostitution is the result of decades of work by non-governmental organizations to raise awareness about trafficking and to pressure governments to combat violence against women and the trafficking of women and children. It may not be coincidental that such a groundbreaking film comes from Sweden, a country with a feminist government that is among the leaders in working to abolish sexual trafficking. Three years ago, Sweden became the first country to legally redefine prostitution as a form of violence against women. In the U.S., the conservative administration of President Bush recently issued a policy directive stating that prostitution is "inherently harmful and dehumanizing" and "contribute[s] to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons."

The abolitionist position of the Bush administration may be why the State Department made the bold decision to show *Lilya-4-Ever* at the secretary's Open Forum last month. The audience was moved, and a number of people who were new to the topic were inspired to get involved in combating trafficking. One woman said to me, "This film educates you through your heart before it gets to your head."

Increasingly, groups from diverse political positions and philosophies are educating their constituencies and lobbying their representatives to take action against sexual trafficking. The political breadth of the abolitionist movement, from feminist to conservative, gives hope for its success. One of the landmarks in creating a broad based movement is *Lilya-4-Ever*.

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