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The Politics of Gaze in the Representation of Women in Contemporary Bollywood Horror Movies

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Abstract:

Horror films that made their way to mainstream Bollywood cinema by delivering commercial box office hits especially those that released after 2008, showed a change in the representation of women. Apart from showing women as witches these movies began to portray prolonged tortures inflicted on women bodies while the heroes, their saviours, suffered a little. A few others portrayed the sexual aspects of female bodies, giving rise to 'scopophilia'. My paper originates from this chain of observations the credibility of which I wish to prove in my paper. I have selected a few Hindi horror movies that released between the years 2008 – 2015 and that earned huge profits on low budgets by incorporating the aforementioned elements. I will also attempt to show how a few other films that released during the same period could not fare well at the Box Office as they lacked the above factors.

Keywords: horror, 'scopophilia', female bodies, torture.

INTRODUCTION

Horror movies became a subgenre of Bollywood, that is, the Hindi film industry, since the late 1940s and this subgenre gained its popularity in 1970s—1990s. Today horror movies have made their way to the mainstream box office hits. Almost all the horror movies always comprise of haunted houses, forests, exorcism, demonic forces without really having to offer anything new. In the past few years a peculiar similarity can be found in the films that became box-office hits and the similarity lies in the representation and objectification of women in these films. For my paper, I have chosen seven Bollywood horror movies—*1920* (2008), *Haunted 3D* (2011), *Ragini MMS* (2011), *Raaz 3* (2012), *1920:Evil Returns* (2012), *Ragini MMS 2* (2014), *Alone* (2015) – all of them being box-office hits of their time.

The 2008 movie, *1920*, has as its story a married couple Rajneesh Duggal (Arjun Singh) and Adah Sharma (Lisa) moving to a mansion (which Arjun intends to rebuild into a hotel) after marriage and there, the wife (Lisa) starts experiencing strong supernatural presence. Subsequently, Lisa is possessed but is ultimately saved by her husband (Arjun). *Haunted 3D*, a 2011 Hindi horror film, stars Mahaakshay Chakraborty as Rehan and Twinkle Bajpayee as Meera. Rehan moves into a mansion where he is sent by his father but starts hearing strange noises and experiences some paranormal activities going on. He then happens to discover a letter where Meera (who is already dead) has written about how her piano

teacher Iyer (Arif Zakaria) tried to violate her modesty and in the heat of the moment she killed him but even after his death, Meera's chastity was being violated upon, almost daily, by the ghost of Iyer. So, she chose to commit suicide. Rehan's sympathy and a rag-picker's spell takes him 75 years back so that he can save Meera and free her from her cursed state and he finally does so.

Ragini MMS, released in 2011, was inspired from the 2007 American supernatural horror film *Paranormal Activity*, a found footage film, where Rajkumar Rao plays Uday and Kainaz Motivala plays Ragini. Uday takes Ragini to a secluded house and intends to shoot a video of Ragini, without her knowledge. However, the secluded house is already a shelter to the spirit of a woman who had been killed by her family long ago. While Uday gets killed, Ragini manages to escape. A quasi-sequel to *1920* was the 2012 movie, *1920: Evil Returns*, stars two lovers Jaidev Verma (Aftab Shivdasani) and Smruti (Twinkle Bajpayee). Smruti is possessed by the ghost of Amar (Sharad Kelkar), who is Jaidev's enemy and stands in the way of their union. Ultimately after a series of horrifying incidents, Jaidev saves Smruti. *Raaz 3* (2012) revolves around Shanaya (Bipasha Basu), Aditya (Emraan Hashmi) and Sanjana (Esha Gupta). Shanaya, a successful actress, feels her place slipping out because of the new-entrant Sanjana and turns to black magic in order to destroy Sanjana with the help of her lover Aditya. However, Aditya falls in love with the helpless Sanjana who is being constantly harmed by Shanaya. Aditya ultimately dares to differ from Shanaya and saves Sanjana while Shanaya commits suicide.

A sequel to the film *Ragini MMS* (2011), *Ragini MMS 2* was released in 2014. An erotic-horror film, it starred Sunny Leone and Sahil Prem in the lead roles. The film shows that the MMS of Ragini (which had been made in the earlier film) has gone viral and a director chooses to make a film on the story of Ragini. Sunny who would be playing Ragini in the movie, meets the real Ragini and the ghost possesses her. Sunny starts killing her crew members until at last a doctor, Dr Dutta (who has studied Ragini's case) comes to save them. Another movie, *Alone*, released in 2015, stars Bipasha Basu in a double role as Sanjana and Anjana (two conjoined twins) and Karan Singh Grover as Kabir. Sanjana is possessed by the dead Anjana's soul and ultimately it is revealed that Sanjana had killed Anjana in order to gain Kabir.

All the above stories are not just about haunted houses, the conventional war between good and evil and the victory of God over the evil spirits — these movies are much more than these clichés. In all the aforementioned seven movies, there are women who become objects of violence — they are sexually abused, injured and vigorously tortured and there are men — their saviours — who fight against all odds to save their ladies. Obviously, these films abide by the rules of patriarchy where the man proves to be the stronger sex by showing his courage at the face of terrifying incidents. Men, not surprisingly though, are saved from constant tortures.

FEAR OF THE OBJECT

A close analysis might call for a supposition that women receive misogynistic treatment in horror movies due to the fear of the 'abject'. In this connection I would quote Julia Kristeva who discusses and defines 'abject' in her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982) : "The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine...I" (Kristeva 1). Abject may be defined as the delicate border between 'self' and 'other'. The abject is what one wants to expel from the body but the body cannot exist without it. Again Kristeva in her essay "Approaching Abjection" (*Powers of Horror*) says:

Loathing an item of food, a piece of filth, waste, or dung. . . The spasms and vomiting that protect me. The repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage and muck." (Kristeva 2)

The tears, faeces, urine, vomit, mucus, blood become the site of erogenous zones. The blood gets related to the menstrual cycle of a woman which only a female body can perform. In *1920*, Lisa (Adah Sharma) feels a presence of evil in the mansion. She roams about in the mansion, unprotected and unaware of what might happen next. Her 'loathing of food' becomes a concern for her husband Arjun (Rajneesh Duggal). Soon she is possessed by the evil spirit and is found eating raw meat from the body of an animal. She breaks glasses, she jumps off the stairs, she is someone who knows neither any bounds nor can she be controlled anymore. She hurts herself with sharp objects, oozes blood, does some disgusting deeds and also kills men who try to save her. In this connection I would quote Barbara Creed who has used the term 'monstrous-feminine' in her Introduction to her famous book *The Monstrous-Feminine*:

I have used the term 'monstrous-feminine' as the term 'female monster' implies a simple reversal of 'male monster'. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his audience. A new term is needed to specify these differences. As with all other stereotypes of the feminine, from virgin to whore, she is defined in terms of her sexuality. The phrase 'monstrous-feminine' emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity. (Creed 8)

In *1920: Evil Returns*, Smruti (Twinkle Bajpayee), gets possessed by an evil spirit who intends to destroy Jaidev (Aftab Shivdasani). She vomits out nails drenched in blood. When questioned about the identity of the spirit, she vomits on the faces of the hero and the priest, her eyes become red and then she injures herself. Both the heroines no longer adhere to the norms of what may be called 'beautiful'. They are repulsive and ugly. The abject in them needs to be purified since their bodies no longer abide by the social codes of conduct. The 'monstrous- feminine' becomes a threat. Their bodies become polluted and contaminated since they have crossed a certain border, which distinguishes between 'me' and 'not-me', that should not have been crossed. These bodies then need purgation because the abject needs to be separated from these contaminated bodies. Here again the relevance of Kristeva's words can be found as she says:

The various means of ‘purifying’ the abject—the various catharses—make up the history of religions, and end up with that catharsis par excellence called art, both on the far and near side of religion. (Kristeva 17)

Thus, the purification of abject forms the basis of the exorcisms shown in *1920* and *1920:Evil Returns*.

Jane Ussher in this connection upholds Creed’s views and writes in her book *Managing the Monstrous Feminine: Regulating the Reproductive Body* Jane Ussher writes:

Woman is literally a monster: a failed and botched male who is only born female due to an excess of moisture and of coldness during the process of conception (Ussher 1).

A woman, whom ‘art’ has always portrayed as beautiful, always glorified her pulchritude seems to pose neither any threat nor any danger to the opposite sex. To quote Jane Ussher in this connection again:

Karen Horney has argued that the idealised version of woman we see in art (or film) is not a glorification of woman, but a reflection of man’s desire to conceal his dread, for there is no need for me to dread a creature so wonderful, so beautiful, nay so saintly. (Ussher 2)

So, when pretty heroines like Twinkle Bajpayee and Adah Sharma turn into vile creatures rousing aversion, they need to be cleansed and brought back to their normal selves so that they again fit into the societal scheme of things.

TORTURE FILMS

In all the four films, *1920*, *1920:Evil Returns*, *Haunted 3D*, *Alone*—there is another commonality—prolonged tortures inflicted on the female bodies. In *1920*, the evil spirit of a treacherous soldier possesses the body of Lisa. Lisa becomes a victim of male violence, while the evil spirit makes her twist her head, makes her penetrate a sharp knife into her thighs, makes her cut her veins that make her bleed, she falls down the stairs, climbs the pillars, falls down again—all the while hurting herself more. Violence and torture of the heroine is also a recurring theme in its quasi-sequel *1920:Evil Returns*, where yet again the soul of a traitorous friend finds its shelter in the body of the beautiful heroine Smruti. Again goes the same old story — she flies from pillar to pillar, hitting her head against the wall, twisting her head and body 180 degrees, eating the flesh of dead men — all of them being not self-inflicted but she is being constantly forced by the evil spirit to injure herself. *Ragini MMS* uses the ‘final girl’ trope where Ragini is the last girl who survives to vanquish the evil spirit and finally escape. Although she escapes death, she could not escape torture. Uday gets possessed first and is compelled to commit suicide but that makes him escape the torturous journey that Ragini has to undergo before she finally destroys the spirit. She is tortured, her hairs are pulled, she is slapped, she is thrown around, but finally she is the ‘final girl’ who survives to tell her story. In *Raaz 3*, Shanaya turns to black magic to ruin Sanjana’s career. Sanjana gets nightmares, her servant kills herself brutally in front of Sanjana’s eyes, she is attacked by moths which

force her to open her clothes and run insanelly amidst a crowd. In *Alone*, Bipasha Basu is possessed by the soul of her dead conjoined twin sister — well, apparently then it becomes a bit different from the former two films. But is it really so? As the story progresses, gradually we find that her pains, her injuries are all because of her past misdeed. She had murdered her twin sister and after murdering her, she had donned her appearance in order to marry Kabir, the hero. So although, she is the victim of violence, she fails to garner sympathy of the audience because of her villainous character. The heroes are the ones who are entrusted with the job of saving or protecting the heroines from the demonic spirits. In the process, they suffer a little or sometimes they do not suffer at all. They keep the glory of masculinity intact by successfully saving their heroines. In all the seven movies, women are subject to prolonged tortures and sufferings — the reason behind this is that it increases the saleability of the films. In an article “Monster Pains: Masochism, Menstruation, and Identification in the Horror Film” by Aviva Briefel, she analyzes that even the monstrous sufferings are very much gendered. She explains that pain, being central to a horror film, “determines audience positioning in the horror film.” She presents two central ideas to the identification of monstrous sufferings:

The genre presents two contrasting modes of monstrous suffering: masochism and menstruation... Masochism is central to the construction of male monsters, who initiate their sadistic rampages with acts of self-mutilation... The female counterpart to the act of self-mutilation is menstruation, a narrative event that positions the audience in an uncomfortably close relationship to the female monster. (Briefel 16)

In *Haunted 3D*, the violence inflicted on the heroine has a whole new face. Meera accidentally murdered her piano teacher Professor Iyer while he was trying to violate her chastity. But even after his death, his lust did not subside down. His evil soul kills Meera’s driver, servant and governess and then inflicts perpetual sexual torture on her. Although not possessed by a demonic force, Meera becomes the victim of male violence and ceaselessly is sexually assaulted by the evil spirit. Women, usually considered to be the innocent and tender sex, become the weapon for selling and promoting a film. A hero, in distress or being tortured by a ghost would not accumulate as positive a response as a young damsel in distress would. When women are in extreme agony, audience would experience a sympathetic feeling towards her — hence the trope of ‘misogyny’.

THE MALE GAZE AND ‘SCOPOPHILIA’

A bit different is the case with *Raaz 3*, *Ragini MMS 2* and *Alone*. *Raaz 3* stars Bollywood’s ‘Scream Queen’, Bipasha Basu, who is also the driving force of the film. She becomes the evil woman but with a difference. Not just an evil woman using black magic to torture Sanjana, Shanaya (Basu) is also a woman with a lot of sexual appeal. With a number of bold scenes and a display of skin, Shanaya becomes a desirable object.

This same perspective holds true for *Ragini MMS 2* which focuses absolutely on the sexual appeal of Sunny Leone (an ex-pornstar). She is the seductress, walking across the

haunted house, luring and seducing men into making love with her before she finally kills them. Her display of her beautiful body gives rise to 'scopophilia' (Greek 'skopeo', 'look at') which is the name given to the pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects. Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" refers to Freud and says:

The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures, one is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at. Originally, in his "Three Essays on Sexuality", Freud isolated scopophilia as one of the component instincts of sexuality which exist as drives quite independently of the erotogenic zones. At this point he associated scopophilia with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. (Mulvey 835)

The film was undoubtedly a commercial success. The total budget of the film was 18 crores but it grossed a whopping 65 crores. Thanks to Sunny!

Bollywood's 'Scream Queen', Bipasha Basu is not just a pretty damsel in distress running across the hallways, shouting for help. She is much more than that. With bold outfits and a display of skin, she becomes a desirable object like Sunny. It is not just another horror movie portraying a woman possessed by a spirit that incessantly inflicts pain on her body; the movie in fact showcases the beautiful body of the Bengali beauty Bipasha which evokes pleasure. Laura Mulvey in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' says:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly... Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed... Women displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle... (Mulvey 837)

Although a horror movie, we find some bold scenes and a show of skin by Bipasha Basu. Mulvey further adds: "The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing Scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect"(Mulvey 836). Despite a thin plot, the film went on to become a commercial success grossing 250 million while its total budget was 180 million.

CONCLUSION

Pavan Kripalana, who directed the super-hit *Ragini MMS* in 2011, directed another movie in 2014 titled *Darr @ the Mall*, subtracting the pornographic elements which the former film contained and the results were unsatisfactory. Whereas *Ragini MMS* grossed 90 million with a tiny budget of just 13 million, *Darr @ the Mall* could not even earn enough to recover its making cost (budget: 20 crores, total earnings: 5.5 crores). Again, in 2014, whereas *Ragini MMS* went on to become a super-hit at the box-office, *Pizza*, another horror movie, which released two months after *Ragini MMS 2*, earned hardly 2.5 crores (one crore more than its making charge 1.5 crores). The year 2011 became witness to the success of two horror

movies *Haunted 3D* (budget:94.9 million, collection: 550 million) and *Ragini MMS*. Another 3D film, *Bhoot Returns*, released in 2012, featured a small girl getting possessed by a spirit but it failed to impress the audience earning a little over its budget of 50 million. In fact, *Aatma* (starring Bipasha Basu) which released in 2013 after Basu's successful *Raaz 3* in 2012, underperformed. *Aatma* features Basu as a loving mother and not as the object of male gaze and it fails to connect with the audience, earning around 15 crores, whereas *Raaz 3* grossed 674.1 million with its budget of 250 million.

The aforementioned films which underperformed at the box office have a peculiar commonality among them—they have either not represented women as a potential object of male gaze or have not shown spirits inflicting endless tortures on women. The films that became commercial successes but released before or after these 'flop' films showed women as objectifying the dominant male gaze or showed the purgation of the 'abject' or women being tortured and finally being saved by the heroes. Thus it clearly shows that the above discussed type of portrayal of women is used for earning huge profits with low production budgets.

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