

Article

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Ghosts of Hindi Cinema and The Trajectory of Horror Genre in Bollywood



Tumbbad (2018)

Do we really love to be scared in that dark theatre, or is it the eternal quest of human beings to unearth the unknown that created the horror genre in films? Simple research shows that all these intense emotions emanated from the divine concept of God and Satan. These concepts are perennially existent, in every country and culture, in some form or the other. Horror, as a genre, included all kinds of sub-genres, thus making it more spiral. For example, the supernatural, zombie, slasher, and mystery are all featured in the horror category. Mainly, folklore, tradition, and age-old belief system is responsible for perpetuating the consciousness of this other world. Hollywood began its tryst with horror with the production of the film *Dracula* (1932), which has been revived repeatedly. Films like *The Exorcist* (1973), *A Nightmare in Elm Street* (1984), and *Friday the 13th* (2009) promoted supernatural elements in film and thus created a sustainable and loyal audience for the horror genre worldwide.

Sigmund Freud's model of ordinary human consciousness connects to horror cinema through his

vision of abnormality: the origin and effects of the monstrous, the disgusting, the hidden, the murderous, and the perverse. Explaining why people are drawn towards horror elements, Freud, in his famous essay "*The Uncanny*" (1919), discussed the sensation regarding fear. He explained, "The subject of the '*uncanny*' is a province of this kind. It undoubtedly belongs to all that is terrible — to all that arouses dread and creeping horror; it is equally certain, too, that the word is not always used in a definable sense so that it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread. Yet we may expect that it implies some intrinsic quality that justifies using a special name. One is curious to know what this peculiar quality is, which allows us to distinguish as "*uncanny*" certain things within the boundaries of what is "fearful."

The German word *unheimlich* is the opposite of *Heimlich*. *Heimlich*, meaning 'familiar,' 'native,' 'belonging to the home',; and we are tempted to conclude that what is '*uncanny*' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. Not all things unfamiliar is scary, yet within the ad-hoc

journey between the unknown and return to the known lies the traumatic fearful sensation. It's more like the “*mark of the return of the repressed.*” Thus, the audience is being taken for a ride with others that can be real or a figment of our repressed psyche. Most of the time, the thin line of difference between mystery and supernatural spills into each other and, in the end, produces an eerie feeling among us. Something that we want to hide but cannot, and it eventually comes to the surface. Thereby coaxing us to encounter the underlying demons we all have within us. Confronting our hidden fears, desires, and anxieties by watching horror films is like the *vipassana* experience that reveals our dormant selves to us..... This experience can be fascinating but can also be traumatic. As we seldom wish to experience anything dark voluntarily. The perennial enigma called the subconscious is something human beings have no control over —the ambivalence of the real and the unreal merges in these films. The three-hour gaze into the horror films compels the audience to face the “*uncanny*”, imagining it is an ad-hoc stint with the repressed subconscious; they fear yet enjoy the so-called unreal. Yet, even when the film ends, the visual images and occurrences remain with them, mostly taking them back to the cinema hall to witness another unfamiliar narrative. As the uncanny lives in the subconscious, we either refuse to confront the objects (here, in horror films) or keep returning to them, believing they are not real (especially when happening in cinema). Thus, we tend to combat, confront, and fear and eventually come to terms with the *uncanny*.



Madhumati (1958)

Before delving deeper into the realm of cinematic neurosis caused by horror films, let us probe into the trajectory of Indian horror films. Besides a few noteworthy films, it was Ramsay Brothers who established horror films as a specific category in Hindi cinema. Occasional trysts with the supernatural repeatedly occurred in Hindi films before Ramsay Brothers took charge. For example, Kamal Amrohi's *Mahal* (1949), Bimal Roy's *Madhumati* (1958), Raj Khosla's horror trilogy *Woh Kaun Thi* (1964), *Mera Saaya* (1966) and *Anita* (1969), *Gumnam* (1967), *Bees Saal Baad* (1962), *Kohraa* (1964), all these films dealt with supernatural existence.

Despite Hollywood interference, Hindi horror films managed to steer clear of any explicit western influence in their art and aesthetics, especially in creating their own narratives. For example, however gross it might seem, the Ramsay Brothers' films will always remain relevant in the discussion of the Indian horror genre. Though mostly considered below-standard films, they had their distinctive style that left an indelible mark in Indian film history. The semi-erotic narrative and almost iconic presence of Samri in their ventures like *Purana Mandir* (1984), *Tahkhana* (1986), *Veerana* (1988), *Purani Haveli* (1989), *Bandh Darwaja* (1990) triggered a spate of gore and haunting stories. Churails, sinister graveyards, 'gorey tantrics' masquerading the screens with occasional spine-chilling screams and ominous background scores might seem to belong to a bygone era in this fast-moving digital world, but in 70's down '90s, Ramsay meant horror.

One notable element in all these films is their typical Indianness. Rooted in their age-old belief system of good and evil, they remain authentic in their representation of supernatural elements. Tantric, thakurs, transgressive women turning into churails, appearance and reappearance of Godmen and aghoris (the devotees of God Shiva) firmly established Indian mysticism.

From the 90s, the horror scenario underwent a massive transformation with more technical suaveness, exciting storylines and artistic performances. In a word, horror achieved a kind of

sophistication in the hands of directors like Ram Gopal Verma, Vikram Bhatt etc. Vikram Bhatt successfully explored the horror genre in a spate of films. His *Raaz* (2002) is the highest-grosser to date. An unofficial remake of the Hollywood blockbuster “*What lies Beneath*”, this one created a brooding atmosphere of haunting menace throughout the film. With picturesque landscapes, and captivating songs, the film remained a favourite for many. In the new millennium, these directors provided a new twist in the horror genre and often merged it with humour, mystery, and human stories around it that produced exciting results. Pawan Kripalani, in his *Ragini MMS* (2011), claimed to be based on actual events and relied heavily on the paranormal activities a girl witnessed. Kannan Iyer, in his cryptic film *Ek Tha Dayan* (2013), managed to pull off a story of occult, witch and suspense in the modern-day city. Ghost narratives are usually based in villages, amongst the wild nature, but Ram Gopal Varma, in his eclectic feature film, *Bhoot* (2003), based his plot on a high rise where modernity is at its peak. He compels us to understand that no scientific progress, rationality, and positivist outlook can destroy the eternal concept of God and Satan. This is the story of an avenging woman and how she hits back with a vengeance in her afterlife by possessing another body. These are age-old stories told in a new and smarter manner. What Varma successfully establishes is that growing urbanisation cannot kill our inner demons.

Debutant director Amar Kaushik takes us back to a village and its secret demonic folklore with his fantastic comedy horror film *Stree* (2018). The plot is based on the urban legend Nale Ba (Translation: Come tomorrow) of Karnataka, modified as *O Stree Kal Aana* (Oh woman come tomorrow) in the film. A very interesting story, the film underlines women’s power and celebrates it. The producer duo has already successfully made *Roohi* (2021), another horror film with a female protagonist. Thus, they plan to complete a horror trilogy with their upcoming *Bhediya*, featuring Varun Dhawan, in 2022. The director’s innovative storytelling and brilliant performances from the lead actors elevated these films to a superior level.

Pari (2018) by Prosit Roy is an Anushka Sharma production who also acted as a protagonist in this bizarre film. It revolves around a demon called Iffrit and a satanic cult called Auladhchakra from Bangladesh. The film, with an unusual storyline, created new vistas for the whole genre of Hindi horror films. The film was delightful, with a stylised camera, sharp editing, and a haunting background score. For serious horror film lovers, this film is a blessing. *Pari* is a glaring example of how far the horror genre has progressed in India.

Tumbbad (2018) the penultimate horror film by Rahi Anil Barve. Set in the pre-independence period, this film is an epic. Vinayak Rao, the film’s protagonist, accidentally stumbled upon the hidden treasures in a dilapidated house in the rain-drenched village of Tumbbad. The treasure is cursed and guarded by a demon named Hastar. A visually stunning film, *Tumbbad* concocts Indian mythology in the horror genre. The underlying philosophical intonation in *Tumbbad* is not scary narration but addresses greed, one of the basic instincts of human beings. *Tumbbad* is a milestone in Indian horror cinema, and consequently, it featured in the critics section of the 70th Venice International Film Festival.



***Bulbbul* (2020)**

Anvita Dutt, in her *Bulbbul* (2020), a period piece, recreated a Bengali zamindar house and re-established the concept of a witch who can be identified with her twisted feet. Still, a sordid story lurking behind provides a double-edged plotline. Brilliant usage of Bengali history, the dark secrets under the feudal regime, the exploitation of women

and the revenge story have been beautifully yet quite scarily represented in this horror film, released exclusively on the OTT platform. The gloomy atmospheric element defining every moment in the movie, the creepy mood prevalent in every corner, and the scary mise-en-scene elevated the film to another world. The notable attribute of today's horror films is that these films are multi-layered and vested with multiple meanings. *Bulbbul*, under the garb of a simple horror film, is an archive of a feudal society where suppressed sexuality, male chauvinism, and women's exploitation showed society's ugly rotten face. So, what if the women fights back, even as a demon, to seek justice. *Bulbbul* is a complex narrative of possessive love and fevered lust, unrequited love and the presence of a demon-woman in the nights of blood moon creates the nether world of lust, murder and revenge, leading to the final scene of epiphany. The film is a poignant take on the patriarchy and a woman who seeks revenge.

One astonishing fact is that in all the above films I have mentioned, most films depict an avenging woman as a demon who turns into a witch and seek revenge from the other world. Most of these women are considered transgressive when alive; society, primarily men, tried to straighten them in their lifetime and, of course, wrongly. They reappear in the mortal land to seek justice. This recurring formula takes me back to the medieval practice of witch-hunting, a pagan approach where transgressive women are hurled with stones.

It is a kind of purgation that happens while watching horror films; this cathartic feeling helps us ward off our negative emotions. In his celebrated essay "Why Horror", Noel Carroll equated the existence of monsters with our vast fantasy world. People seeking sensation in their lives get aroused by horror films, often in the pornographic sector, which

tends to resort to graphic violence tantamount to horrifying elements. Pornography and horror are like Siamese twins, demanding hyper-emotional reactions from the audience. Yet, no Hindi filmmakers recently indulged in projecting explicit sexual images except in one or two films; this resulted primarily because of possible censorship and public outcry. Elements of titillation and revulsion, both present in these films, lure the audience to flock to theatres. It can be remembered that Sunny Leone's item number was one of the prime reasons for *Ragini MMS* (2011) to be likeable to us.

In a post-modern 'grey' world where everything spills into the other, horror cannot be confined to a rigid boundary; it often tiptoes the line of outright porn. To avoid censorship and other commercially non-viable issues, porn has been conveniently substituted by romance. In *Stree*, *Roohi and Pari*, all the paranormal elements fall in love with their male counterparts. That makes the shocking elements in the film much bearable for the spectators.

Hindi horror films have thus witnessed a radical and subversive transfiguration in recent times with commendable progress in the genre. The paradigm shifts from theatre-like backdrops to impressive horror films that satisfy both mainstream cine-goers and critics alike is being produced more significantly. The brilliance of the latest Hindi horror genre is showing a steadfast progression and breakthrough in revolutionising fear and terror. Films in the 2000s are a period in horror worth revisiting in Bollywood. The emotion related to the dead is eternal and universal as all these 'PretAtmas' resides in our living selves. Which self we titillate and indulge in allows them to resurface. Modern 'smart horror' films have been critically re-explored over the past decade with a critical eye. And that's commendable.

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