



Reconsidering Scriptural Demonic Iconography: Monstrosity as Mythic Subtext in Bollywood Horror Cinema

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The various images of monsters— human, animal or hybrid— are clearly intended not as exact, but as iconic, representations, for not only do the same narrative descriptions reappear across a range of works spanning many decades, but the selfsame image may be used within a single book to illustrate accounts of several different creatures.

— Margrit Shilldrick, *Embodying
The Monster: Encounters with the
Vulnerable Self*¹

In an introduction to his book *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen clearly states his manner of analysis of cultural reading from monster's point of view. He proposes in this book to sketch a new *modus legendi* of reading cultures from the monsters they engender without fetishizing history.² He safely contends that history is perhaps disguised as culture. Here, he makes a grand gesture by stating that '...history is composed of a multitude of fragments, rather than of smooth epistemological wholes.'³ Hence, speaking about the birth of a monster in his first thesis "The Monster's Body is a Cultural Body", Cohen meticulously suggests that ancient myths are these epistemological spaces which give birth to the monster at a metaphoric crossroad as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment. He proposes that the 'monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read ..."that which reveals", "that which warns"...it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.'⁴ Sticking to Cohen's approach, I will argue that monsters in Indian horror literature and films are purely mythic icons that resurface in these works in different contexts. The intertextual approach to this issue will also lead us to understand Hindu mythology and its relation with other mythologies of the world with respect to the monster figure which is a key to understand the nature and significance of evil in a global context. Bollywood films have exhaustively used diverse Hindu myths to fabricate the complex matrices of their plots. Here, I will delimit



myself with those Hindi horror films which figure horrendous monsters that act as agents while playing prime roles in stating morals.

But before that, it would be worthwhile to reconsider the Hindu mythology in its austere form paying special attention to the monster icons and their fundamental functions. It is generally an accepted notion that all myths of all climes are relevant to all times. Myths are unanimously considered as ancient wisdom. Do metaphoric monsters carry any significance in our lives in modern times? While Jeffrey Jerome Cohen begins his preface to the already-mentioned book with the line ‘We live in a time of monsters.’⁵ (vii), Dani Cavallaro mentions that many societies tend to warn their subjects to ‘look out for monsters everywhere, since the threat of degeneracy cannot be confined to some dark cave but actually traverses the cultural environment in its entirety.’⁶ (Cavallaro, 172) The omnipresence of monstrosity in present times probably makes us hearken to older myths to redeem and rescue ourselves from this insinuating evil. *Bhagavatgita* enumerates demonology (Chapter 16, Verse No. 4) through the following Sanskrit verse:

Dambho Darpobhimanacchya krodha parushyameva cha,
Adnyanan chabhijatasya partha sampadmasurima.

Lord Krishna explains Arjuna that egoism, pride, arrogance and ignorance are the chief features of a demon.⁷ The myth of Pralhad is a classic instance of this doctrine. The demon Hirannyakashipu tries to kill his son Pralhad for chanting the glories of the God. God appears in the form of “Narsimha”, whose half body was of a man and rest of the lion, kills the demon Hirannyakashipu and blesses Pralhad for his loyalty. All God/Demon episodes in Hindu mythology preach that evil cannot be sustained and good achieves victory over morally bad or wicked.

Probably the most important demonic iconography is to be found in the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*. The three demons Kumbhakarna, Shurpankha and Ravana are the ultimate prototypes of devilry in Indian mythology. It is generally assumed that *Ramayana* cannot be completed without Ravana—the arch villain of the epic. It is interesting to note that his mother Keshini belonged to the *Rakshasa* (demon) family, while his father Pulasti was a sage. Keshini was an evil temptress who seduced Pulasti to get married with him. When the fact was known to the sage, he cursed his wife that she will bear cursed issue. The fatal results of this curse were the three demons that played key roles in the whole *Ramayana*. The



asuras (demons) from *Mahabharata* are usually associated with the Apocalypse, especially Duryodhana, who is one of the hundred demons known as *Kaurava*. He is identified as an incarnation of the demon Kali. According to *Vishnu Purana*, Kali is a negative manifestation working towards the cause of “the end of the world.” Vis-à-vis, these recurring demons are as much a subtext in Indian literature as the Gods who antagonize them.

The demons from Indian mythology resurface in Indian literature and Bollywood movies since times immemorial. Especially, Bollywood horror films exclusively use this set of demons to evoke listlessness in its audiences. Horror genre film in India can be dated back from early 1940s with Kamal Amrohi’s 1949 box office hit *Mahal* (The Mansion) igniting huge popularity of horror genre. Hemant Kumar’s *Bees Saal Baad* (After Twenty Years, 1962), Raja Navathe’s *Gumnaam* (Anonymous, 1965) and Mehmood’s *Bhoot Bangala* (Ghost Bungalow, 1965) soon led by examples how chilling terror should be induced in the minds of the spectators. It was, however, 1970s which laid the foundation for horror films with Ramsay Brothers’ *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche* (Two Yards beneath the Ground, 1972). Ramsay brothers can be called as fathers of Bollywood horror films, though; they may rightly be termed as *tantriks* (Black Magicians) for bringing the dead back and creating run amok situations in their films.

These horror films, like average Bombay Cinema, sought inspiration from the older Hindu myths in featuring the monstrous in it. As Vijay Mishra puts it, ‘I read Bombay film as a form homologous with the narrative paradigm established over two millennia ago in the Sanskrit epics, namely the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Bombay films may, therefore, be seen as transformations of the narrative structures which may be discovered in these epics.’⁸ Patrick Hogan also shares this opinion when he says that ‘...the *Ramayana* bears both directly and indirectly on the development of countless romantic and heroic plots in India from Sanskrit drama through the most recent Bollywood films. Each new use of that poem reaffirms its paradigmatic place.’⁹ Rajkumar Kohali’s *Naagin* (Female Snake, 1976) is a noted example of this. Though the plot is based on a popular folklore, it has its roots in the *Mahabharata* in which Lord Krishna (An incarnation of Lord Vishnu) taking a form of an enchantress to lure the demons for killing them.

Later horror films continued this mythical formula during the 1980s with amazing results. Of these, Ramsay Brothers’ *Purana Mandir* (The Old Temple, 1984) came as “their *ur-text* on account of its enduring popularity and exceptional commercial returns.”¹⁰ The monster Samri in *Purana Mandir* proved as a malevolent prototype of death and destruction



for all later monstrosities in Bollywood. He closely resembles the *Rakshasa* (demon) of the Hindu mythology. When Samri is put on trial, his terrible litany of crimes is read. He has performed various 'heinous acts to please his demonic spirit masters'. He has 'raped newly-wed brides and cannibalized young children'. That is why his head is cut and a *Trishool* (Trident) is kept on the coffin to guard it. Again we find a strong mythical stamp on the film through many religious symbols tacitly used by the directors Tulsi and Shyam Ramsay. For instance, the *Trishool* checking the buried monster evokes the myth of Lord Shiva who slew many demons. Lord Shiva is one of the holy trinity who protected the good and the noble by destroying evil. In the words of Peter Hutchings, 'Ramsay Brothers are the closest things to horror specialists that Indian cinema ever had' with the films that 'inserted songs and dance numbers into stories that drew upon both Indian mythology and western horror conventions.'¹¹ In fact, religious myths and depiction of monstrosity is their focal concern in most of the horror stories.

This mythical strain in depicting monster is evident yet in another Ramsay horror film *Veerana* (Creepy Forest, 1985). Like *Purana Mandir*, *Veerana* uses mythical symbol "Om" to scare and control the female-monster Nikita who creates havoc in a nearby forest. Thakur Sameer Pratap (Vijayendra Ghatge), while going on a witch-hunt, carries the sacred Om and captures her with it. The witch Nikita resembles with mythical female demons like Putana and Shurpanakha in appearance and actions. She is ragged, hideous and very much fearsome. This film, like the previous, makes use of Dracula-type Hollywood gestures by incorporating a coffin and a horse-driven carriage.¹² Whilst the Ramsays are observant followers of Hollywood horror films; they install *Desi* material in the Hollywood framework with acute ingenuity and skill. The individuality of Ramsay Brothers lies in showing that evil houses the minds of the humans. The monster in *Veerana* is an agent in the hands of a human *tantrik* baba (Rajesh Vivek). Hence, both of them are eliminated at the end. The devil collapses while God establishes order and peace in human lives.

Like the classic horror movies, Bollywood horror is moralistic in that the monsters are domesticated by the end and are not on the loose somewhere. This is why these horror films are religious and having mythic subtext with a major thrust on moral considerations in it. As John C. Lyden puts it, 'All horror films, classic and modern, wrestle with the continued existence of evil in the world and allow the viewer to wrestle with this fact as well.'¹³ While Ramsay Brothers ruled as the undisputed masters of Bollywood horror during the 1980s, Ram Gopal Verma emerged as a new director experimenting in horror genre in the 1990s with his



scary film *Raat* (The Night, 1992). This film is not much significant from our point of view, but Mahesh Bhatt's *Junoon* (Impetus, 1992) sought inspiration from Hollywood classic *Cat People* and mythical werewolves. Though the film proved a box-office failure, the innovative horror techniques were appreciated by film critics and reviewers during the 90s.

The Bhattas played a crucial role in depicting mythic monstrosities in a host of films in the new millennium. Vikram Bhatt reworked the Satyavan and Savitri myth astonishingly in his *Raaz* (The Mystery, 2002). After establishing the necessary background about Aditya Dhanraj (Dino Moriya) and Sanjana (Bipasha Basu), the film shifts its location to Ooty, where Aditya had a chance extramarital relation with a tramp psychic girl Malini (Malini Sharama). Malini wants Aditya to abandon his wife in order to get married with her. When Aditya refuses, she blackmails him with a threat to end her life. She actually gets killed in one of their quarrels and her spirit brings Sanjana to Ooty with a hope to kill Aditya and take him to lead an afterlife with her. The film narrates how an Indian married woman saves her husband by risking her own life in Savitri's fashion.

As for the evil spirit of Malini, she is demonic right from the beginning when she was alive. She defies her father and runs from the house in order to lead a wanton life. The film brilliantly portrays the evil in human nature in the form of monstrosity. It does this by using gothic framework to entice the pleasures of horror. For instance, the film uses the movement of blank camera, the sudden whirl of wind and strange shouts coming from far-off to induce terror in the audience. In fact, terror is a personal experience which hints at unimaginable horrors. Speaking of this state of mind in the postmodernist context, Maria Beville says:

Terror can be seen then as an experience that effects an altered state of consciousness, one in which a narrowed focus allows us to absorb fundamental aspects of our being; those which arguably are unknowable in our ordinary subjective frames of references.¹⁴

Thus, Vikram Bhatt plays with the psychic undercurrents of his spectators to generate a new feeling of horror. This type of horror is further seen in *Raaz 2 – The Mystery Continues*, directed by Mohit Suri. Again we find Indian mythical elements in the film used rather crudely. The film deals with the issues of the 'evil within' the human psyche and how it manifests itself. Throughout the film, the lines 'Tum Ashudh ho, andar se sad chuke ho/ you are impure, rotten from inside, are used to highlight the inherent evil in human nature.



The theme of inherent evil in human nature resurfaces in another horror film by Bhatt's *Raaz 3D*. The story revolves around Shanaya (Bipasha Basu), an actress at the height of her success. She is offered the best roles and wins all the awards she is nominated for. In addition, she also has an affair with a handsome director named Aditya (Emraan Hashmi). This all ends when a younger actress, Sanjana (Esha Gupta) makes her film debut. In place of Shanaya, Sanjana comes into spotlight and begins to snatch away her awards. Suddenly, Shanaya seems forgotten and everybody only wants to work with Sanjana. Soon enough, Shanaya sees her career fading away and her envy slowly becomes craziness. She begins to turn to black magic and makes it her goal in life to destroy Sanjana's career and make her feel the pain of loss. After some topsy-turvy state of affairs, the evil-minded Shanaya is defeated and things become smooth for Sanjana and Aditya. While Sanjana and Aditya start their life together, the film gives a message, "Some people forget everything and run behind mere fame that gets destroyed by time. They do not know that the only thing that remains is the love that we have not just for ourselves, but also for our co-beings. That when we strive, not for ourselves, but for others, that *Raaz* (secret) is referred to as Life."

The mythical undertones in Bollywood horror cinema thus provide a direction to the spectators with regard to an ideal way of living life. This mythic subtext in itself is a blueprint of an underlined morality and codes humans are supposed to follow. Speaking about myths, William K. Ferrell aptly puts:

Myths are not merely fanciful stories told to children at bedtime. They are stories that attempt to provide an understanding of the real world at the time they are conceived. Today, just as the Greek poet Hesiod and the writers of the ancient poetic Hindu text the Rig-Veda, once did, contemporary authors [and film makers] attempt to craft stories that will provide insight into how should we live. They either provide us a positive model or models to follow, a "knight in shining armor", or the negative, showing us what can happen if we do not follow the right path.¹⁵

The monsters depicted in Bollywood horror films resurface taking varied forms and shapes from ancient Indian mythology. *The Vedas*, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* abound with the demons allegorizing to celebrate the victory of good over evil. Bollywood horror films subtly use this set of demons to evoke chilling terror in its audience. Hence it is argued that these



films can be read and re-read as an exegesis of the *Puranas* (Old Scriptures) to learn the worthwhile in it.

Notes

1. Shilldrick, Margrit. *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self*. Texas: Sage, 2009.
2. Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. 'Monster Culture (Seven Theses)' In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 3-25, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
3. *ibid*, page 3.
4. *ibid*, page 4.
5. *ibid*, page vii.
6. Cavallaro, Dani. *The Gothic Vision: Three Centuries of Horror, Terror and Fear*. New York: Continuum, 2002.
7. As in other mythologies of the world, Indian mythology distinguishes Gods from demons on the basis of virtues and vices. That is why Bibhishan, although brother to the demon Ravana in *Ramayana*, is not included in the *Rakshasa* (demon) class because of his virtues.
8. Mishra, Vijay. 'Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema'. *Screen*. 26(3, 4). Page 133.
9. Hogan, Patrick Colm. *Understanding Indian Movies: Culture, Cognition and Cinematic Imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008. Page 18.
10. Nair, Kartik. 'Run for Your Lives: Remembering the Ramsay Brothers.' In *The Many Forms of Fear, Horror and Terror*, edited by Leanne Franklin and Ravenel Richardson. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009. Page 72.
11. Hutchings, Peter. *Historical Dictionary of Horror Cinema*. Toronto and Plymouth: Scarecrow, 2008. Page 207
12. Kartik Nair's acute observation about the Hollywood frames used in Bollywood films is amply revealing. Ramsay Brothers' use of these techniques of Hollywood horror signifies the belatedness of Indian film-makers in horror genre.
13. Lyden, John C. *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals*. New York: New York UP, 2003. Page 228.
14. Beville, Maria. *Gothic-postmodernism: Voicing the Terrors of Postmodernity*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009. Page 24.
15. Ferrell, William K. *Literature and Film as Modern Mythology*. New York: Greenwood Press, 2003. Page 05