



“Hell to Thee Blighty Spirit”: Gothic/Romantic Monstrosity and Bollywood Horror Tradition

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“We live in a time of monsters.”

— Jeffrey Jerome Cohen,

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In an introduction to her influential book *The Cinematic Imagination: Indian Popular Film as Social History*, Vridi Jyotika briefly outlines the hangover of the British Raj (British dominance) on Indian culture that resulted in a peculiar byproduct in films. She says, “The colonial encounter left its trace on every aspect of Indian polity and culture. Contrary to conventional wisdom about the “east” and “west” – and never the twain shall meet – an osmosis did occur in Indian cultural forms, creating new hybrids.” (3) With respect to our contention that Bollywood Horror cinema is embedded with Gothic/Romantic monstrosity, Neda Atanasoski’s views on this issue are particularly revealing. According to Atanasoski, Bram Stoker’s 1897 *Dracula* is an exemplary “gothic tale that expresses a phobia of non-Western spaces marked as racially other. Stoker’s novelistic representation of the Transylvanian undead Count who haunts European modernity elaborates upon the imperative to civilize pre-modern spaces that was used to justify British imperial expansion into Asia and Africa.” (*Dracula as Ethnic Conflict*, 77) Indian horror films seem to adhere this trajectory to imbibe and induce the gothic *per se*.

These horror films, like average Bombay Cinema, sought inspiration from the Western Gothic in featuring the monstrous in it. 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 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.” (*Run for Your Life*, 72) The monster Samri in *Purana Mandir* proved as a malevolent prototype of death and



destruction for all later monstrosities in Bollywood. His Dracula-type cloths and the abode where he lives makes us perceive the gothic elements. Similarly, the scene in which Samri's head is taken to the temple in a horse-cart strongly suggests the gothic. Even the mansion depicted in the movie is gothic having a medieval flavor.

Similar gothic strains in depicting monster is evident yet in another Ramsay horror film *Veerana* (Creepy Forest, 1985). Like *Purana Mandir*, *Veerana* also uses gothic and romantic elements. This film, like the previous, makes use of Dracula-type Hollywood gestures by incorporating a coffin and a horse-driven carriage. 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.

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 and the ever-present gothic elements were appreciated by film critics and reviewers during the 90s.

The Bhatt's played a crucial role in depicting monstrosities in a host of films during the first decade of 2000. Vikram Bhatt reworked the gothic/Romantic elements 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 portrays an enchanted jungle near the farmhouse of Aditya Dhanraj. The episodes when Sanjana feels the presence of an evil spirit are as much gothic as they are Romantic.

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.

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 the Gothic/Romantic elements looming large throughout the film.

The monsters depicted in Bollywood horror films resurface taking varied forms and shapes like vampires. The craze for vampires can now be seen across the globe and Bollywood is no exception to it. Bollywood horror films have amply used such gothic formulas to enchant the spectators. The chain that started from the middle of the previous century is still going on and on with amazing results.

References

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