
The Hindi Horror Cinema: Losing its Authenticity

By Vatsala Sharma

I was born in India, and have grown up on a staple diet of Bollywood films that I adore, but a feeling of dread descends on me when it comes to watching horror films churned out of Bollywood. Most of them are either complete rip-offs of their Hollywood counterparts, and more recently East Asian horror flicks, or they lack any coherent aesthetics. They often come across as a parody of a director's vision, or rather, a lack of it. What they are struggling with, apart from an absence of knowledge of basic story building, are the right proportions of aesthetics, themes and motifs, to concoct a horror film that complements an Indian context.

Surely horror films rely on the power of suggestion; what lurks in the dark corners, the suspense of unaccountable footsteps, the dread of imminent doom, the panic of being followed by unseen eyes, the terror when something suddenly emerges from the deep shadows—these are all crucial ingredients in achieving a sense of mystery and eeriness. However, the survivor of the horror is equally crucial. The person has to be someone who the audience can relate to and recognize themselves in. Conventionally the man plays the hero rescuing the damsel from distress. However, horror is one genre that has globally grown out of its Gothic inheritance by radically experimenting with the narrative, form and structure. A woman no longer has to rely on a gentleman to save her from the menacing monster. Now increasingly women turn out to not only be survivors but also heroes. Like Ripley in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), Sethe and Denver in *Beloved* (Jonathan Demme, 1998), Samantha in *The House of the Devil* (Ti West, 2009), Amelia in *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014), Edith in *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, 2015), and Thomasin in *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, 2015).

Looking at the recent popular Bollywood horror films such as *Raaz* (Vikram Bhatt, 2002), *1920* (Vikram Bhatt, 2008), *1920- Evil Returns* (Bhushan Patel, 2012), *Shaapit* (Vikram Bhatt, 2010), *Haunted* (Vikram Bhatt, 2011), etc., it becomes evident that these filmmakers employ age-old alien elements of the Gothic genre such as the self-sacrificing virgin maiden, the hero with a scientific bent, a villain, bandits, the clergy and a haunted castle or mansion. Further, by mistiming their frights, being too generous in the number of wails and shrieks, using mud-cake makeup on a possessed leading lady and placing the narrative in plastic Gothic settings, that have no relation to Indian landscape whatsoever, Bollywood filmmakers fail to create a sense of

horror. Thus they deliver a film that fails to connect with their immediate audience. By being so one-dimensional the narrative, plot and characters render the work as being hollow and vacant with no critical insight or intent whatsoever. There is a thin line between horror and comedy and most Bollywood films seem to manage a spoof rather than a good spook.

Horror movies produced in the last three decades of the 20th century were no different. The 1970s and 80s were marked by a rise in the production of “masala” films. With the introduction of VCRS in the 1980s, most middle-class movie viewers chose to watch films at home rather than in the theatre which was increasingly regarded as an immoral space that was infested with crass and loud “masala” films. The narrative and plot of these films mostly revolved around urban crime, loaded with visceral graphic visuals. VCRS also opened up an avenue to global cinema, mostly represented by Hollywood. Many Indian filmmakers referred to these films for inspiration and started adapting these new plotlines and reworking narratives to make them fit with the Indian context. The proliferation of VCRS coupled with the rise of raunchy masala films allowed the B-grade horror film industry to progress in India. Tropes, characters and aesthetics of popular American horror films like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi, 1981) and works of Dario Argento proved to be resourceful and were employed judiciously as can be seen in the works such as, *Jadu Tona* (*Black Magic*, Raveekant Nagaich, 1977) *Geharayee* (*Abyss*, Vikas Desai and Aruna Raje, 1980) and *Raat* (*Night*, Ramgopal Varma, 1992). The Ramsay Brothers (a team of seven siblings) deserve a special mention here as they brought about a tremendous shift in both Hindi and Indian horror cinema. Even though aesthetically and narratively they lacked originality, mostly reworking Hollywood monster movies, they managed to experiment sub-textually with taboo issues and themes such as incest and exploitation that can be considered largely absent in earlier mainstream social films.

However, horror films were different in the post-independent India of the 1950s and 60s. They were authentic and original, and that is what I am going to discuss in the following article.

While spending an afternoon with my mom, I came across the film *Woh Kaun Thi* (Who Was She?), a mystery-thriller film directed by Raj Khosla in 1964. Its haunting and melancholic soundtrack drew my attention and my interest in the film along with the man who had made it was immediate. Not only did this director come across as someone who had a vision, but also for the first time, I recognised a director whose film noir sensibilities positioned him outside of the Bollywood system that I’d been exposed to before. The film seemed to be a truly a suspenseful and intelligent horror film. I sought out the next two films discovering that

they comprised Khosla's suspense trilogy, *Mera Saaya* (My Shadow) (1966) and *Anita* (1967), all of which starred the actor Sadhana Shivdasani as "the mystery girl".

Bollywood as we know it today didn't exist in the '60s. The films produced in the newly independent India of the 1950s were preoccupied with either celebrating, or painting a dismal image of the nation that had failed to provide for its people. This perspective started to change a little in the 1960s with an increasing interest in the exploration of an individual's life rather than the nation as a whole and popular films from this decade often focus on the modern young couple and the emergence of a commodity culture.

Female characters also became tremendously important during this time and the number of women joining the film industry rose. Before the 1960s women who chose to appear on screen in India were often courtesans as the film industry was considered a place of ill repute. Women's role in the film industry began to change and beauties from "respectable" families now started to appear as leading ladies. Sadhana was one such actress and her appearance marked a breakthrough in the mainstream cinema. Sadhana became a significant figure influencing popular Indian culture by setting fashion trends, the most popular being the fringe haircut which is still popularly referred to as the "Sadhana cut" among Indians. She also introduced churidars, a form of well-fitting cotton pyjamas once only popular among women from the Muslim community, to the mainstream.

Sadhana's face soon came to signify modernity and urbanism representing the woman of the now-somewhat stabilised independent India. Cities offered women like Sadhana the comfort of anonymity and a sense of freedom and allowed them to construct new identities for themselves professionally and socially. Once restricted to their homes, women were seen more and more in the public spaces of offices and markets where they worked and interacted with men; something that years earlier only courtesans did. This was a cause of alarm for conservatives because it now became impossible to judge a woman's character. These anxieties were transported on to the screen in films like Khosla's suspense trilogy: *Woh Kaun Thi*, *Mera Saaya*, and *Anita*.

The trilogy's story revolves around the doppelgangers of a dead woman who is known for her purity and morality. It is interesting that Khosla repeatedly chose Sadhana for all three different female roles throughout the trilogy that addressed issues of property, the role of women in society, and marital life. The resolution in each film changes to offer different reasons for Sadhana's dual characters. This tells us a lot about the changing nature of representation of a woman in Indian cinema and the industry's social and cultural relevance. The doppelganger effect in

the first two films allowed Sadhana to play out different characters without the danger of being typecast as a “vamp” for the rest of her film career as was the case with many female actors at that time. A search through her filmography makes it quite evident that she opted for roles that depicted women’s vulnerability, their reluctance to surrender and their persistence to survive.

In both *Woh Kaun Thi* and *Mera Saaya* Sadhana plays the role(s) of identical twins, one of whom is married, virtuous and reputable; the other, a criminal with loose morals. The films follow similar trajectories of suspense and mystery and both end with the death of the wayward twin while the virtuous woman is reintegrated in the civil world. Unlike the earlier two films, Anita’s titular character, again played by Sadhana, does not have a twin. Rather, she is forced into fabricating a fake identity for herself and constructing a false past, two things that are relayed to us through various men’s recollections of their encounters with her. There is a strong contrast between the Anita they remember and the one we see in the first half of the film before she commits suicide.

By carefully locating each of the three films in specific landscapes, Khosla creates the right mood for mystery and suspense as well as conveying a tone of horror. *Woh Kaun Thi* is set in the snow capped hills of a small town in India, *Mera Saaya* is set in a dreamy oasis town, and *Anita* is set in a developing coastal city. A particular trope that Khosla employs in all the three films is to assign a characteristic song that is sung by Sadhana’s character. The song acts as a haunting mechanism designed to lure the male protagonist away from the society in search for their missing partner. In *Woh Kaun Thi*, Sandhya’s return to haunt Anand is accompanied by a melancholic “Naina Barse”. Rakesh broods away in *Mera Saaya*, listening to a song, “Mera Saaya,” sung by Geeta, lost in his memories of her. In *Anita*, Anita lures Neeraj away to a riverbank, singing “Saamne Mere Sanwariya”. All the songs convey the woman’s tremendous loneliness and sadness as she haunts by singing the song in a loop.

By using these elements of horror Khosla masks the actual public concerns that he is trying to address in these films. One of these is his depiction of the partial identity of the woman, her secretive “shameful” past, and hence the uncertainty of her role in the changing Indian society. The other is of the role of the former *zamindari* system and the difficulty in breaking away from it. This is addressed through the male leads Anand and Rakesh of *Woh Kaun Thi* and *Mera Saaya*, respectively. Though these men belong to a class of noblemen, they have to pursue a profession (Anand is a doctor, and Rakesh is a lawyer) in an independent democratic India. While Anand inherits a huge property, Rakesh is a “Thakur” or nobleman and lives in a huge elegant mansion by a lake. Both these men

are unaware of their wife's past and have never met her family, shockingly, not even when she "passes away". The unruly hauntings that follow her death push these men to the verge of insanity that is only resolved with the killing of the malevolent twin restoring in some way the old order.

In these two films, Khosla seems suspicious of the ideologies of the emerging modern Indian couple of the 1960s. The practice of arranged marriage, marriages arranged by parents, a tradition that has persevered in contemporary Indian society and continues today. Within this tradition parents of each partner were well aware of each other's families and their history as living in the village allowed little anonymity and privacy. However, the transition of this practice in modern and urban independent India was not a smooth one instead it was filled with suspicion and doubt especially concerning the woman's moral character and past. The occurrence of strange events in the two films then comes to symbolize the eruption of the old order into the present and points to the idea that a transition from the old to the new is not going to be a smooth one and that a lot has yet to be learnt.

Anita follows a significantly different narrative to the previous two films. In the beginning of the film, Anita commits suicide because her father stops her from marrying her boyfriend, Neeraj. Compared to Anand and Rakesh in the preceding two films Neeraj is not a nobleman but an honest and humble writer for a newspaper. Rather than passively mourning like Anand and Rakesh he smells foul play and actively investigates the reason behind the strange occurrences by digging into Anita's past. Also, unlike Sandhya and Geeta, of whom we know nothing apart from their roles as wives in the house of their respective husbands, Khosla gives us ample experience of Anita's life in her own home, in her own room and space. We see signs of an independent woman in her; she drives herself around, wears her hair short in the form of a bob as a "modern", hip woman, and does not shy away from giving her opinions. She asks Neeraj, a man who socially belongs to a class lower than hers, to marry her choosing the unconventional court marriage over traditional Hindu ceremony, which is quite a radical move for that time. By suggesting court marriage Khosla seems to hint at a progressive practice of the marriage institution although he fails to develop it further.

When compared to its two predecessors in the trilogy, *Anita* offers a clear picture of Khosla's maturity as a filmmaker and his realisation of the potential of filmmaking and storytelling as a lens through which to digest his changing world. His choice of a common man as one of the leads in the film shows that he has come to terms with the death of the old zamindar order and has made peace with the fact that a noble past is no longer required to validate a person's character or virtue. More

importantly, there has been an evolution in Sadhana's character. She has evolved from playing Sandhya, a docile and subservient wife who quietly accepts the insults of her husband, and Geeta, who remains mute at the most crucial times in order to keep her past a secret, to finally embodying Anita, a girl who doesn't easily give in to her fate, and fights all the way through to be reunited with her lover.

Anita is also Khosla's attempt to overturn the very formula of horror he became comfortable with by reinventing the logic of suspense. He flipped audience expectations by depicting Anita as just a victim of cruel lies and weird male fantasies and deconstructed the absurd male fantasy concerning a "mystery woman" and the threat she poses. Khosla does this by insinuating that these are nothing but male anxieties threatened by the introduction of women into the public domain—something that I'm not sure he was even aware he was doing. Unlike Sandhya and Geeta, Anita has no partial identity, evil twin or a secretive past. By naming the final film after her Khosla is no longer playing with imagery of ghosts or shadows. Anita survives until the end giving us a glimpse of what a fully developed female character could be.

Khosla creates a sense of otherworldliness and unfamiliarity allowing himself more creative freedom while toying with the horror mood. To achieve this he developed motifs and aesthetics that managed to not only create a sense of horror but to also communicate creatively the anxieties that were prevalent socially and politically at that particular time. Surely, certain Gothic elements are present in Khosla's trilogy, but rather than being simply replicated as plastic objects and props to decorate and fill the landscape they are employed as sub-textual characters with their own cultural significance and history. It is a disappointing reality that these aesthetics have been left, so far, unexplored and underdeveloped with Bollywood filmmakers still looking for "inspiration" any place elsewhere than films from their own industry.

Notes on Contributor

I have completed my Masters in Arts and Aesthetics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. I did my Bachelors (Hons) in English Literature from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University.

Having studied film and media theory and aesthetics for my Masters, I have studied, researched and attended seminars on diverse and varied topics, such as, Indian Cinema, Historical Trauma and Memory in Cinema, South Indian Cinema, Asian Cinema, Science Fiction Cinema, Global Cinema, European Cinema, and Transnational Cinema.

I have spent most of my academic life on exploring the horror genre, the

figure of the female vampire and the ghostly woman character in films and literature. One of my really well received paper has been on Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, which I recently presented at NYU's Graduate Student Conference at the Tisch School of Arts.