

# CHALCHITRA DARPAN

SEX & HORROR  
2021-2022



THE UNDERGRADUATE FILM JOURNAL  
CELLULOID

CHALCHITRA DARPAN

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**SEX & HORROR**  
**2021-2022**



MIRANDA HOUSE  
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI



CELLULOID  
THE FILM SOCIETY  
OF MIRANDA  
HOUSE

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# CHALCHITRA DARPAR

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dear Readers,

It gives me immense pleasure to present to you, the second edition of **Chalchitra Darpan**, Celluloid: The Film Society of Miranda House's academic journal. **Chalchitra Darpan**, Delhi University's only undergraduate film journal, was introduced with the vision of building a student community of future film scholars around it. We are proud to publish an issue with the majority of papers written by undergraduates, who explore the diverse and multifaceted cinematic traditions of sex within the horror genre.

The publication of this journal would not have been possible without the exceptional support and persistence of a number of people. I would like to extend my gratitude to Professor Gorvika Rao and Professor Shweta Sachdeva Jha for their noble guidance and encouragement. Sincere gratitude is also extended to Kartik Nair and Meheli Sen for inspiring this edition's theme. I would also like to express my special thanks of gratitude to Ashray Sinha for creating a brilliant website for our journal.

I am especially grateful to Oli Chatterjee and Giitanjali, the brilliant Editors-in-Chief of the first edition of **Chalchitra Darpan**, for the creation of such a platform for undergraduate research and scholarship in cinema. Their knowledge, words of advice, kindness and faith in my team have been vital in the publication of this edition.

My sincere thanks to the Celluloid Union 2021-22 for their much valued support, and encouragement. I am indebted to my President Mansi Ray, Vice-President Mukta Mitra and Treasurer Deeya Bhatia for their patience, unwavering support and for lending an ear every time journal-work hit a snag.

The planning, development and publication of **Chalchitra Darpan** would have been impossible without my team. My editors, designers and illustrator worked countless hours on the journal publication. They deserve my endless gratitude for their hard work, efficiency, diligence, enthusiasm, commitment and exacting attention to detail.

On a final note, I would like to thank all the authors who chose **Chalchitra Darpan** to disseminate their excellent research, and consequently, remind us of the need for an academic space for undergraduates interested in film and media, who wish to explore and engage in film academia. Apologies are due to them since the publication of this journal took longer than anticipated. And finally, we thank our readers for showing an interest in our journal and giving us their time!

**Faaria Hilaly**  
**Editor-in-Chief**

## A NOTE ON DESIGN

Designing for an academic journal was a task in itself and the theme made it more challenging yet fun to play around with. The theme, "Sex and horror", comes out to be graphic and therefore it comes with considerable number of ideas. The journal's intrinsic layout has drawn inspiration from Celluloid's first edition to succeed the past's contemplation with the present's conviction.

The colour palette of red, black, and white subtly presents the objectivity of horror as a theme, being dark, desirous, weak, enthusiastic, compulsive with an appetite of helplessness that hides in plain sight, and craze, among other establishments of the journal's character, and has been garnished by the animation of the papers' subjectivity. The typography chosen for cover pages of papers juggles with the cases of the text gives an abstract look and puts everything together. In addition to the papers, the unquestionable appeal of the illustrations accompanying the papers helped to satisfy the essence of each paper. This compilation is intended to be a relatively simple evocation of thoughts and entrenched silences of sex and its attributes in the genre of films and movies specifically with regards to horror, which when backed by the minimisation of font and design, makes space for the peak of intensity of this year's theme.

**Asra & Sejal  
Design**

The theme '**Sex & Horror**' proved challenging for me at two levels. Firstly, in illustrating for an academic journal, there is a need to not fall into the trap of portraying or visualizing the very stereotypes and tropes the authors are being critical of. Secondly, in the more artistic sense, the illustrations needed to evoke the feelings of both sensuality and horror and at the same time convey the gist of the articles it accompanied. In order to avoid the former, references from movie scenes or posters were mostly avoided and a more symbolic approach was taken tailor made for the central arguments being made by the author. In line with the wide ranging themes covered in the journal, the medium of art was not restricted and it ranged from charcoal, watercolor, penwork to digital art. Visual and creative cohesion was achieved by fixing a color palette of red, black and white. The use of red and black helped to create deep shadows and a bold and spooky imagery. In the cover page my aim was to express intimacy at the foreground and a larger looming dread of horror at the background- tying together both the themes Sex and Horror.

**Gopika  
Illustrator**

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## EDITORIAL

By the end of a panel discussion on “Navigating Myth and History” held as part of Celluloid’s Annual Film Festival, *Chalchitra* 2021, we had unexpectedly found inspiration for this edition’s theme- Sex & Horror- when our panelists Kartik Nair and Meheli Sen underlined a crucial truth about the genre of the horror film- the extent to which the genre is concerned with human sexuality and gendered human subjectivity.

A seemingly innocuous phrase, such as what ‘sex & horror’ is, gets tinted with countless interpretations when we factor in the malleability of language and the fluidity of meaning. What do we mean by ‘sex & horror’? Sex as a site where horror is externally imported, or sex as a source from where horror is born? How does the genre approach sex as an act, sex as violence, or the gendered body as the site of horror?

Horror externalizes the intimate and fragile realms of human sensibilities, magnifying terror, fear, and desire to a brash crescendo. The repetitive churning out of the formulaic narratives which adds to the repository of horror genre has given a gendered contour to the genre which cannot be bypassed. Horror’s historical preoccupation with issues of sexual difference and gender is reflected in the titles of horror movies. Although there have been a few genderless monsters, gender-specific monsters predominate the genre. Many of the horror films that do not foreground difference explicitly, either in their names or in the physical design of the monster, are also based on the politics of sexual difference.

In the 1970s, critic Robin Wood suggested that the thematic core of the genre might be reduced to three interrelated variables: normality (as defined chiefly by heterosexual patriarchal capitalism), the *Other* (embodied in the figure of the monster), and the relationship between the two.

Why has the monstrous or the *other* ( i.e., that which is deemed by dominant culture anti-thetical to the Self) in the horror genre been most frequently depicted and constructed in terms of sexual deviancy, may it be of an aggressive female sexuality or queer sexuality?

Body, especially the female or a queer body, has been traditionally used as a device to incite sensational emotions, may it be of pleasure, terror or disgust, or sometimes sympathy (more so in the case of female body than the queer body).

Erin Harrington in her book, "Women, Monstrosity and Horror Film" highlights the privileged place that women hold in the horror genre. Positing the relationship between the genre and women, she notes, "horror genre is a site of entertainment and excitement, of terror and dread, and one that relishes in the complexities that arise when boundaries – of taste, of bodies, of reason – are blurred and dismantled. It is also a site of expression and exploration that leverages the narrative and aesthetic horrors of the reproductive, the maternal and the sexual to expose the underpinnings of the social, political and philosophical othering of women. This is a consistent point of interest, even across the breadth of an already diverse genre and into that which might otherwise be deemed 'the horrific'.

The genre has always focused emphatically on the body as sight/site of horror. Linda Williams in "When the Woman Looks", elaborating on questions of bodies and embodiment, observes that that one of the shared characteristics among most sub-genres of horror is that they tend to display (especially female) bodies in the throes of extreme sensations: "[T]he body spectacle is featured most sensationally in pornography's portrayal of orgasm, in horror's portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama's portrayal of weeping... Visually, each of these ecstatic excesses could be said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm—of the body 'beside itself' with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness." In Meheli Sen's words: "horror as a genre is melodramatic at its core and deploys bodies accordingly, and, some of its sub-genres teeter precipitously on the brink of pornographic titillation, especially when presenting the female body as spectacle."

All human societies have a conception of the *monstrous-feminine*, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject. Julia Kristeva's work "suggests a way of situating the monstrous-feminine [basically the horrific female monster] in the horror film in relation to the maternal figure and what Kristeva terms 'abjection,' that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules,' that which 'disturbs identity, system, order'". She notes how abjection, as a source of horror, "works within patriarchal societies as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject."

Chris Dumas in "Horror and Psychoanalysis" argues that there is a clear distinction between other genres and horror- while other genres of cinemas show recurring cataclysms of violence, horror films can, to an extent, be typified by the idea that their violence is motivated by sexual aberrations with roots in the past.

He further explains, "Sigmund Freud's model of normal human consciousness connects to horror cinema through his vision of abnormality: the origin and effects of the monstrous, the disgusting, the hidden, the murderous, the perverse." Consequently, the most common route of psychoanalytic inquiry into horror cinema is through considerations of the monster's gender and sexuality.

Horror movies of psychological disturbance usually offer a vague psychoanalytic explanation locating the cause of madness in the character's earlier developing sense of sexual identity. As Andrew Tudor aptly puts it, the genre is commonly conceived "as a kind of collective dream-world requiring analysis by methods derived from one or another tradition of psychoanalysis." For Robin Wood, an influential film scholar, "the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses."

In film theories about horror, one of the central Freudian ideas is the concept of *castration*. Castration can be understood literally, but it is usually a metaphor for some kind of loss, an absence that each one of us must undergo in order to be accepted into society. Suggesting the gendered dynamics of *looking* in the horror film, Linda Williams notes, "Laura Mulvey has shown that the male look at the woman in the cinema involves two forms of mastery over the threat of castration posed by her "lack" of a penis: a sadistic voyeurism which punishes or endangers the woman through the agency of an active and powerful male character; and fetishistic overvaluation, which masters the threat of castration by investing the woman's body with an excess of aesthetic perfection."

Echoing orthodox Freudianism, in films of monster horror, the monster is usually understood as, in Wood's terms, the "return of the repressed, the outward, distorted projection as Other of the protagonist's unacknowledged desire". Barry Keith Grant in the introduction of "The Dread of Difference" notes that Margaret Tarratt and Frank McConnell explain the conventional narrative of many such movies as "ideological endorsements of patriarchal, heterosexual monogamy wherein the monster (desire) must be defeated (negotiated through the superego) by the male hero in order for him to succeed in winning the hand (metonymically speaking) of the attractive daughter of the scientist (the Father). And those films that T. J. Ross calls 'psychological thrillers' and Charles Derry dubs 'horror of personality' movies are most frequently understood as variations of the Jekyll-Hyde paradigm of the beast *within*, often defined in terms of desire." Probably the most common image in horror movies, regardless of the sub-genre, is what Harvey Roy Greenberg, calls the *beast in the boudoir*. Most often in such scenes, the monster is coded as male whose victim is almost always female.

Typically, her vulnerability and sexuality are heightened because she is a comely maiden “wearing a night-gown or a wedding-dress or some other light-coloured garment.”

Some critics have extended the psychoanalytic approach beyond the texts themselves to account for the spectatorial pleasures of watching horror. Walter Evans, interprets the classic monsters of the Universal films of the 1930s as addressing issues of sexual identity in ways that are “uniquely tailored to the psyches of troubled adolescents,” particularly in their coded concerns with the “rites of initiation” involving puberty—masturbation and menstruation. James Twitchell, similarly, sees horror “as a ritualistic form that serves to conduct the viewer through the passage from adolescent onan-ism to mature reproductive sexuality”.

On the high side of horror lie the classics, and then there is the *horror of horrors*—the slasher (or splatter or shocker) film, which is drenched in taboo and encroaches vigorously on the pornographic: the immensely generative story of a psycho killer who slashes to death a string of mostly female victims, one by one, until he is himself subdued or killed, usually by the one girl who has survived. Early destruction of those who seek or engage in unauthorized sex, i.e. sexual transgressors, amounts to a generic imperative of the slasher film. It is an imperative that crosses gender lines, affecting males as well as females. However, the numbers are not equal, and the scenes not equally charged. Even in films in which males and females are killed in roughly even numbers, the lingering images are inevitably female. However, what is most likely to linger in the memory of the viewer is the image of the distressed female who did not die: the survivor, or *Final Girl*. She is the one who encounters the mutilated bodies of her friends and perceives the full extent of the preceding horror and of her own peril.

Looking at the calcified trope of ‘final girl’ and formula of slasher films and torture porn, why is horror genre such a prominent site for primarily male heterosexual filmmakers to model their anxieties and fears regarding sexual hierarchies? Or is the leering depiction of sexuality merely a ploy to attract a cis-het male target audience?

On the face of it, the relation between the sexes in slasher films can hardly be clearer. Carol J. Clover in “Her Body, Himself” points out how the killer is, with few exceptions, recognizably human and distinctly male; his fury is unmistakably sexual in both roots and expression; his victims are mostly women, often sexually free and always young and beautiful ones. Just how essential this victim is to horror is suggested by her historical durability.

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Clover notes, "Our primary and acknowledged identification may be with the victim, the adumbration of our infantile fears and desires, our memory sense of ourselves as tiny and vulnerable in the face of the enormous *Other*; but the *Other* is also finally another part of ourselves, the projection of our repressed infantile rage and desire (our blind drive to annihilate those toward whom we feel anger, to force satisfaction from those who stimulate us, to wrench food for ourselves if only by actually devouring those who feed us) that we have had in the name of civilization to repudiate."

The concept of 'sex and horror', then, is not so linear as it appears out to be. The rich cinematic tradition of sex within horror cinema is something which warrants closer attention. The analyses by the authors of these intricate research papers anthologised by this journal lends us a perspective where we can undertake a multidimensional and nuanced reading of the horror genre and its relation with sex.

*Signing off,*  
*Faaria Hilaly, Editor-in-Chief*  
*Kizhakoot Gopika Babu, Illustrator*  
*Sejal Maheshwari, Journal Design*  
*Asra Malik, Journal Design & Editor*  
*Akshika Goel, Editor*  
*Anushka Joshi, Editor*  
*Aryama Ghosh, Editor*

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TRANS ALLEGORY  
IN  
BRANDON CRONENBERG'S  
'POSSESSOR'  
(2020)

PRANTIK ALI

"I haven't been in control of myself lately," says a jaded Christopher Abbot in the last minutes of Brandon Cronenberg's **Possessor** (2020), addressing his fragmented subjectivity, as he fails to make sense of whether he really is in control of his consciousness. This purported disruption of the coherence of identity, or the loss of subjective agency, is a concept that goes hand in hand with contemporary notions of the body in postmodern society. Conceived of as a site for the reclamation of freedom from the ego, this breaking of anthropological unity is a quest that owes its origin to postmodernity, or at the very least, the end stages of modernity.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the last few decades, the interest in the body as a corporeal site has accelerated manifold, and is now placed in a much more easily accessible and comprehensible domain – that of popular culture and media. It is thus to that domain we turn to in order to try and understand how a transgender body in a postmodern setting is automatically collated in the subconscious to the idea of the 'monstrous.'

The convergence of the idea of the abnormality or otherness of the body with gender or sexual deviance has been a common trope in literature and the arts. Horror films, historically, have toyed with corporeal transgression, in their primary objective to instil in the audience an unnameable dread, or to induce a feeling of corporeal instability, mainly through the extreme depictions of the body on screen. At times, this location of the site of horror in the female body (or in femininity itself) has led to problematic approaches of perception, exacerbated by the fact that male adolescents make up the largest fraction of horror film audience. Villains in horror films have often been coded with transgender stereotypes, be it the cross-dressing Norman Bates in Hitchcock's **Psycho** (1960) or the serial killer Buffalo Bill in Jonathan Demme's **The Silence of the Lambs** (1991). Although this noticeable trend of fetishizing and/or demonising trans people needs to be placed in the cultural ideology of its time, it would certainly be a gross disservice to the transgender community to completely efface this exploitation and call it a simple 'lack of understanding.' Although trans representations in media of late have forsaken the roles of the criminal/psychopath, transgender representation is mostly negatively coded, associating itself with madness, disease, perversity, and horror. Of Tom Hooper's **The Danish Girl** (2015), critics have rightly pointed out that what is intended to be a biopic of transgender artist Lili Elbe, is in fact oversaturated with sexism, misgendering, harmful depictions of gender performance, and an awful amount of queer erasure.<sup>2</sup> In the same context, the notion of corporeal transgression which I refer to (and which remains an important feature of almost all horror films), when applied Cronenberg's **Possessor**, is able to subvert the repetitive plot of the body as the sole site of horror, and instead asks an important question – what if the perceived monstrosity in the body, or the psychologically displaced mind, is merely a resulting factor of the invasive social system we live in?

1 Russo, Maria. (2020) "The Human Body as a Problem in Post-modern Culture". Church, Communication and Culture. 5. 74-91. 10.1080/23753234.2020.1713010.

2 'The Danish Girl' review by Sally Jane Black Sabbath, Letterboxd

Alessandra Lemma is hence quite perspicacious in suggesting that the idea of identity disruption is most evidently present "*...in the varied experiences of people who describe themselves as transgendered and seek to modify their bodies to make them more congruent with the subjective experience of gender identity.*"

In **Possessor**, Tasya Vos (played brilliantly by Andrea Riseborough) is able to possess the host body's consciousness, using a brain implant technology, and then control them to assassinate the target and subsequently kill the host body by suicide, severing all link to the crime and emerging as herself in her own body. This plasticity of the body could be a potential critique of the obsessive desire to be something other than we are, in an age where media provides autonomy in excess, and paradoxically entraps the human body within invisible limits.

The subjective dislocation of Tasya is repeatedly reflected in the diegesis. While going to meet her child and her husband after the first assignment, she practices her speech intonations and facial expressions, in order to pull on a façade of normalcy, pointing to the fact that her identity is incohesive to begin with. Later on, while spying on Colin Tate and his partner Ava (Tasya is supposed to be possessing Colin's consciousness for the next assignment, and thus needs to pick up on his mannerisms), she is once again practising to mimic her target identity's speech. Both these sequences seem to suggest that Tasya herself is caught in a flux, or rather, that she exists in a vacuum, since her job very specifically entails her having to shift her identities constantly, to merge and metamorphosise seamlessly from one persona to the other.

The concept of gender dysphoria is first introduced in the film by a mirror scene, with Tasya (now controlling Colin's mind) inspecting his body, feeling his chest and his abdominal muscles, and then proceeding to examine his genitals in ludic earnestness. What appears as a gratuitous demonstration of intrigue, however, conceals a very relatable condition for most transgender people - as they are forced day in and day out to curb the sense of self-alienation that is a natural concomitant of the incongruity of one's subjectivity in relation to their body. Reading this scene in line with Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, one can clearly delineate how Tasya is, for the first time in the movie, able to make out in the mirror image what Lacan terms the 'Ideal I', a version of herself she continually yearns to be, and failing to do so, enters into a 'libidinal relationship with the body image.'

This notion of self-alienation is taken to a more explicit level in a following scene, where Colin (Tasya) is shown to be having sexual intercourse with his partner.

A rupture in the link (no doubt the result of the psychic displacement faced by Tasya while sexually performing through the body of Colin) allows her momentarily to be viscerally present in bed with Colin's partner, and the camera pans down to reveal her body with male genitals. The audience is immediately drawn to viewing this body as an anomaly, and a collective gasp of shock in the minds of the viewers at this juncture is not at all unexpected, as they are left dithering between fascination and fear. As noted by Foucault, the 'hermaphrodite' (a term that has since been regarded as both impolite and politically incorrect to the transgender community) in this scene is a monster not in and of itself, but because of the culture which perceives (and represents) it as such – owing to its subversion of the idea of the male and female as separate and immutably distinct.<sup>3</sup>

Since the female body with male genitals is tough to categorise according to the normative binarism of male-female, the viewers' conception of what is desirable or perverse makes the experience simultaneously exciting and disturbing. The phallic woman, by escaping the matrix of conventional gender/sexuality, subverts all notions of sexual desirability in the audience, challenging the constancy of even their sexuality. Once again, this inversion of subjectivity in the context of gender is an honest depiction of the transgender experience, resulting in a palpable sense of 'otherness' in one's one body, similar to the way Tasya experiences psychic dislocation in Colin's body.

The dislocation of one's subjectivity from their body, according to researchers in the field of social sciences and psychology, can also be linked to the ever-changing face of the society they live in. Catherine Spooner, in her book '*Contemporary Gothic*', makes an interesting point in that the obsession over "...freaks, scars, diseased flesh, monstrous birth, and above all, blood, is an attempt to reinstate the physicality of the body in an increasingly de-corporealized information society." The breakdown of a certain 'specificity' in human identity in a postmodernist corporate society can thus be aptly reflected in the way the victims in a horror film react to their loss of autonomy in conducting their daily businesses, or even coming to the realization that the site of horror is, after all, not external, but an internally orchestrated attack on the psyche, brought about by the incompatibility between one's place in the world, their body, and their consciousness. Just as postmodernism celebrates the abundance of transformation and flux, in **Possessor**, we notice a veritable tendency on the part of Tasya (and later Colin) in trying to shift between their identities (bodies).

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, "Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France, 1974-1975", Picador, 2004, p - 71.

The psychological experience of such dislocation, brought about by the neurotic desire to metamorphosise (as mentioned before, Tasya is shown to be so much habituated to identity-shifting, in fact, that she has to practise small talk before going to visit her family so as to not give the real nature of her occupation away) can be an echo of the radical rejection of a fixed identity in postmodern society.

Hence, when one places a film like **Possessor** within the discourse of postmodernity, the erosion of identity that the film portrays in abundance can be tied to both gender dysphoria, on the one hand, as well as to postmodern-anxiety on the other. In a similar vein, Lianne McLarty talks about the 'disembodiment' of horror, which refers to the way the horror (in any given situation) is literally disentangled from the monstrous body in all its explicitness, and instead presented as a stain of evil present 'among' us, or even, in the context of the film, 'inside' of us. The body is presented simply as the screen on which the destabilising effects of a postmodern world is played out with recklessness. The transformation of the body (or lack thereof, which results in dysphoria) expresses the dissatisfaction of people living in an environment they are constantly at odds with, and is an apposite example of postmodern-anxiety coupled with self-isolation, both of which I have referred to earlier in the context of cinematic horror.

As Tasya begins to perceive her own body as the 'Other' – the audience realizes that she does not, in fact, want to expunge this sense of 'otherness', but merely act under the guise of a different self so she can finish her task and reclaim her real identity. One might recall that during the intercourse scene, Tasya is not taken aback, or disgusted by her male genitals – her astonishment at this juncture would only mean she has never been ready to switch between so many roles, identities and genders, and her profession as a skilled assassin would be a farce. Indeed, she's ready to forego any notion of gender confusion, and sexuality (one might also note that although she has a son with her estranged husband, her sexuality is never indicated or addressed throughout the film) for the purpose of fully embodying the role of the host.

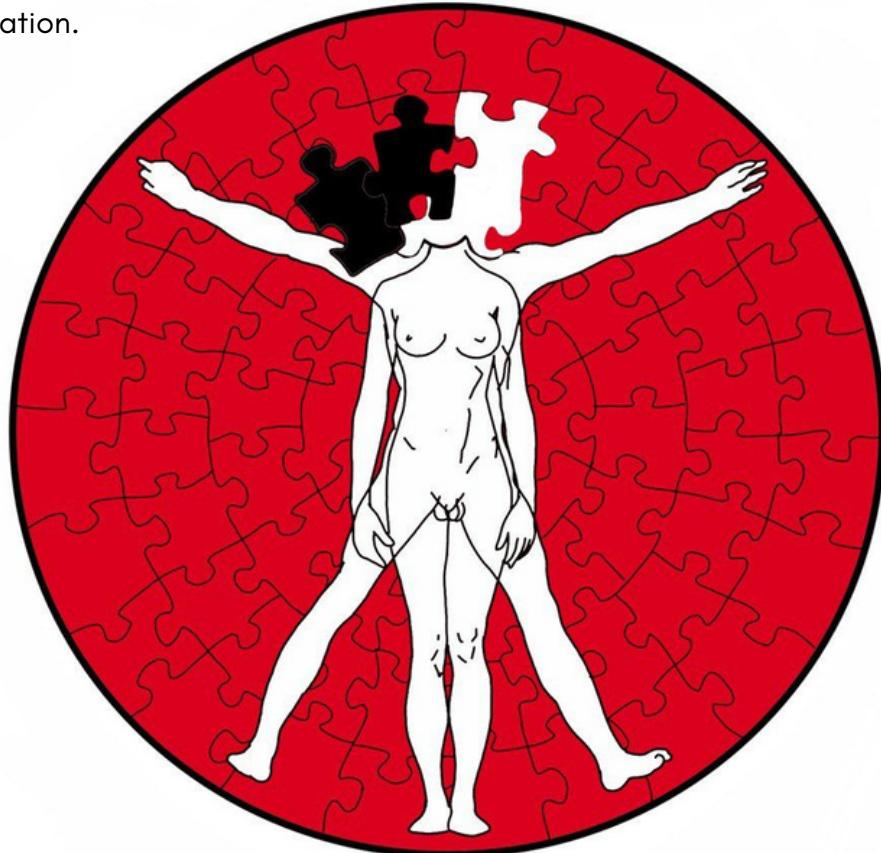
Tasya's profound sense of alienation is perhaps matched only by Colin, whose consciousness wages a violent resistance against Tasya's impingement as the story progresses. I contend that both Tasya and Colin mutually represent the transgender experience in **Possessor**, one fascinated, to a certain extent (the mirror scene and the intercourse scene together portray Tasya as enjoying the fruits of being in a different body) by the changes in her body, and the other frightened by the possibility of having his body at the authority of an alien subjectivity (that of Tasya's). This alienation results in mental ailments and psychological conditions like body dysmorphia, gender dysphoria, personality disorders, and so on.

The role of postmodern ennui, a veritable presence in the lives of this generation's youth in shaping their subjectivity (or fragmenting-shattering-inversing it) and consequently mandating how they react to it, is thus undeniable.

Postmodern identity, seen either through the lens of gender or the society one lives in, is nothing but a pliable abstraction.

Arundhati Roy <sup>4</sup>remarks that a human being is much like a Russian doll - a walking sheaf of identities, which they can conveniently shuffle around, defying some, and complying with those that will favour their existence in the respective socio-cultural environments they are placed in. Similarly, the concept of identity in **Possessor** is one that eludes a fixed definition. Tasya can, at the expense of the coherence of her psyche, plug into a machine and control the mind of the host, and just as easily as she attains the new identity, she seems to lose all sense of autonomy over her own.

In **Possessor**, there is a discernible attempt on the part of the director to disentangle himself from the tendency to construct a sense of monstrosity in the feminine body, and instead of the all-too-familiar problematic manner of representing transgender people as innately depraved and murderous creatures with an affinity towards perversity in sex, he treats body politics in a technocratic world itself as a source of paranoia and crippling alienation.



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<sup>4</sup> Arundhati Roy, "The Graveyard Talks Back", 2020, The Graveyard Talks Back: Arundhati Roy on Fiction in the Time of Fake News < Literary Hub (lithub.com)

He situates the postmodern dread of a shattered identity, or the fragmentation-inversion of one's subjectivity, in the context of gender, and then examines through a visceral lens of gore-splatter how the resulting sense of otherness entrenched in the transgender experience makes that dread very, very real.

People affected by gender dysphoria experience an inner turmoil that mirrors the model of the frenzied world that a film like **Possessor** is situated in. Bereft of all sense of cohesion with one's own self, fetishized and stigmatized by the common gaze to the point of demonisation, and disenfranchised by society till they're forced to seek refuge in occupations that further perpetuate their poverty of autonomy, it would not be an ambitious leap at all to claim that the horror that defines the images of trans bodies in the popular consciousness is a *product* resulting from what is *done* to the body, instead of being an inherent qualitative feature of the same.

It might, in conclusion, be fair to hope that putting this very pertinent question up for deliberation (in the realm of cinema in general, and horror, in particular) is but the first domino that sets into motion a more nuanced understanding and a more progressive representation of people who have been forced to stray aimlessly through the corridors of a world that is horrified at the prospect of encountering anything that refuses an easy definition or conformity in the matrix of crude hegemonic binarism.

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**The Wicker Man**

**CHALCHITRA DARPARN**  
SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

**"DID  
YOU SMILE  
WITH HER  
AT THE  
END?"**

PERFORMATIVE SPECTATORSHIP IN  
MIDSOMMAR AND THE WICKER MAN

BRITI BHATTACHARYYA

Folk horror has often been characterised by affect-driven<sup>1</sup> attempts at definition such as, “intuitive rather than formally identifiable feeling” (qtd in Cowdell), and by extension the subgenre has previously been *a priori*<sup>2</sup> tied to tropes of otherisation. In this paper I question the role and performativity of the audience of folk horror in the evolution of the genre’s otherisation tropes. I do this through an examination of two folk horror movies, **The Wicker Man** (1973) – often referred to as one of the “unholy trinity” of folk horror’s first wave, and **Midsommar** (2019) – a second wave folk horror film which explicitly takes inspiration from the former.

Despite having very similar endings in terms of plot, I argue that it is the approach taken to gender, sex, and sexuality in **Midsommar**, under the umbrella of post modernism’s “aggressive blurring of boundaries” (Pinedo 10), that has led to the widespread reception of **Midsommar** as having a happy ending contrary to **The Wicker Man**. By leaving the implications of cross-cultural encounters vis à vis sex, sexuality, and gender – particularly in between ‘Pagan’, and Judeo-Christian traditions, blurry I argue that **Midsommar** allows for the audience to perform a subversive, performative role in the viewing of the film, denied to viewers in **The Wicker Man**. Through this examination, I comment on the capabilities of folk horror, and horror by extension in both furthering and resisting patriarchal paradigms, depending on, and as a product of the spatial-temporal arena in which it is engaged with and created.

## FOLK HORROR AS REACTION

*Horror is a reaction; it's not a genre.*

– John Carpenter (qtd in Krancer)

Folk horror has often been characterised by affect-driven attempts at definition such as, “intuitive rather than formally identifiable feeling” (qtd. in Cowdell 296), and by extension the subgenre has previously been *a priori* tied to tropes of otherisation. By portraying a ‘pagan,’ often rural ‘Other’ as “unmodern, superstitious and, above all, capable of enacting extreme violence in order to conserve the rural idyll” (Thurgill 33), using the affect-oriented technique of atmosphere, folk horror has been accused of “engender[ing] topophobia” (Thurgill 34) which may be defined as,

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1 Affect is a psychological term used to describe, “the mental counterpart of internal bodily representations associated with emotions, actions that involve some degree of motivation, intensity, and force, or even personality dispositions.” (Barrett and Bliss-Moreau)

2 *A priori*, Latin for “from the earlier,” is a philosophical concept popularized by Immanuel Kant to distinguish those types of knowledge, justification, and arguments that, in Kant’s words, are “absolutely independent of all experience” (qtd in Russell).

"offering 'experiences of spaces, places and landscapes which are in some way distasteful or induce anxiety and depression'" (qtd in Thurgill 34)

Adam Scovell, one of the primary critics of the subgenre, has identified a "folk horror chain" which he calls "the hyphen between these depicted horrific events...within [which] Folk Horror can be conjured as a framework" (Scovell 18). The first link, landscape "where elements within its topography have adverse effects on the social and moral identity of its inhabitants" causes the second link – isolation, whereby "creatures are 'banished' to the landscape." The subsequent "skewed belief systems and morality," results in the true meat of the genre, "the happening/summoning" (Scovell 17-18).

If horror can be seen as reactionary i.e. a method of reflecting societal fears in the form of a warning, how can the subgenre of folk horror be historicized? Emerging in Britain in the late 1960's after the British "Hammer horror" films of the 1950s and 60s, folk horror reflected a departure from a "visual strain of High Romantic Gothic" (Cowdell 300). As Cowdell has pointed out,

"Hammer's success meant rival studios had to explore new directions to establish their identity...They created a new aesthetic in part by "eschew[ing] nineteenth-century settings," and blending period settings into "a conglomeration, at times imprecise, of different historical sources," which also points to folkloresque bricolage at work (67)." (Cowdell 300)

Cowdell goes on to note about **Blood on Satan's Claw** (1971), one of the three films that make up the "unholy trinity" of British folk horror,

A celebrated shot from that film, of a plough turning up a partly buried eye in a furrow, points to some of the differences between folk horror and its predecessors... The superstitious peasantry, in all their muddy reality, move from background to centerstage in folk horror. They become less plot adjuncts than the defining milieu." (Cowdell 301)

Within the first wave of folk horror, "extend[ing] from roughly 1968 to 1979" (Keetley 2), this "fear of the folk" is apparent. Cowdell (2019) argues a direct linkage between the subgenre and the development of the discipline of folkloristics in Britain. While Koven (2007) shows how **The Wicker Man** uses the material of the discipline, particularly the works of antiquarians such as James Frazer, Cowdell notes,

"there is a more general tendency for filmmaking, the emergent folk horror subgenre specifically, to follow closely developments—even the most awkward—in the unfolding of folklore's disciplinary history." (306)

What can be considered to distinctly mark the first wave of British folk horror then, is not only the material of British antiquarians but also their well-documented methods of otherisation. For example, while the imagery in ***The Wicker Man*** (1973) is primarily taken from *The Golden Bough*, the results of which have been previously established as grossly ahistorical by Koven (2007), it intersperses this with real Celtic folk music, not written specifically for the film, such as an instrumental of the popular folk song “*Willie of Winsbury*” during the Mayday celebrations (***The Wicker Man***). Such a technique invariably may lead to a fear of *real* people based on erroneous examples of their traditions. As Thurgill notes,

“In reality, the lived or embodied horror of such landscapes emanates not from the social inadequacies or archaic customs of rural populations but lies rather in a lack of investment in and an estrangement from central governance and metropolitan hubs. The true horror of rural landscapes thus exists as a composite of lived experiences of social and political marginalization and the proximity of human bodies to the less savory aspects of rural existence.” (Thurgill 34)

It is important to note here that according to Cowdell,

“Frazer’s writings are marginal to folkloristics these days. He still plays an important part, however, in the intellectual foundations of modern paganism, where his colossal assemblage of data has allowed for building on the foundations of German Romanticism, with its appeal to pagan classicism, and its “nostalgia for a vanished past, and desire for an organic unity between people, culture and nature” (Hutton 1999:21).” (Cowdell 306)

If folk horror is then considered a reaction to the British fear of the ‘pagan’ and/or rural ‘Other’, at the time of “a burgeoning interest in the occult that was developing around the emergent neo-pagan revival” (Cowdell 300), the intention can be said to have backfired. To take ***The Wicker Man*** as an example, while writer Anthony Shaffer and director Robin Hardy “have distanced themselves from “pro-pagan” readings” (Stephenson 6) with Shaffer referring to “those interested in paganism and witchcraft as ‘lunatics’... audiences have continually sided with the populace of Summerisle rather than with the virtues represented by Howie.” (qtd. in Stephenson 6). It is interesting to note the varied response to ***The Wicker Man***, from modern pagan communities with it being considered a cult classic in the pagan community by some, (Power) and to leading to rioting, at least according to director Robin Hardy, in other cases (Hodgkinson).

Yet this very assumption of folk horror to be simply reactionary, at least in regards to its reception, has been argued to be flawed by Stephenson (2007). They argue against a conception of *The Wicker Man* as, "simply a Gothic horror tale depicting the civilized British Christian's fear of the colonised and their potential regression to savage heathendom" (Stephenson 4) by elaborating its postcolonial interpretations. This brings in a fundamental theme of this paper; that of *performative spectatorship*.

## PERFORMATIVE SPECTATORSHIP – THE AGENCY OF THE AUDIENCE

How much does an audience control the meaning it derives from a film? Such a question would possibly fall under the purview of a theory of *spectatorship*. In the words of Judith Mayne,

"spectatorship is not just the relationship that occurs (3) between the viewer and the screen, but also and especially how that relationship lives on once the spectator leaves the theatre." (qtd. in Comanducci 18)

What then is *performative spectatorship*? In my opinion, in its subversive form, it is a critical response to Mulvey (1975)'s call for a "blow against the monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions" (Mulvey 816). As they note,

"There are three different looks associated with cinema : that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience." (Mulvey 816)

Performative spectatorship then can be said to be a reclaiming of these subordinated gazes along with the "returned gaze" of the cinema. I am inspired here by the work of Ian Olney (2013) who writes about performative spectatorship, in reference to Euro Horror,

"it affords viewers the opportunity to approach film spectatorship as a form of "play" or performance." (Olney xii)

They note,

"To a certain extent, film viewing always involves an element of performativity. In her phenomenological account of the cinematic experience, Vivian Sobchack appropriates Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description of the "intertwining" or "chiasmus" of subject and object that takes place at the moment of perception in order to argue that watching a movie should be thought of not as an act, but rather as a dialogue that involves the audience and the film as equal participants.

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Writing that a movie "is as much a viewing subject as it is . . . a visible and viewed object" (51), Sobchack demonstrates that spectatorship is necessarily "a dialogical and dialectical engagement of two viewing subjects who also exist as visible objects" (52)"

They go on to say that this notion of "partners in dialogue" (Olney 61), is often missed with the exception of Sobchack's notion of "intersubjective basis of objective cinematic communication." (qtd in Olney 61). It is the active encouragement of this by a filmmaker that I call "allowing for performative spectatorship."

It is important to denote the differences between active, passive and performative spectatorship here. In their work on gifs and performative spectatorship, Hautsch and Cook (2021) note,

"We know that the gif is not representing our actual body - or what our body is doing in that moment but by using a reaction gif, we cast ourselves as another body and into its affective and emotional performance of reception. This reception then engages, activates and changes the body of the spectator of our gif." (Hautsch and Cook 75)

Thus, performative spectatorship does not necessarily represent a dominant or oppositional reading, as in Stuart Hall's Reception Theory,<sup>3</sup> but rather "an intersubjective dialogue." (Olney 63).

"Spectatorship-as-performance" as Olney terms it, also may lead to Farmer's "identificatory performativity" (qtd. in Olney 168) by "allowing spectators the opportunity to experiment with alternative viewing positions and...identities." It, thus, nudges viewers to, in the words of Berenstein, "identify with and desire against everyday modes of behavior and to play with the masks that Western culture asks us to treat as core identities" (qtd. in Olney 141). This allows for Deleuze and Guatarri's "potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight," (qtd in Olney 113).

Before applying Olney's theory to ***Midsommar*** (2019) and ***The Wicker Man*** (1973), the next section examines the notion of the 'Other' in the second wave of transnational folk horror, and elaborates on the "postmodern aspects" present therein, including consequential opportunities for performative spectatorship.

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<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall's Reception Theory is a theory of spectatorship that states that media codes are encoded and decoded. During the decoding process, audience members take three positions. These are the dominant or preferred reading or how the producer wants the audience to view the media, the oppositional reading where the audience rejects the preferred reading, and the negotiated reading which is a compromise between the dominant and oppositional reading. See Hall (1973).

## BLURRY BOUNDARIES - THE 'OTHER' IN 'POST-HORROR'

In reference to "an emerging cycle of independently produced (and potentially profitable) horror films that merge art-cinema style with decentred genre tropes, privileging lingering dread and visual restraint over audio-visual shocks and monstrous disgust," (Church 1) often dubbed as 'post-horror,' Church writes:

"Coined in July 2017 by Guardian columnist Steve Rose, the term "post-horror" is one of many flawed attempts to name a corpus of recent films whose core stylistic tendencies were developed during the 1950s to 1970s "golden age" of modernist art cinema, but whose generic overlaps with horror cinema also open onto a wider range of precursors and contemporary intertexts.... my tentative use of post-horror should be taken with a large grain of salt, as less a wholesale endorsement of the term itself than as a convenient shorthand for the corpus of films concurrently labeled "smart horror," "elevated horror," and so on...."post-horror" is also problematic, since it could erroneously imply that these are not "actual" horror films - yet its very vagueness as a term also makes it more reclaimable, for my purposes, as a ready-made placeholder label for the many tropes, themes, affects, and political concerns that together constitute the corpus." (Church 3)

I draw upon Church's reasons for the usage of the term here, to elaborate qualities across the contemporary horror genre. This I do, in order to denote its influences on the second wave of folk horror. The 2010s saw a resurgence in films labelled folk horror transnationally, with the production of films such as ***The Witch*** (2015), ***Midsommar*** (2019), ***A Field In England*** (2013), ***The Wailing*** (2016), ***Hagazussa : A Heathen's Curse*** (2017), and ***Apostle*** (2018). Keetley notes:

"This second wave has moved in two directions— forward, shaping new incarnations, as well as backward, revisiting and reworking the defining folk horror texts from the late 1960s and 1970s." (Keetley 2)

Some like ***Hagazussa***, ***The Witch***, and ***Midsommar*** deal with themes that have generally been considered to be under the purview of postmodernism. Considering Pinedo's elucidation of post-modern elements of the contemporary horror film may prove useful here:

"The universe of the contemporary horror film is an uncertain one in which good and evil, normality and abnormality, reality and illusion are virtually indistinguishable. Together with the presentation of violence as a constituent of everyday life, the inefficacy of human action, and the refusal of narrative closure, the result is an unstable, paranoid universe in which familiar categories collapse. The iconography of the human body figures as the site of this collapse. The boundaries of any genre are slippery, but this is particularly true of the postmodern horror film, since one of the defining features of postmodernism is the blurring of boundaries." (Pinedo 17)

This blurring of boundaries then complicates the position of the ‘Other’ in horror with postmodern elements. In the case of folk horror, accusations of *a priori* otherisation may be contested with opportunities for spectatorship-as-performance, for deterritorialisation of common otherisation systems. This may offer subversive results of folk horror, and horror by extension, in which the fear and disgust i.e. the horror associated with the Other, is transformed.

### **MUSHROOMS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS - EPISTEMIC VIOLENCE IN *MIDSOMMAR* AND *THE WICKER MAN***

“I have thus defined epistemic violence as a forced delegitimation, sanctioning and repression [...] of certain possibilities of knowing, going hand in hand with an attempted enforcement [...] of other possibilities of knowing.”

- Sebastian Garbe (qtd. in Brunner)

There are two forms of epistemic violence I will address in this section. One is the epistemic violence inflicted upon the protagonists of both films. The second is that by the films themselves, against the audiences of the films. In the second case, I use the term ‘violence’ not as a politically repressive tool, but as a narrative technique which, by controlling how much the viewer knows, subsequently controls their spectatorship, and performativity in regards to the films. I argue that in the case of *Midsommar*, this encourages a subversive form of spectatorship while in *The Wicker Man*, a reterritorialisation of known otherisation tropes occurs.

***Midsommar*** begins with several long shots of empty, mountainous, winter landscapes. The desolation, and isolation are complemented by a soundtrack of a bittersweet, solo Swedish folk song, jarringly cut short by a telephone call and a shot filled with the rooftops of an urban environment, covered with snow. This is followed by the mechanical recording of a voicemail message. A sharp contrast between isolated, vast natural landscape, and mechanical, jam-packed urbanity, is thus established from the first scene. The swift movement between the two is one of many times that ***Midsommar*** subverts the expectations of the audience. These subversions, unlike the momentary fear of a jump scare, cause a sense of atmospheric dread, coupled with an inability to explain the reasons for it – a form of epistemic violence in the way that the film causes the audience, like Dani to question why they are feeling the sense of dread that they are, while the film itself causes the aforementioned feelings. As Pinedo notes,

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"Horror exposes the limits of rationality and compels us to confront the irrational. The realm of rationality represents the ordered, intelligible universe that can be controlled and predicted. In contrast, the irrational represents the disordered, ineffable, chaotic, and unpredictable universe, which constitutes the underside of life." (Pinedo 22)

This technique can be seen as essentially a form of *gaslighting*. In reference to gaslighting, Church writes,

""Gaslighting" is a concept that first gained prevalence in 1940s America, but was revived as a pop-psychology term during the period of posthorror's 2010s emergence. Broadly speaking, it describes a destructive pattern of emotional manipulation achieved by consistently undercutting a person's psychological selfhood to the point of affecting their sense of reality, especially through accusations of being "mistaken," "paranoid," or "crazy." ... films with gaslighting as a central dramatic focus tend to be structured around romantic or intimate-partner relationship"(Church 102)

A dynamic of gaslighting is common between the protagonist of ***Midsommar***, Dani, and her boyfriend Christian. As Church notes,

"Dani is calling her parents to check in about a cryptic social-media message left by her sister. Her boyfriend Christian seems unconcerned about "the sister situation," more interested in hanging out with his graduate-school friends, and blames Dani for letting her sister drive her "straight to crisis mode . . . every other day" as an "obvious ploy for attention." She responds, "You're right. I just needed to be reminded – thank you." But despite this instance of how anxious gaslightees "align themselves with a partner . . . giving up their own perception as quickly as they can in order to win the other person's approval and thereby prove to themselves that they're good, capable, lovable people,"<sup>19</sup> Dani is ultimately proven correct." (Church 108)

"This second wave has moved in two directions—forward, shaping new incarnations, as well as backward, revisiting and reworking the defining folk horror texts from the late 1960s and 1970s." (Keetley 2)

It is important to note that Christian mentions, "She does this every other day Dani, and only because you let her." (***Midsommar***). This is a common theme where Christian blames Dani for being "oversensitive" – a trait commonly associated with women. The main couple's heteronormative relationship where Dani is the "needy woman" and Christian the "emotionally unavailable boyfriend" seems to parody common gendered tropes. As Ari Aster, the director of the film stated,

""He's not the worst guy in the world. And she's very needy. But she's needy because she's navigating this unfathomable situation" (qtd. in Church 111)

The scene where Dani's parents are shown to be apparently sleeping soundly in their beds, mirrors this gaslighting by Christian towards Dani, as the film gaslighting its audience. In reality, Dani's parents have been killed by her sister Terri in a murder-suicide. It is interesting to note the foreshadowing of this by the sounds of an ambulance, as Dani calls her parents to ask if they are okay. This is one of many examples of Ari Aster's usage of foreshadowing. In fact, the entire film is summarised in a tableau in the opening scene. This again, is a technique of creating atmospheric dread. In the words of Philip Brophy,

"The contemporary horror film knows that you've seen it before; it knows that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know."

The inability to do something despite knowing, contributes greatly to an undercurrent of hopelessness in the viewer, mirroring Dani's anxieties. The mirroring of Dani's feelings is a technique used throughout the film to keep Dani as the audience's "emotional lodestone" (Church 113), and blur the boundaries between the audience and Dani.

Before Dani finds out about the murder-suicide, she speaks to a friend about her relationship with Christian. She reveals that she is anxious that she is "scaring him off" (*Midsommar*), and shrugs off her "sister situation". During this scene, the camera focuses on the label of her medicine bottle which states that it is an Ativan – a benzodiazepine used to treat anxiety, among other conditions. This scene is telling for multiple reasons. It shows us that Dani does have a support system outside of her gaslighting boyfriend, yet she chooses to not speak to them about her most pertinent issue, reserving such a discussion to be undertaken with the unavailable Christian.

This shows us the depth of codependency in Dani's relationship with Christian, and foreshadows the complete lack of support Dani will have when she is cut off from the outside world in a remote location in Sweden. Furthermore, by focusing on the medicine label while Dani reveals her anxieties, shortly after Dani has mentioned that her sister has bipolar disorder, the film plays into the audience's (possible) biases surrounding people with mental illness – which can be seen as a ploy to make the audience complicit in the gaslighting of Dani.

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Church notes,

"Upon receiving Dani's call about the multiple suicide, Christian goes to her apartment to console her. Inside, the wide shot very slowly tracks in and indifferently passes out through the window as she wails abjectly, soundtracked by the rise of discordant strings and tribal drumbeats. During this lengthy pre-credit sequence, Ari Aster thus foreshadows several important threads that run throughout the film: Dani's correct intuition about impending danger, which Christian continually discounts through gaslighting;[and] the camera's willingness to uncomfortably linger on Dani in moments of emotional torment." (Church 109)

The camera's focus on Dani in her moments of grief, is contrasted directly with Christian's unwillingness to see her. This marks an important bit of foreshadowing for one of the sequences towards the end of the movie, where the Harga women not only see Dani in her moments of utter grief, but mirror her.

In a later part of the film, Dani's fear of the Harga is portrayed as a misunderstanding by Christian. The very act of this denies Dani her agency of understanding - a textbook definition of gendered epistemic violence. As Church notes,

"Christian thus fits the mold of what Robin Stern calls the "Good-Guy Gaslighter," a partner who seems to be good and to act reasonably, but who does not really compromise when he seems to do so. Stephanie Sarkis also describes gaslighters as masters of the "conditional apology" (a non-apology intended to deflect criticism), using superficial displays of empathy while avoiding responsibility for their own actions." (Church 109)

Christian's gaslighting of Dani throughout the film is in direct opposition to the Harga's understanding and empathy of her. Yet, the Harga also commit epistemic violence on Dani, the first example of which is how they force upon her an extreme usage of psychedelic mushrooms.

Before even arriving at the Harga's village, Dani is pressured into taking psychedelic mushrooms which Pelle, Christian's anthropologist friend, "dubs ... a traditional Hårga way to connect with nature before the festivities begin" (Church 111). At first, Dani finds peace in her sun-lit natural surroundings, even 'hallucinating' her hand to be made of the grass on which she is sitting. This marks a theme of Dani finding closeness to nature throughout the second half of the film. The gender connotations of this is important to note. The Harga as the 'primitive Other' represent a closeness to nature, as a part of the nature-Culture, female-Male dichotomy, prevalent in colonial discourse. Dani's closeness to nature then can be seen as an exploration of another parodied gender trope.

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Soon however, with only the mention of the word ‘family’ Dani starts to have a bad trip, and we, the viewers, are taken along with her, with the visual effects mimicking that of a psychedelic experience. This renders the viewers’ detached perception of Dani obsolete, and they are forced to question which version of their viewing experience is real.

As Church notes,

“This is the first of several instances of hallucinogenic flora’s use in drugging the Americans – and an indication that it is not just Dani who is being gaslighted in the context of the ensuing festival. As eventually becomes clear, Pelle and his brother Ingemar (Hampus Hallberg) have deliberately invited guests because the close-knit Hårga community needs fresh blood from outside, both by breeding with and ritually sacrificing foreigners.” (Church 111)

Another action of epistemic violence is Pelle’s deliberate withholding of information regarding the Attestupan ritual of the Harga – a systematic method of senicide. After Dani is retraumatised by witnessing the event, Pelle convinces her that he empathizes with her because he too has witnessed grief and distracts her by asking if she “feel[s] held by” Christian (*Midsommar*).

The Harga also systematically arrange for Dani to see Christian mating with another woman, hiding the fact that he has been drugged, and coerced into the action. This is the final breaking point for Dani, yet it is almost ignored by most viewers at that point that she has been manipulated by the Harga, and Pelle. This is because like Dani, most viewers have started to empathise with the Harga at this point, for the empathy that they have shown Dani, contrasted with the complete lack of it in the other members of the group. Despite going into the film knowing that the Harga are the ones to be feared, Aster subverts the expectation of the audience by pointing discreetly at another villain instead – Christian and the rest of the group of Americans – with Mark being a parody of the annoying American abroad, and Josh the textbook unethical anthropologist attempting to steal the Harga’s sacred book – the Rubi Radr.

Constantly surrounded by blinding sunlight, and shown the kindness, empathy, and community of the Harga, the viewers and Dani herself undergo a deterritorialisation of their beliefs about the Harga’s malevolence. This is the primary epistemic violence of the film, as this overshadows the Harga’s cult-like actions, and slow brainwashing of both the audience and Dani. It is only after Dani has fully broken down for example, that the audience is shown the murderous fates of the rest of the group one by one, which had been withheld until that point. Yet distracted by Dani’s complete loss of control, and Christian’s (forced) unfaithfulness, the viewers, and Dani herself almost ignore what the Harga have done.



The subversion of the trope of the evil Other, is thus deterritorialised by Dani's integration with them, and the audience's subsequent alliance with them. Yet at the same time, the murderous actions of the Harga, with a specific commitment to white supremacy (it may be noted here that all the people of colour in the group of outsiders were killed with only white characters being offered the option of mating with the Harga), and their cultlike mentality offer caution against excessive association with community as well. This offers an approach to prevent a reterritorialisation, in the mode of the Other taking the role of the subject from the subjugated. Thus, the film offers a comment on the pervasiveness of epistemic violence in both ends of the binary, invisibility and integration. As Butler notes about drag,

"In this sense, then, drag is subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality." (Butler 85)

The parodying of gender roles, 'normal' and 'Other,' and the violence of urban invisibility in contrast to a rural hivemind in ***Midsommar*** then reflects the imitative nature of the binary itself. The elucidation of the authoritarianism of both sides of these binaries allows for a potential prevention of reterritorialisation of one side of the binary from 'good' to 'bad' categories. This allows for a radical subversive performativity in the audience's spectatorship. It is exactly here that ***The Wicker Man*** fails. The protagonist Sergeant Howie is also gaslighted during the entirety of the film, and the audience alongside him. While investigating a missing child on the fictional Scottish island, Summerisle, Sergeant Howie is led to believe that the islanders are preparing to sacrifice the young girl, Rowan, to their gods, to ensure a fruitful harvest, while they are preparing to sacrifice Howie instead. Yet without showing any form of integration of the binary, as is shown in the case of Dani, the film only reterritorializes the notion of the Other as untrustworthy, and violent. Thus, while audiences of the film have typically sided with the Summerislers, this represents simply a reterritorialisation of the Other from 'bad' to 'good,' forming a counterculture that simply opposes rather than attempting to move away from the mainstream through a line of flight.

### CONCLUSION - "DID YOU SMILE WITH HER AT THE END?"

The question in the title of this paper was the first thing I asked my friend after finishing ***Midsommar***. At the end of the film, after choosing Christian instead of one of the members of the Harga as a human sacrifice, Dani watches the building burning, lurching around in a huge dress made of flowers, as the members of the Harga community scream and wail around her in their typical form of mimesis. In this purging of 'the most unholy affects' Dani also takes part.

This scene is the very picture of deterritorialisation, a disruption of transcoding, with a lurching, cathartic soundtrack playing in the background as a direct subversion of the expectation of the end of a horror film. Dani ultimately finds catharsis as she stares directly into the camera, her lips breaking into a full-blown smile, with viewers being encouraged to smile with her as the music comes to a sweeping conclusion. This last moment represents, in my opinion, a line of flight, a crack in the system of control that Dani has been in for the entirety of the movie. By encouraging the audience to smile with her, the film encourages a radical sort of empathy, a performative spectatorship whereby preoccupations between Other and Normal, Wrong and Right, are temporarily swept aside for a moment of catharsis and freedom. **The Wicker Man** in contrast ends in a reterritorialisation of the belief that it has espoused for the entire film – that the Other is violent and unworthy of trust. While Sergeant Howie represents Jesus on the cross, and is immortalised, Dani lies in the cracks between visibility and invisibility- both seen and unseen; But, for a single moment, she and the audience are completely free.

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CHALCHITRA DARPAN

SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

# HORROR ACROSS THE DIRT

A CULTURAL EXAMINATION OF SEXUALISATION AS  
EMANCIPATION ACROSS COUNTRIES

SAMPADA JAIN AND VASUNDHARA T

Across cinemas, horror and sexualisation of women make an unbreakable pair – tearing through frames of excessive nudity and objectification set against the backdrop of pseudo-normalising assault. Gore has made the entry of obscenity convenient, something which is extremely weighted towards one end of the gender spectrum. Women are usually the only ones serving as helpless victims, or even worse, they're only allowed to save the world if dressed in supposed purity. Eras in the genre have been defined by stills glorifying the fear of women, and despite their abundance in casting, limiting their characters to sexual desire or as victims of unspeakable horrors. This eventually feeds into giving the audience a voyeuristic experience of dynamic sadism and masochism- either they enjoy the movie while the characters suffer, or they partake in masochistic pleasure- identifying with the victim and resonating with shared suffering. Horror movies often start with plots revolving around sex or set in motion against it, as we see in movies like *Raaz* (2002), *The Grudge* (2002), *Orphan* (2009), etc., and the only one who survives at the end is one who has maintained abstinence. Evil is assigned to the “compromise of virtue”, where in reality, the villain is the sexual liberation and agency which is taken away. This is where the problematic trope of the *Final Girl*<sup>1</sup> comes in. The survivor and ultimate hero is not based on any skill, but simply the promise of virginity, owing to centuries long of censuring away sexual acts and urges. Whether this is the influence of religion, historical gender roles or age old slut-shaming, we won't know, but it is a fact that directors agree on as well: Horror wouldn't maintain its nail-biting rushes or the trademark “chilling aversion” if the ledger turned virgin. In our article, we explore different themes under the same: how this perversion is displayed around the world and what it symbolises in accordance with the culture it is birthed in.

### AMERICA

Hollywood is infamous in our particular genre, be it in slasher flicks or supernatural horror with religious connotations. It also best displays the paradoxical nature of horror – for movies which pass the Bechdel test frighteningly well, female roles still cater to male predation, cast in a lustful helpless light.



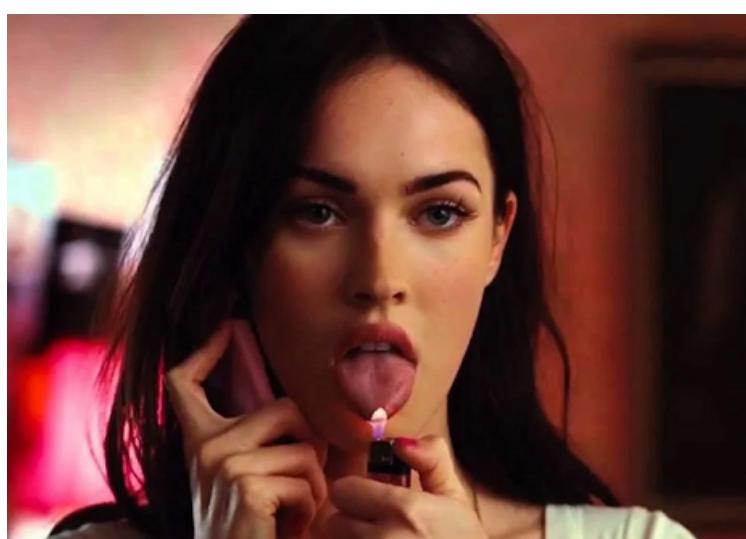
*The comic, from Dykes to Watch Out For, that gave rise to the “Bechdel Test”*  
*(Wikimedia Commons)*

<sup>1</sup> For more information on Final Girl, refer to - Horvat, Ana. "Final Girl: Analysis of the Slasher Film Trope." Master's thesis, University of Zadar, 2018.

A recipe involving a female victim and a towering man has become classic, complete with a sharp weapon- often phallic shaped and handheld, implying the need for invasion of personal space and a kind of “penetration”. Some genre classics display this violence greatly- The life threatening consumption of female sexuality from Coppola’s **Bram Stoker’s Dracula** (1992), the infamous masturbation scene led by the devil in **The Exorcist** (1973), or the brutal stabbings from **Jennifer’s Body** (2009) while the male perpetrators laugh at Jennifer’s pain.

We would like to focus especially on **Jennifer’s Body** (2009) and **Scream** (1996)- both horror classics starting out in a lust driven threat, and yet, with female protagonists emerging victorious despite their “lack of virtue”. They either defeat the final girl trope, or manage to end with most of the audience rooting for their cause. However, both movies still give in to the 2000s objectification: women are oversexualised and too much focus is laid on their bodies and sexual activities to take them seriously as complex characters. Eventually, they fall back into the rhythm of voyeurism and nudity, where all the danger ends up being arousing in a sense.

**Jennifer’s Body** is possibly the best example of this. Once touted as the biggest failures in horror feminism after its reception during its release, the movie has gained a cult following in recent times. Following the #MeToo Movement, the movie has been revered as a rape revenge film, and touted as a movie ahead of its time- with its themes of female friendship and underlying queer positivity. The movie was also complimented on depicting sexually desirable women as more than their bodies; they give Megan Fox, a cultural sex icon, a complex character arc going beyond lust, instead dealing with real trauma which eventually transforms into anger and power.



Still from *Jennifer’s Body*, 2009, dir. By Karyn Kusama  
(20th Century Fox)

However, while recent reception of the movie has been positive, there is no denying that the *male gaze*<sup>2</sup> was the target audience for the film. The theme of Jennifer being a survivor of assault is only subtle in the movie, and even her *Girl-bossing*<sup>3</sup> is cut short by unnecessary focus on her body or states of undress- in fact, the whole sequence of her swimming in the lake seemed inconsequential. Moreover, the movie seemed to eat at yet another male gaze based trope: that women become characters who must be heard out only through their abuse, grounding in the fact that no matter what power women are given in horror films, they receive it through unspeakable violence and trauma.

Jennifer and Needy embody a complex relationship, which brings a sense of monstrosity – each peculiar to their own. Polar opposites with different personalities in a complicatedly codependent relationship. They even get “biff” necklaces as a testament to their friendship.

Though the directors hailed it as a film beyond its time by incorporating an LGBTQ+ aspect – with the intention to bring focus on gay rights and existence, that too was oversexualised with forced overtures brought in through a heterosexual lens or male gaze.

Despite the intention of propagating LGBTQ+ relationships, their innate need to imbue it with gaslighting and toxicity is one step forward and two steps back.

To quote Victoria Santamaría Ibor in “Hell is a Teenage Girl”, “The film’s specific use of the conventions of the horror genre regarding gender roles is both a feminist denounce of a patriarchal system and a perpetuation of the same clichés the film wants to subvert.”

### INDIA

India is no stranger to misogynistic media, but it cannot be denied that horror does slightly better on that note when compared to other genres (not that item numbers and flimsy sexual innuendoes pose a great standard). But in a culture where the main protagonist is homogenised into a particular, often unattainable identity, horror provides a path where the critical characters are the marginalised- they are beings who’ve seen pain, suffering, and are intrinsically different from the clichéd hero. Here, the villains and monsters are finally given a platform for commentary. But, where horror wins at giving women an actual role and backstory, it fails as another aspect of patriarchy shines through- depicting women as helpless, weak, and often mentally ill.

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2 For more information on Male Gaze, see- Mulvey, L., 1989. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema.

3 Amoruso, S., 2014. *Girlboss*.



In countless examples (**Raaz** [2002], **Bhool Bhulaiyaa** [2007] etc.), the woman's "mental weakness" are the reasons she is possessed- there is a clear portrayal that it is an innate tendency where the woman loses her conscious mind, only to be saved by their male partners who in fact had little to do with it other than the coincidence of "being there". This feeds further into the damsel in distress trope, altogether diminishing the independent roles of women protags.

The other route for female roles in Indian horror is usually of the supernatural antagonist- another problematic stereotype punishing women for simply being sexually attractive. They are shown as being promiscuous and raunchy, and in turn get the gift of being the villains or end up falling prey to dark forces, as shown in the infamous *Raaz* series, *Ragini MMS* (2011) and *Bhoot* (2003).

This plays into the male gaze based concept of connecting danger with seduction- any woman with a pint of sexual thirst is washed over by evil, thus sculpting a sexual image of the supernatural. It is as an article by Ekata Lahiri rightly stated, "You cannot win with the representation of women in Indian cinema- it is either damned or damning."

However, recent media has seen a change in this trend, and the shining pearl of this oyster is undoubtedly *Bulbbul* (2020). A beautifully themed and directed film, it reaches a groundbreaking sentiment- representing horror in a very different, but just as real and terrifying angle. Symbolism and setting is given most importance: each frame contains easter eggs and thematically paced moods which urge the film in the direction of the plot. It pays tribute to all of its more obvious inspirations, and yet sits in as a very new concept- a sharp, fresh take on a subject done wrong too many times.



This is not to say that it breaks the stereotypes of horror entirely- in fact, the thinly adorned plot slips out from behind the immaculate beauty of the frames as the story develops a classic desensitising overdramatisation. The scenes of abuse are unnecessarily played out, and while it may have been with the intention of showing the extent of the pain and trauma it did to the protagonist, it actually undos itself and ends up being an important plot point taken away from the main character and granted to the male abuser.

Much like **Jennifer's Body**, this larks back to the problematic cycle of a woman gaining power only after being violently broken, and the consequent (and severely overdone) rape-revenge sub-genre of horror.

Added to this is the fact that, like all Indian horror films, the story is set in motion with and ends with patriarchy. A healthy curiosity and exploration of one's fantasies eventually becomes their undoing as innocence is set aside by the rage of envy. Although Bulbbul eventually gets her revenge and the movie itself serves as a wonderful callout to Indian systems and battles women face, the fact remains – the cornerstone of the plot is still male. But that is not to disregard the subtle yet powerful touches of women empowerment peppered throughout the film. The abuse scenes are not meant as an exhibition, rather a reality check of experiences women actually face. Not only are women actually represented as individual people with different personalities (especially highlighted by Paoli Dam who draws Binodini and her thinly-veiled envy beautifully), it even focuses on the multiple facets behind any character, regardless of gender. The film does seamless weaving while running back and forth between the time changes- the yellow blue of Bulbbul's innocent girlhood is vivid, paying homage to this nostalgic sort of sadness, grieving happiness lost. The fiery red is an obvious statement of rage omnipresent through the film. The rosy lens almost begs for a character of its own- It nods to maturity, menstruation, blood, power, rage, and of course the eventual role of *Kali* (which may have been controversial, but God, does it scream powerfully). The constant switching of the mise en scène feeds into the realisation of the climax- you mourn the death of a bubbly, curious girl as she butterflies into a woman built of power and rage. You worship Bulbbul as her youthful smile turns into an unsettling smirk of pain lived and lives lost. And so, a movie meant to instil fear transforms into women rising to battle real trauma, taking that fear and molding it into vengeful justice.

### JAPAN

We now cross over to the other part of the world with the same trope of oversexualisation but a different exterior purpose - ***Kanashimi no Beradonna*** or ***Belladonna of Sadness*** (1973).

This 1973 animated film by Eiichi Yamamoto is based on Jules Michelet's 'Satanism and Witchcraft' and carries influence from Eurocentric art styles – especially from Art Nouveau (itself influenced by Japanese prints), and artists like Alfons Mucha, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustav Klimt, and even Egon Schiele.

One may hail it as a feminist manifesto but still inherent are deeply flawed conceptions of femininity.

It was probably made with one hand on the brush and the other in the pants, with heads nodding to both Japanese psych-rock and the self awareness of the societal evil they were committing.

The film follows the protagonist Jeanne as she engages in witchcraft after being raped by the clergy in order to gain revenge - only to be burnt on a pike for her husband. The pint sized devil, whose head in a few scenes is shaped like a phallic symbol, is said to be a manifestation of her hatred which grows exponentially till the end of the film. He strokes her nascent thirst for regaining her power which was subverted. She instead reclaims her agency with the gift of *Belladonna* allowing her to embrace the life of a sorceress.

*Belladonna* is the flower of virtue turning into a flower of promiscuity and hence liberation - encouraging libido in order to conquer inherent societal sadness arising from repression of natural tendencies.

Sex is therefore the instrument of tyranny... before being clearly seen as the devil's instrument, and finally, a tool of liberation from oppression.

Every symbol in the background is a callback to lust, be it in a 20 minute sequence of only sexual acts in various positions or in the phallic shaped deuterogenist- the film was sexual graphic at its best. To quote Alissa Wilkinson on her 2016 review for the movie, "There are expressionistic, undeniable, disturbing depictions of rape; there are orgies; in one sequence, various genitalia transmute, as if in a dream, into whole spectra of flora and fauna."

And yet, we observe that what started out on overused sexual violence, nudity and objectification eventually turned out to be an altar worshipping the act of sex.

An important point to note is the usage of women as the Western angels of liberty and assigning unchaste women to be the embodiment of evil witches that need to be dispelled for the good of society.

A paper on the same by Alison Rowlands mentions that "the French demonologist Jean Bodin noted in 1580 that women were fifty times more likely than men to succumb to the temptation of witchcraft." The persecution of women in the name of witchcraft and witch hunting was inherent in Mediaeval Europe and hence can be seen from Michelet's book. However, Eiichi and Michelet try to make the protagonist witchcraft their way against institutional misogyny.

According to Michelet, in a note added to the end of his book:

*"The object of my book was purely to give, not a history of Sorcery, but a simple and impressive formula of the Sorceress's way of life, which my learned predecessors darken by the very elaboration of their scientific methods and the excess of detail. My strong point is to start, not from the devil, from an empty conception, but from a living reality, the Sorceress, a warm, breathing reality, rich in results and possibilities". A sorceress is driven to her profession by external factors and worshippers of god are the perpetrators of bringing the darkness. Excesses are the only way to break out of the shackles of society.*

Prizing women for their sexuality one minute and punishing them for it the next, **Belladonna of Sadness** reflects this dynamic down to its core. This is a story about men who are in the thrall of Jeanne's beauty, and then enraged by their inability to control it. This too, thus, arises out of male motive – again expounding the omnipresence of male privilege in the film.



*Still from Belladonna of Sadness, 1973, dir. By Eiichi Yamamoto  
(IMDB Photo Gallery)*

## CHALCHITRA DARPAR

Coming to the art style, the animation here might bring with it an antique and vintage feel, with the camera panning up, down and across large still artworks. Most of the images are created by thin washes of watercolour paint accompanied by gorgeous, sinewy lines, although in places the lines became blotchy like early Andy Warhol illustrations.

The use of colours is absolutely brilliant. Eiichi changes Jeanne's hair colour depending on the context and the stage of character development she's undergoing – from yellow to brown to pink to green (colour of power, and hence of devil) to black to blonde hair (when bad/evil) and finally red. An interesting callback to the colour grading of Bulbul mentioned earlier.

The mixture of art nouveau and eroticism, very typical of the 70s, reminds one of French cartoonists of the time such as Philippe Druillet or Georges Pichard. Eiichi Yamamoto makes his mark by defining a unique directorial style to his art. He alternates animation and camera movements on still images, but also different illustration techniques, ranging from watercolour to collage, including gouache – everything by offering plans in rich and varied colours than others much more stripped down and monochromatic.

This European influence and manner of animation makes it a world apart from the otherwise prevalent Japanese forms of *hentai*<sup>4</sup> and *Pink films*.<sup>5</sup> The drawing is magnificent, the mixture techniques are done to perfection and some images are prodigious (rape that tears the body in two is not a idea of great originality, but the result is striking).

The sauciness of certain graphic proposals gives almost adolescent provocation to the film, with an overuse of themes dear to Japanese genre cinema (rape, submission, etc.). The last scene ends with an ode to Eugène Delacroix's "Liberty Leading the People" – a testament to Yamamoto's attempt to whitewash the film with a sense of revolution by women.

### DIRECTOR'S CUT

Horror itself has many tropes to rise up against, but part of the problem is the sheer lack of heterogeneity amongst directors. Jason Blum, famed horror producer, commented in 2018 about the lack of women directors, suggesting that they are unwilling to explore the genre.

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<sup>4</sup> McLelland, M., 2022. A short history of 'hentai'. Canberra, ACT: The Australian National University.

<sup>5</sup> Arnold, M., 2022. Sex Every Afternoon: Pink Film and the Body of Pornographic Cinema in Japan.

This view has been proved wrong time and time again, be it the historical emergence of gothic **Mary Shelley's Frankenstein** based on a novel of the same name by Mary Shelley, the absolute brilliance of **The Babadook** (2014) directed by Jennifer Kent, or the emergence of genre-defining horror gems the recent years are developing. The issue is thus more about the gatekeeping of movies from directors of other genders. Yes, there has been a shortage of movies with non cis het filmmakers, as data collected by 'stephenfollows', a film research blog, indicates, only 9.9% of American movies between 1988- 2017 have had female directors. Horror as a genre has had only 5.9% in the same time period. It thus becomes easier to admit that the male gaze influence is so strong because the views of the non-cis het are never given a chance.

With regard to sexual representation , there is no argument that sexual openness is even less welcome than demonic possession. While we have moved on from the worst of a global conservative era, stigma still follows any expression of bodily pleasures. Talks of the bedroom are often hushed, and allude to the same forbidden, secretive feeling the horror genre is built upon. Thus, a directorial formula has emerged, which links enjoyment of thrillers to the part of the brain which experiences sexual pleasure. The rush of adrenaline, pounding of the heart, and the nail biting effects are highlighted by nudity, objectification, and violent punishment of eroticism.

This has also led to the " You have sex, you die" idea highlighted in **Scream**- an overused cliche breaking down contemporary horror, and targeting anyone willing to explore bodily pleasures, so they might be subject to hellish punishment.

In an article, Michael Varrati, director of **Unusual Attachment** (2020), points out that "the trope runs parallel with the rise of the conservative era of Ronald Reagan, as well as the dawn of the AIDS Crisis. You have a landscape where those in charge want to limit what teenagers know about sex and their own sexuality running alongside a terrible and deadly pandemic that the world at large equates with promiscuity," he says. 'You have sex, you die' is most prevalent in the 80s because it was a manipulation of our fears, and that place where fear and sex intersect."

### CONCLUSION

The horror genre has a funny way of showing love to women. They are either put on a pedestal or commanded as derogatory and that pedestal itself is brought through violation.

The idea of female liberation is common throughout all three films – however each realises it in different ways. Jeanne forcefully succumbs to salacious and carnal desires (becoming the devil herself), Bulbbul realises female aggression through pain and consequent representational revenge, while Jennifer imbibes both of these motifs in her quest for survival.

All three films discussed so far have attempted to subvert tropes and stereotypes yet paradoxically ending up conforming to them. Preconceived notions of the filmmaker arising from different contexts and time periods peek out nevertheless, carrying societal perceptions whether they intended to or not. Thus, even though the films of an era shape its society, the society shapes the films as well.

Perhaps the monstress is a liberation of women that celebrates the triumphs and tribulations of womanhood (like **Belladonna of Sadness**). Or perhaps the monstress is the assumption that a life of excess is the only means of liberation. Only time will tell.

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**"CLOSE  
YOUR  
EYES,  
KIDS!"**



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**FRIGHTENING  
FILMS FOR  
CHILDREN**

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*"I should have known you wouldn't understand. No one ever does."*

Norman, the child protagonist of the movie **ParaNorman** (2012), says this to the adults of his world. Ironically, the words uttered by Norman ring true in light of the predicaments that the adult world has faced in constructing the 'child'. While earlier, the child was only seen as a miniature adult, 16th century onwards, childhood became a place of heavy contestation between the theories of original sin and original innocence. The Augustan Christian doctrine of Original Sin posited that the child, born through an act of sin, is inherently sinful and needs to be moralised, while, the Romantic period professed that the child was the embodiment of a pure and innocent human spirit. The children's horror subgenre of films stands at the very intersection of these theories, in all its' glorious liminality. The genre horror in itself transgresses that which is considered 'civil' or 'normal' by society. Children's horror becomes even more so transgressive because it is intended towards an audience that society has always sought to protect. Thus, in this paper, we have referred to 'Children's Horror Films' as horror films particularly targeted towards children.

We intend to analyse the child protagonist of some of these films, first in its likeness to the child in the audience, and then in its dissimilarity to the child of the adult horror film and ultimately, the gender politics that underlie it all. The scope of children's horror films along with its history, aesthetics and generic characteristics has been traced by Catherine Lester in her groundbreaking thesis "The Children's Horror Film: Beneficial fear and subversive pleasure in an (im)possible Hollywood subgenre", which has proven to be the basis of this paper, helping us to explore her arguments even further. While the subgenre includes many films, the films that we have chosen to highlight all have child protagonists. These are **Coraline** (2009), **Frankenweenie** (2012), **Monster House** (2006), **The Witches** (2020) and **ParaNorman** (2012). The child protagonists of these films, much like the genre they occupy, are often liminal, transgressing traditional notions of childhood, not fitting into either mould of sin or innocence, exploiting their freedoms more than any real child can afford to. And herein lies the appeal of children's horror films to the child audience, as will be explored further.

### CATHARSIS OF THE CHILD: REEL AND REAL

Children's horror films are a "traumatically cathartic" (Gilbey) form of entertainment for its child audience. In order to understand this, it is necessary to first understand the pleasures of the horror genre as a whole.

There has been much scholarly debate on this topic but for the sake of this paper, we will be taking the arguments of Robin Wood as our basic assumption. In his essay, "The American Nightmare: Horror in the 70s" (2003), Wood uses the Freudian theory of the 'return of the repressed' to explain the pleasures of horror. According to this, there are two types of emotions/desires in humans which we consciously or unconsciously repress within ourselves. These are 'basic' and 'surplus'.

The repression of 'basic' emotions help us to become a coordinated human being instead of a screaming animal while the repression of 'surplus' emotions helps us in becoming "monogamous, heterosexual, bourgeois, patriarchal, capitalist" beings. But it becomes imperative for the society to deal with these 'surplus' repressed emotions, which go against basic bourgeois ideology. This is where the horror film genre comes in. This 'surplus' is represented on screen as 'otherness' or the 'monstrous' in the horror genre. It is shown as "monstrosity which temporarily invades normality and subverts social norms" (Lester 61). This allows the audience to confront and deal with these repressed emotions, resulting in a kind of 'catharsis'.



Andrew Tudor suggests that the horror film is pleasurable for the audience because it appeals to the "beast" concealed within the superficially civilised human, allowing the audience to revel in morally 'unacceptable' desires. (qtd in Lester 62). The audience can indulge in violent behaviour through their on-screen counterpart and eliminate the need to indulge in it in reality. As far as the child audience of children's horror films is concerned, as entailed by Lester, they are not yet adults and hence are still going through the process of basic repression instead of the surplus.

The children's horror films provide a cathartic experience for these 'basic' emotions. The onscreen child protagonist indulging in dangerous, unruly behaviour becomes a source of enjoyment for the child audience, an expression of basic instincts. As Maria Tatar (2009) has suggested, since this expression and confrontation of repressed emotions is done in a safe zone (the audience is only sitting and watching the film), the "thrill" of being frightened is experienced without getting hurt, as executing such violent behaviour in real life would prove to be dangerous, maybe even fatal (qtd in Lester 63). Thus, Victor of **Frankenweenie** resurrecting his dog from the dead, wherein he crossed the boundaries of life and death, or Coraline exploring the Other World, which was her bold attempt to explore her dissatisfaction with her own reality, becomes a cathartic experience for the child audience.

Fear is an important tool in this catharsis. It is introduced, but it is either dissipated, or otherwise, accepted and overcome. Kimberly Reynolds (2001) has commented on this "sense of security children's horror provides", as "what was thought to be inexplicable is explained, and what seemed dangerous and menacing is made safe". In Coraline, when Wybie, the human boy first appears, he seems to be monstrous- a robot on wheels, accompanied by thunderous lightning and an alarming horn. Coraline is scared as it seems he is about to attack her, but eventually she finds out that beneath the mask is actually a harmless human boy, and thus, the fear is dissipated. Thus, childish fears are unfounded and imagined monsters and dangerous strangers turn out to be perfectly ordinary objects and individuals. (Reynolds, 3)



A brilliant example of this dissipation of fears is the child protagonist, Norman (ParaNorman) himself. With his ability to talk to the dead and his fascination with monsters, he himself lies away from the 'norm' and fits into the definition of that which is considered the 'other' or the 'monstrous'. This nature of his results in him being misunderstood and cast off by his peers. Thus, being a human boy possessing characteristics of the 'other', Norman demystifies monstrosity and horror for the child audience. (Lester, 109) He delivers the message that to perceive the 'monstrous' or the 'other' as something to be feared and ostracised, is to misunderstand it. Thus, the entire film becomes an attempt to dissipate one's own fears.

The motif of the child protagonist in these films helps the audience identify with them better. Children's films often have adult protagonists, possessing a didactic attitude. However many children's horror films have child protagonists who reflect the real life experiences of the child audience. Victor (Frankenweenie) and Norman (ParaNorman)



both are pre-adolescent children who are lonely and bullied in school, a phenomenon common among children of their age. Coraline also suffers from loneliness and boredom. Her parents are inattentive and focused primarily on their jobs. They almost always misunderstand her intentions, thus, causing her to dislike them and yearn for the Other World. Such figures of parental authority are common in these films: they misconstrue and misunderstand their child and hence, are distanced from their lives. Norman is always misunderstood by his parents, especially by his father who is not ready to accept his inability to fit into the norm.

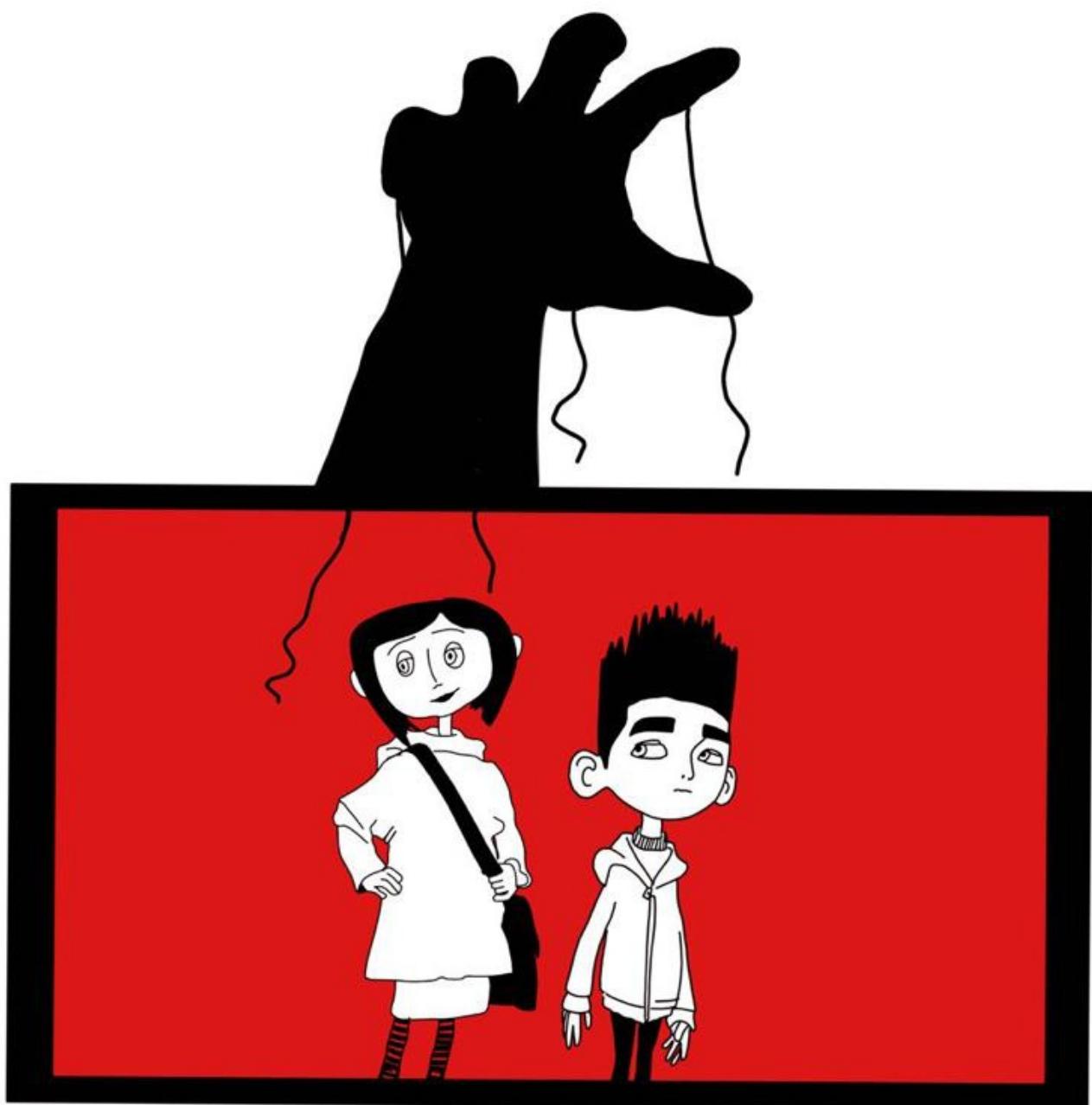
Victor's parents too want him to fit into the norm, the mould of the baseball playing, American male child. These situations result in the child protagonist gaining agency and reversing the hierarchy between adults and children. This temporary subversion of hierarchy allows the child audience to explore 'basic' repressed emotions and indulge in them. But the order is soon restored as almost always there lies a reconciliation of the nuclear family in the end, where parents finally understand, accept and support the child with all their imperfections. Thus, Disney's 'happily-ever-after' resurfaces and helps the child viewer to gain catharsis.

The horror in some of these films, also often lies near the home, in the 'everyday'. In **Monster House**, the mysterious house turns out to be possessed by a vengeful spirit, thus, the 'peaceful' house literally becomes a space of horror. As suggested by Lester, for children who rely on parental protection, this becomes particularly frightening. Coraline goes even further as it turns the familiar into the uncanny. Supernatural manifestations of Coraline's parents, want to destroy her and entrap her forever. The safe domestic space has now become fear-inducing. The repressed fear of losing a parent, or the home is literally manifested on screen. The film confronts these repressed emotions by battling with the Other Mother, winning over her and ultimately, making Coraline accept her own reality, and live in her own 'happily-ever-after'. While in the beginning, the repressed desires and fears resurfaced, they have now gone through the process of confrontation and have been finally overcome, enveloping the child in a sense of relief. While children's horror films allow the child the space to go through this psychological process of catharsis, historically, horror films have never afforded much respect to the child on-screen or in the audience. While a child audience became non-existent when horror turned into an adult genre, the onscreen child was always seen as demonic. The following section will focus on this difference in representation.

### *REDEFINING THE CHILD*

Using children in horror is a technique that could be traced back to the late 50s in Hollywood with the familiar tropes of the possessed child or the monstrous child. While this child is quite satanic in its attributes, the child in children's horror films is the hero that saves the day. In this section, we'd be primarily focussing on these differences in the child of an adult horror film and that of a children's horror film through selected American and Indian films.

# CHALCHITRA DARPAN



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## The Child in Children's Horror:

The child protagonist in children's horror films has always been a messiah, saving their friends and family from immoral danger. This child is similar to the possessed or monstrous child of adult horror films in several facets, yet is also entirely different from it. It isn't passively innocent but deals with problems that even the adults are oblivious to or just unfit to solve, hence propelling it into adulthood.

A stark example is the film **Monster House**, where DJ and his friends gain agency because of the absence of parental figures, setting out to eliminate the threat. They perform deviant acts but are never stripped of their childhood innocence in this process, as the aforementioned acts are rendered heroic due to their intentions. The child in **Monster House** is a vigilante coupled with the usual attitude of the pre-teen, except he is more able than the adult since his parents are off to a dentist convention, he is left without any parental guidance while the other adults are not much vigilant. Unlike DJ, Coraline's actions are borne out of longing, loneliness, childlike wonder and inattentive parents and there is not much evidence of her transition to adulthood. While Coraline and DJ are the heroic, active protagonists, Victor, from **Frankenweenie** fits into the stereotype of the innocent child as his intentions to revive his pet are pure. The absence of parental figures in the previous films compels the child-protagonist to act, unlike in **Frankenweenie** where Victor's parents are fairly active and involved for the entirety of the film, thus restricting the child's abilities to take hold of the situation. Thus, parental absence in these films, becomes a precondition to letting the child gain agency in the fictional world and deal effectively with the threats posed in it.

**Frankenweenie** also plays on the comparison of the 'child' in children's horror films and adult horror films. In appearance, Victor's classmates seem to be caricatures based upon famous Universal monsters. As Megan E. Troutman (2015) suggests, if these children were a part of classic adult horror films, chances are they would be "hunted and killed to restore the natural order; however in this postmodern text, these children look abnormal, but there is no attempt to either destroy them or force them into normalcy". Thus, the children's horror film despite all its imperfections, gives the child its previously lacking respect and representation.

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## The Child in Adult Horror:

The child in the early horror films was a figure of innocence painted as a victim of demonic possession. Moving to the 50s, the child gradually became associated with the monstrous identity itself, feared even by the adults with films like ***The Bad Seed*** (1956) and ***Rosemary's Baby*** (1968). One of the few Indian horror films that has artfully centred around the monstrous child is ***Tumbbad*** (2018), a story of Vinayak Rao who is in search of a treasure hidden in the village of Tumbbad, Maharashtra, set in 20th century British India. At the centre of the narrative lies Vinayak's son, Pandurang. Vinayak's family is cursed with the secret of Hastar who, as the folktale goes, is the son of the Goddess of Prosperity and banished to a life of seclusion but sheltered in his mother's womb. While Pandurang isn't possessed, unlike the common child in adult horror films, he is consumed by the greed that once belonged to his father, thus making him as monstrous as the latter. The child in ***Tumbbad*** is miles away from his bubbled childhood; he is precocious and even sexualised to an extent. This monster child constantly tries to overthrow the patriarch and exert dominance over him to occupy his wealth and mistress.



with supernatural abilities such as the child in ***The Shining*** (1980) which is a story of an aspiring writer who moves to the Overlook Hotel with his wife, Wendy, and son, Danny, working as its off-season caretaker. Danny has supernatural abilities that aware him of the horrifying history of the hotel and the fate of his father. In "The Monstrous Child: Replacement and Repetition in The Shining", Dustin Freeley argues that Danny's psychic abilities pose a threat to his father that "shatters the illusion of innocence and threatens the socially constructed hierarchy within the adult/child dynamic".

Danny transgresses the boundaries of childhood by housing childhood innocence as well as the power of adults. The child figure in **The Shining** is neither possessed nor demonic in any sense, rather uncanny.

Cole from **The Sixth Sense** (1999) like Danny, is bestowed with the abilities of the unknown. As his relationship with his psychologist Malcolm builds, Cole confides his secret to him: he can see dead people who are unaware they are dead. In "The Uncanny Child in Transnational Cinema", Jessica Balanzategui notes that "The Sixth Sense makes overt the uncanny child's symbolic role as a receptacle for the adult's repressed trauma" as Malcolm himself is dead and for him, Cole is an evocation of his repressed trauma, an attempt to make amends for his failures. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny", Freud suggests that the uncanny encompasses a transition from the *heimlich* (familiar) to the *unheimlich* (unfamiliar). The uncanny child, hence, is an amalgamation of childhood vulnerability and the adult's buried consciousness. As the uncanny disrupts the hierarchy of power between the adult and the child, the childhood becomes a past temporal stage of adulthood, housing repressed fears of the adult psyche, a 'return of the repressed' on screen.

### CHILDREN'S HORROR FILMS THROUGH A FEMINIST THEORETICAL LENS

There is no dearth of feminist work in the horror genre and this can be attributed to a series of seminal works from early 1970s to late 1980s. Megan Troutman, in "(Re)Animating the Horror Genre: Explorations in Children's Animated Horror Films," summarises these studies in a very comprehensive manner that allows for a systematic understanding of the perceptions of horror and gender throughout the history of the genre. Megan argues that there was a 'conceptual shift' in the early 1980s from perceiving horror as a masculine genre in which 'active male monsters' terrorised 'passive female victims.' Feminist studies, earlier, focused their attention on this bifurcation of powerful males and passive females; however, they moved beyond this restricting bifurcation to provide a more nuanced understanding and this started with Susan Lurie's "The Construction of the 'Castrated Woman' in Psychoanalysis and Cinema" in 1981 and was followed by several other studies like Linda Williams's 1984 essay "When the Woman Looks", Barbara Creed's "The Monstrous Feminine" (1993) and Carol J Clover's "Men, Women, and Chainsaws" (1992). These feminist scholars have changed a stereotypical perception of studying gender in horror, and to quote Megan, "In many instances, the scholarship produced by these four women has created a horror genre that is far more progressive in terms of gender portrayal."

In this section, we will primarily focus on two theoretical concepts that seem most relevant to analyse representation of women in children's horror films: Barbara Creed's "Monstrous feminine" and Carol J Clover's "Final Girl". Further, we will analyse **Coraline** (2009) through these concepts in detail. The reason to choose **Coraline** for the analysis is two-fold: Firstly, it is the only film that has an active female protagonist not only in our list of films, but also in almost the entire subgenre of children's animated horror films (Troutman, 2015). Secondly, **Coraline** embodies both a Monstrous feminine (in the form of the Other Mother) and the Final Girl (in the form of the protagonist, Coraline) serving, Megan notes, "as the biggest challenge to essentialist gender portrayal implicit to the children's film subgenre."

### The Monstrous Feminine:

*"All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject."*

-Creed, "The Monstrous Feminine" (1993)

Barbara Creed in "The Monstrous Feminine" (1993) studies the portrayal of women as monsters in horror films from a feminist and psychoanalytical perspective.

Creed rejects the conceptualisation of women only as victims, a prevalent discourse in her time. She argues that most studies have not given much attention to women-as-monsters, and those that have, either have "simply discussed female monstrosity as part of male monstrosity", adopted the Freudian argument that "woman terrifies because she is castrated", or argue that "there are no 'great' female monsters in the tradition of Frankenstein's monster or Dracula."

According to Creed, Freud's argument that a woman only terrifies when represented as a man's castrated other reinforces the patriarchal and essentialist view that women are victims by nature.

Creed's study aims to illustrate numerous examples of women as active monsters, not just passive victims and challenges the existing theories of male and female spectatorship. However, she clarifies that the presence of monstrous feminine as active monsters itself does not make it 'feminist' as the monstrous feminine in horror films is more concerned with "male fears than about female desire or feminine subjectivity."

Although Creed analysed adult horror films in her book, her concept of monstrous feminine has been widely used to analyse children's horror films. Constance in **Monster House** (2006), for example, embodies a monstrous feminine by being an active, powerful female monster who is given enough agency to take revenge and be spiteful of a society that abused her when she was alive.

Through discussion of various faces of the monstrous feminine (such as the amoral primaeval mother, witch, vampire, possessed body, etc), Creed argues that the monstrous feminine and male monsters horrify the audience because of very different reasons. To specify these differences and focus on the importance of gender and sexuality in the construction of monstrosity, she presents this new term: Monstrous feminine.

The Grand High Witch of ***The Witches*** (2020) serves as a classic example of a monstrous feminine. She is classified by many (including Lester) as what is called a 'phallic mother', a version of the monstrous feminine, who "make up for her lack of a penis through other phallic body parts". According to Creed, these phallic appendages horrify men who see her as a castrator. Lester argues that this is embodied in the Grand High Witch who resembles a femme fatale and it exaggerates when she reveals her true self with elongated fingers and other horrific attributes. It should be noted that Lester along with Tatar and Sheldon Cashdan, all agree that allusions to sexuality are not picked up by kids, rather they attempt to draw upon the male adult fears (as mentioned by Creed), which are highly misogynistic.

### **The Final Girl:**

Similar to Creed, Carol J Clover in "Men, Women and Chainsaws" (1992) seeks to go beyond the tired dichotomy of passive female victims and powerful male monsters through the concept of the "Final Girl". According to Clover, "The gender of the Final Girl is compromised from the outset by her masculine interests, her inevitable sexual reluctance, her apartness from other girls, sometimes her name."

Further, Clover claims that the Final Girl has an 'active investigative gaze' which is usually possessed by men and punished in women when they possess it. As Megan rightly puts it, "her argument relies on labelling the Final Girl as essentially a co-opted male hero." Coraline, the protagonist in the film ***Coraline*** can be classified as a Final Girl and this is discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **TREATMENT OF GENDER ROLES IN *CORALINE* (2009)**

Henry Selik's ***Coraline*** is praised by some for challenging the essentialist gender portrayal in the subgenre and criticised by others for, among other things, deviating from the more feminist book by Neil Gaiman of the same name from which it is adapted. Before we conclude, we first analyse the Monstrous Feminine (Other Mother) and the Final Girl (Coraline) embodied by the film. Coraline, a blue-haired, eleven-year-old is one of Clover's Final Girls as she matches all the traits of the Final Girl. Unlike most children's horror films which show cheery young girls who are either shown as passive victims or sidekick-turned-love interests (Megan, 2015), Coraline is a rather moody and bored girl who is brave enough to fight the monster.

She is challenged by a horrific monster who poses as her mother but is actually after her life (and her eyes), a scary idea, more so for children. Her masculine (essentialist) interests are evident as she loves adventure, and is often seen roaming outside alone. Further, as the Final Girl is sometimes associated with an unusual name, so is Coraline. Coraline corrects her name multiple times throughout the film as everyone keeps calling her 'Caroline' and Wybie, her 'stalker', even mentions how "an ordinary name like Caroline can lead people to have ordinary expectations", when in fact, our Coraline is extraordinary (even in terms of gender portrayal). Coraline also has an 'active investigative gaze' as we see the movie from entirely her perspective. Thus, Coraline is a classic Final Girl.

The Other Mother, on the other hand, is an equally daunting monster who dominates her power throughout the film. She controls the Other Father and is the 'Woman of the house'. Further, as Megan rightly puts it, her classification as a mother with certain reproductive abilities makes her a monstrous feminine.

The very fact that a children's horror film has both a Final Girl and a monstrous feminine is ground-breaking. For that, **Coraline** should and has been appreciated. But many critics complain, and rightly so, about the dilution of her agency with the introduction of Wybie, a character that is absent in the book. Coraline solves all the puzzles and fights the Other Mother bravely but in the end, in the very crucial moment for her victory, Wybie comes in to save her. This, then, transforms into another man-comes-to-the-rescue movie.

Another issue with the film which is relatively less addressed is its portrayal of motherhood. The film tends to show an extremist portrayal of mothers: one mother is utterly inattentive and another, a classic traditional housewife (who later reveals her monstrosity). Both the mothers get punished for their transgressions. While the Other Mother is punished for her monstrosity, the real mother seems to be shown in a bad light as it is because of her inattentive behaviour towards Coraline and her lack of cooking and other homely skills, that Coraline gets tempted by the Other Mother who eventually traps her. This can also be linked to the worldwide cultural belief that working mothers cannot take good care of their children. A similar argument is given by Nina Nilsson in "Gender Performativity and Motherhood in Coraline" in which she argues that "there is a lack of female role models for the young protagonist" and that for the mothers, "breaking gender norms is undesirable, dangerous, and even punished." The suggested inability of a working mother to take good care of her children makes this film and novel a lot less feminist than it is suggested to be.

To conclude, we can say that **Coraline** disappoints with its flawed portrayal of motherhood, among other things but even with replete criticisms, **Coraline** still remains a rare film with considerable agency given to both the female protagonist and the female monster.

### CONCLUSION

Norman's complaint to the adult world of their inability to understand children echoes throughout children's horror films. Through this paper, we have aimed to understand and analyse this subgenre and the politics surrounding it, in relation to this very crucial audience of the child. While these films cater to this audience whole-heartedly, offering them a taste of the fears and pleasures of horror films, earlier gate-kept by the adult world, these films are tainted by the adult male gaze at times. Despite this, they now form a subgenre of horror films which has the potential to become as commercially successful and critically acclaimed as mainstream horror.



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SEX & HORROR 2021-2022



# SNIP, SNIP

THE EFFECT OF CENSORSHIP ON HOLLYWOOD HORROR

SONGBORTO BISWAS

In 1930, Hollywood's major film studios jointly created the *Motion Picture Production Code* or, as it was popularly known, the *Hays Code*. Although demands for censorship of the cinematic medium had always existed in conservative sections of American society, it was after the advent of talkies in 1927, that these demands multiplied manifold. The introduction of words not only meant that verbal 'obscenities' could be included in films but also that plots would become more complex, with ample opportunities for the inclusion of content which conservatives found objectionable. Representatives of religious organizations were especially vocal in their demands. This led to the creation of the Code and subsequently, the establishment of the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 for its enforcement. For nearly 4 decades, under the vigilant eye of the PCA, Hollywood studios churned out pictures without the slightest trace of explicit "brutal murders", casual sexual relationships (referred to as "low relationships"), nudity, profanity in any form, homosexuality and even mixed-race relationships. The PCA, insisting on upholding the "special moral obligations" of Motion pictures, wanted to transform them into Sunday sermons delivered by small-town pastors. Some genres thrived almost entirely without the aid of sexuality in this so-called 'Golden Age'. Screwball comedies such as ***His Girl Friday*** (1940) and ***The Philadelphia Story*** (1940) replaced sexual tension and physical romance with witty verbal sparring (containing the occasional innuendo) between the male and female protagonists. Horror movie makers were restricted to jump-scares and suggestive peeks of terrifying things lurking just beneath the surface. Typical examples of such films were the production of Val Lewton among which ***The Cat People*** (1942) became very popular. Afterwards, when they finally managed to do away with the code in 1968, the Hollywood dam burst and gave way to a flood of sex and violence. The genre of horror, in particular, basked in the glory of the crudest displays of human lust and cruelty imaginable. This article aims to demonstrate the effect of nearly 4 decades of Hays Code censorship on Hollywood Horror and thereby, reveal that it was the strict censorship that gave Hollywood audiences the joy of reaping forbidden fruits when they were watching semi-erotic horror movies in the post-Code era. In any conservative society, sexuality, in any form, is the monopoly of the marriage bed. The husband and wife are supposed to engage in the sexual act only out of reproductive necessity and not out of any expectation of pleasure (especially for the wife). Any expression of sexuality that spills out of the bedroom is considered to be Unnatural, a perversion of the conservative social order. In the world of entertainment, it is the urge to experience the thrills and sensations of the dangerously Unnatural that has given impetus to the genre of horror. Thus, when viewed through conservative eyes, depictions of horror and sexuality (both homo and heterosexual) are allied at a primal level on the cinema screens.

This has led to the sexualisation of many violent horror elements such as the vampire motif. The vampire's drinking of blood serves as a symbolic stand-in for the physical act of lovemaking, with an additional hint of sexual submission. Modern movies like **Interview with the Vampire** (1994) and the immensely successful **The Twilight Saga** (2008-2012) utilise this effect to the fullest with attractive stars portraying vampires draining blood from equally attractive victims under titillating circumstances. But this wasn't always the case.

The earliest Horror icon in Hollywood was **Dracula** (1931). The 1931 screen version of the Count's terrifying exploits starring the exotic Bela Lugosi drove audiences wild. By modern standards, the movie is relatively tame. Most of the violence required by the plot takes place off-screen leaving little opportunity for the sexualisation of the vampire motif. What was in the movie's source material (a 1925 play adaptation) a long, passionate kiss between Dracula and Mina had transformed on-screen into a formal kiss on the hand. The Studio Relations Committee (SRC) let it escape uncensored in the USA but many countries censored or banned it entirely. This was followed by **Frankenstein** (1931) and **Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde** (1941), both immensely successful for their cosmetic creation of famous literary monsters. On the other hand, **Freaks** (1932), which used people with actual physical disabilities like microcephaly to create a bizarre effect, faced critical backlash and was initially a box-office failure. Among other memorable moments, a scene from this movie showing a conventionally attractive young woman kissing a dwarf stands out in public memory. Even such scenes affronted contemporary conservative commentators. Dracula, Frankenstein, and numerous other monstrosities from Universal Studios spawned countless sequels but post-1934, the PCA tightened its grip on these films. Attempts were made, often successfully, to strip them of even the slightest sexual undertone. This cycle continued to flourish until the 1940s. In the 1950s, the genre of horror was linked up with science fiction to introduce new breeds of monstrosities. The alien impostor theme thrived in movies like **The Invasion of the Body Snatchers** (1956) and **I Married a Monster from Outer Space** (1958) while the Giant monster theme found popularity in movies like **The Blob** (1958), **It Came from Outer Space** (1953), and **Tarantula** (1955). These movies, too, complied completely. Sexual depictions were limited to one or two cautious scenes of heterosexual necking between scenes where All-American heroes and heroines used their wits and courage to fight off the monsters. But these movies were, by no means, prestige productions. Studios specifically highlighted their most lurid aspects to market them to the younger drive-in theatre crowd. The hunger for scarier and more sexually-inclined content remained and it was this taste that gravitated gradually towards the end of censorship.

Ultimately, it was the Brits who brought the delicious mixture of horror and sexuality back to the Americans. Hammer Films brought out a new range of gory and racy exploitation horror movies such as *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), *Dracula* (1958), and *The Mummy* (1959). Hollywood's own AIP emerged to rival Hammer's popularity with endeavors like Roger Corman's adaptations of Edgar Allan Poe's work (1960-64). Christopher Lee's *Dracula* brought a dark, brooding sexuality to the character of the famous vampire. Lee made *Dracula* an athletic figure of great strength whose appetite for blood was a thin disguise for sexual hunger. From Lugosi to Lee, audience sensibilities had been altered radically. The time had come to let go of the Code.

In the post-code era, an ever-popular sub-genre of horror films was born that relied largely on maiming and mutilating the human body in every way imaginable—the slasher. Carol J. Clover in her 'Men, Women and Chainsaws' designates ***Psycho*** (1960) as "the appointed ancestor of all slasher films". She also points out the features that characterise a slasher film—“the killer is the psychotic product of a sick family, but still recognisably human; the victim is a beautiful, sexually active woman; the location is not-home, at a Terrible Place; the weapon is something other than a gun; the attack is registered from the victim's point of view and comes with shocking suddenness”. It becomes apparent that sexuality has an important role to play in these films. The most recognizable scene in ***Psycho*** is the one where the killer (whose identity is hidden from the audience) takes a knife to the bathing victim in her birthday suit. While ***Psycho*** is viewed strictly as 'classy horror', far from the exploitation movies that follow in its wake, the sexual dynamics are very important in this scene. The victim, who is shown to be a sexually active being in the very first scene has her attractive body placed under what Laura Mulvey called the sadistic-voyeuristic male gaze (where women in the media are viewed from the eyes of a heterosexual man, and that these women are represented as passive objects of male desire) in her essay, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, as it is ripped apart by the killer's knife.

***Psycho*** established a pattern that was followed for decades to come. Young victims, generally teenagers, are slaughtered brutally after they are shown to be engaging in sexual activities. The psychopathic killers employ larger and larger melee weapons which serve as outrageous penis surrogates. Rape is generally kept out of the killer's designs as it is the violent destruction of the bodies which serves as metaphors for the act of sexual violations. Movies series like ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** (1974-2022), ***Halloween*** (1978-2022), ***Friday the 13th*** (1980-2009), and ***A Nightmare on Elm Street*** (1984-2010) found such commercial success that they keep spawning sequels and remakes well into the 21st century.

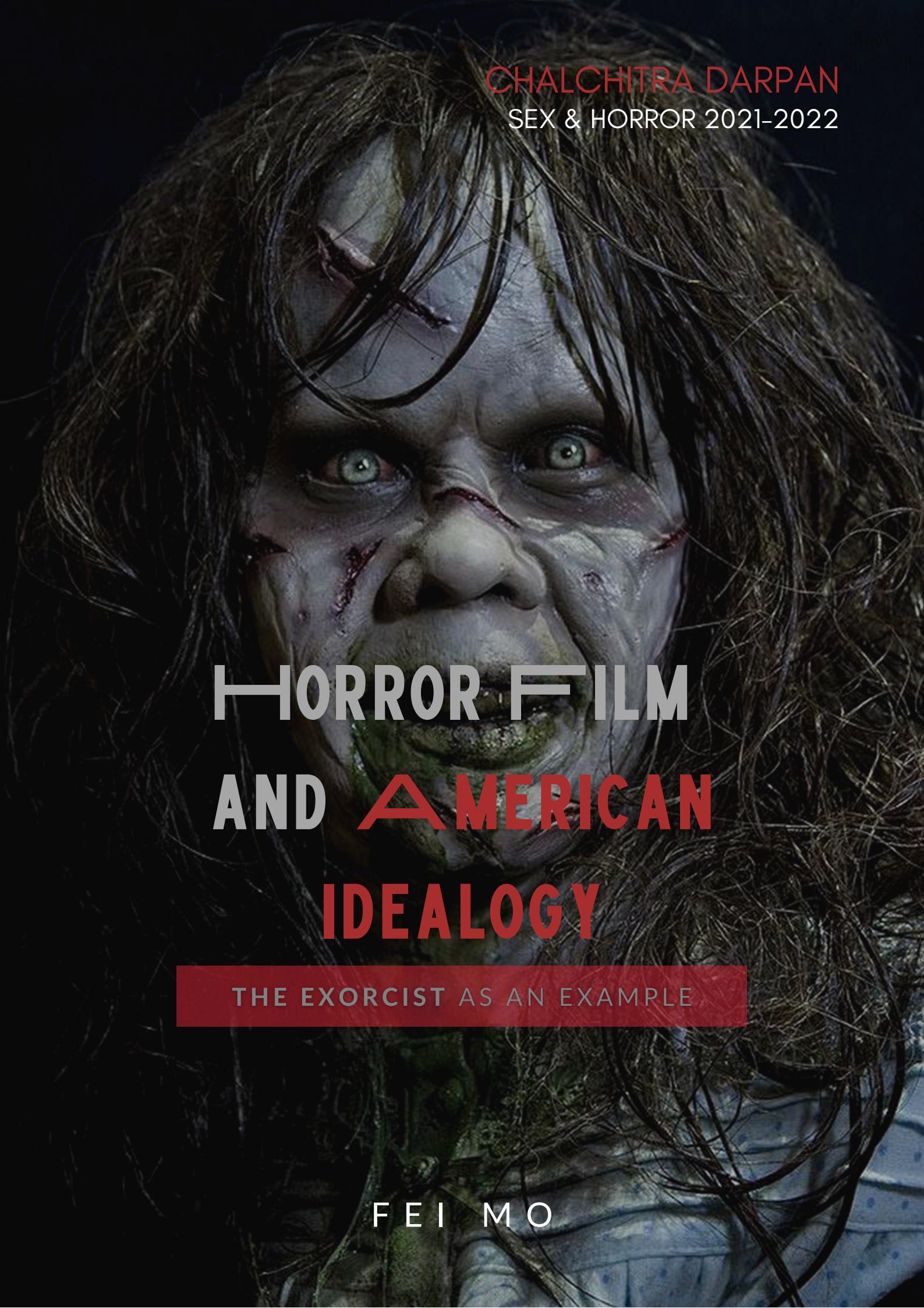


Once again, the biggest consumers of these movies were the younger audience who frequented drive-ins and exploitation houses. Their appeal for such movies remains twofold. The viewing of large-scale sex and violence provides a simple sensory primary joy which is greatly enhanced by the rebellious flouting of contemporary moral standards. The second source of appeal is more subconscious. The audience demographic for such movies closely resembles the on-screen victim demographic. The active sexuality which characterizes the slasher victim is also found in this audience. Thus, the audience identifies closely with the victims and can thus experience the thrill of horror at a much more intense level. Certain scenes of mayhem might even bring about a state resembling Aristotelian *Catharsis*.

However ridiculous it is to expect moral lessons in cinematic franchises oozing with gore and sex, the lessons remain. The slasher plot pattern advocates an approach no less conservative than the Hays Code Censors. Whereas pre-code movies displayed a "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" attitude, the slashers give out a strong message- "The wages of sin (in this case, sexual transgression) are death". This is made explicit in *Scream* (1996), when the protagonist says "Sex equals death, okay?" while discussing the means to survive a horror movie. This approach is retained well to this day, as revealed by the success of the **Saw** franchise (2004-2017). In this series, the Jigsaw Killer punishes moral transgressors (whose immoralities often have to do with sexual promiscuity) by forcing them to inflict great physical pain on themselves to survive. Thus, the effect of Hays Code repression is clear. More than half a century after the repealing of the code, Hollywood audiences continue to enjoy racy horror movies with an adolescent joy associated with escaping conservative moralising. But the very same movies deliver the same moral message in their own twisted way. In conclusion, the most-enduring effect of the Hays Code is that Hollywood horror has been irreversibly linked with conservative morality.

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SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

# HORROR FILM AND AMERICAN IDEALOGY

THE EXORCIST AS AN EXAMPLE

FEI MO

A key aspect of Hollywood genre films is that their narrative strategy has a tight relationship with their social function. As Tomas Schatz (35) explains, Hollywood genre films can both criticize and reinforce American ideologies within the same narrative context. The conflicting American ideologies are embedded in the centre of particular Hollywood film genres and the genre's narrative and visual coding (Schatz 23-24). The horror genre is a typical example of this, as most horror films always manifest a horrible thing ('the monster') as a key figure through which polarising ideology can be critiqued.

**The Exorcist** (1973) embeds rich American ideology in the 1970s, as it contains topics including generation gaps, fractured families, science verses the supernatural and gender issues (Cull 46-51). Guided by the practices of Schatz, among others, this essay will outline the American ideologies present in horror films and the conflicts they undergo, with a specific analysis of **The Exorcist** and how the conflicts in this film are deployed and temporarily resolved. The essay argues that **The Exorcist** grapples with the conflicting American values of belief in science and religion, and the approval of queer and traditional gender norms.

### THOMAS SCHATZ'S RITUAL THEORY: GENRE FILM AND AMERICAN IDEOLOGY

Thomas Schatz's discussion of Hollywood genre films explains why and how genre films represent the American values of the time and how genre conventions are formed. According to Schatz (15), a film genre is an agreement of collected values and ideals identified by filmmakers and audiences. This claim can be understood through Schatz's (16) discussion of the interactions between audiences and studios: As the primary purpose of Hollywood films is commercial success, film studios will repeat and imitate successful filmic techniques and story formulas to fit audiences' preferences and will gradually develop a convention. In addition, since audiences' tastes will continue changing, studios will modify the story formulas and filmic techniques to test the audiences' attitudes and then adapt the conventions. In turn, as a film genre results from the interaction between audiences and studios, it can impress culture until it becomes a popular and meaningful system and eventually become a culture itself. This means the overall experience of viewing a genre will lead audiences to identify a conventional filmic technique and story formula whereby its position as a value-embedded and coherent narrative system can be established. Therefore, if the existence of genres indicates the repetition and modification of values that are recognised by audiences, then the genre's function can be to both reinforce and challenge these values.

Schatz gives three main features for analysing how a genre film can both criticise and reinforce the values of American culture in a particular time, and these are thus: *generic community, iconography and conflict*.

As Schatz (21) mentions, firstly, each genre film assimilates a specific cultural context and turns it into a familiar social community. The repeated expression of this social community turns it into a generic community which is the network of characters, actions, values and attitudes (Schatz 22). Secondly, the characters and other significant objects relate to iconography (Schatz 22). Iconography refers to the narrative and visual coding created by the repeated film stories and characteristics, which further indicates thematic value (Schatz 23). Thirdly, value differences in generic community cause various dramatic conflicts that drive the narrative into a social problem-solving operation (Schatz 24). To resolve these conflicts, one or more of values need to be removed, either by eliminating one of the two polarizing contrasting value communities or by merging them into one (Schatz 30). However, as these contradictory values are consistently existing in social reality, it is impossible to resolve them by genre films, and this absence of resolution leads these films to create a narrative rupture (Schatz 32). This narrative rupture structure enables Hollywood genre films to negotiate American ideologies and to both criticize and reinforce the values of American culture (Schatz 35).

### *HORROR FILMS: ICONOGRAPHY AND VALUE CONFLICTS*

One of the typical iconographies in horror films is a horrible thing ('the monster'). Its coding sometimes refers to certain groups of people who deviate from the mainstream norms of real life society. Robin Wood (9) first defined 'the monster' as 'the Other', which is created by the 'repression' of monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalism. He pointed out that 'the Other' can be interpreted as something repressed by cultures that have predetermined roles. In America, cultures with predetermined roles are based on alienated labour and patriarchal families and repress the following six features: sexual energy itself, bisexuality, female sexuality and creativity and the sexuality of children (Wood 8-9). Therefore, 'the Other' always deals with figures, namely people, including women, children, the proletariat and ethnic groups, as well as other cultures, alternative ideologies or political systems and deviations from ideological sexual norms (Wood 9-11). More in-depth interpretations of the monster from other scholars can be seen via Wood's psychoanalytical approach, covering issues including race, class and, especially, gender. For example, Creed (67) coins the term 'monstrous-feminine' to describe the monster coded with female characteristics. She based the interpretation of 'monstrous-feminine' on Julia Kristeva's notion of 'abjection', which threatens the 'identity, system' and 'order' (Creed 68). She described the 'monstrous-feminine' as always being depicted as an abject image, one with bodily waste such as blood, vomit, saliva and sweat. As bodily waste leaves the human body, and thus breaks through the body's boundaries, the 'monstrous-feminine' can be understood as a threat towards patriarchal symbolic order.

While the monster provides horror films a generic specific in iconography, it also encourages them to develop a generic specific in narrative conflicts that can be translated into value conflicts. In general, the primary conflict in horror films is located between a human and the monster. In particular, when the monster is viewed as a threat towards the human, it is treated as evil and the conflict between the human and the monster represents the value conflicts between 'good' and 'evil'. As Belton (276) summarizes, the horror genre's narrative structure is regularly represented as a form where the protagonists search for knowledge to combat the monster and resolve the problem posed by the monster. Most of the time, the encounter can be seen as values associated with social norms that are threatened by the monster (Belton 274-275). Dubois (119) provided a more specific interpretation of how American values connect with the narrative of humans encountering monsters: when the monster, culturally, morally, and politically adheres strictly to American norms, it is regarded as 'good', and when the monster does not obey these rules, he is 'evil' and will be combated by the human. In other words, if the monster is depicted as 'evil' in a horror film, the film will confirm the American values by defeating the monster in the conflict. However, as the above discussions around Schatz's theory mentioned, while the resolution of the conflict in the film will enhance American values, the expressions and conflicts leading the film towards its dramatic peak can allow genres to criticise American values. Therefore, as the monster is a figure that continually creates conflict in the narrative, the depiction of the monster could also allow horror films to function as a challenge to American values. Benshoff's discussion about queer readings of horror films provides evidence that horror films aim to challenge American values. According to Benshoff (5-6), as horror films create a non-realist hyperspace for their audiences and code queer as monsters, this genre invokes actively queer interpretations that challenge the norm of heterosexuality and traditional gender roles. Overall, in horror films, the monster is a typical iconography that is related to race, class and gender issues. Normally, monsters are depicted as evil in horror films, and thus the horror genre reaffirms American values by destroying the evil monster embedding those opposing values. At the same time, however, the genre challenges American values as the depiction of the monster allows alternative readings in contrast to mainstream interpretations.

### **CONFICTING AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES IN *THE EXORCIST***

***The Exorcist*** narrates a story set in Georgetown in the United States, and is centred around a girl, Regan, the daughter of a single mother and actress, Chris MacNeil. The daughter experiences unexplainable mental and physical abnormalities. After receiving constant attention and care from psychiatrists and neurologists, Regan's symptoms grow more serious and eventually those around her suspect that she is demonically possessed.

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Jesuit priest Damien Karras and Father Merrin are then sent by the Church to arrange an exorcism.

The Exorcist can be interpreted as the film that belongs to 'genres of determinate space', as coined by Schatz (27). According to Schatz (27) the film belongs to 'genres of determinate space' as it provides a symbolic arena of action which represents a culture space where fundamental values experience sustained conflict. In this kind of genre, the narrative structure always involves an individual or collective hero who enters the symbolic arena, resolves the conflicts and leaves the arena in the end (Schatz 27). In ***The Exorcist***, Priest Karras is the hero who enters Regan's room and resolves the conflict by perishing the demon along with himself. Georgetown is the culture space where the generic community of a network of characters, actions, and values exist. While the interactions between MacNiel, the psychiatrists and neurologists, and Priest Karras point to the conflict of rational versus irrational power, Karras' destroying of the demon relates to the conflict between queer and traditional gender norms.



**CONFICTING RATIONAL AND IRRATIONAL POWER**

The conflicts between rational and irrational power follow the Clover's (66) notion of 'White Science' versus 'Black Magic' pattern. According to Clover (66), while the 'White Science' is always represented by white males' doctors, scientists, and psychologists, 'Black Magic' is always represented by mixed-race people, children, priests and women. Only when rational men have accepted the irrational of reality, the community can release from supernatural's threat and return to a new state of calm (Clover 67). Specifically, in ***The Exorcist***, this conflicting value and narrative pattern are successively deployed in the contest between MacNeil and the psychiatrists and neurologists and the contest between MacNeil and Karras. Regarding the former contest, MacNeil continues to be sceptical about the psychiatrists and neurologists' diagnosis, which highlights the issue of challenging rational power. Take the scene where a doctor talks about Regan's symptoms to MacNeil in a hospital as an example. In this scene, white male doctors, psychiatrists and neurologists are coded as examples of patriarchal, rational power. The doctor's dialogues, gestures and his position relative to MacNeil evoke a sense of dominance. His dialogue, 'Nobody knows the cause of hyperkinetic behavior in a child... her symptoms could be an overreaction to depression' (***The Exorcist*** 00:34:37-00:34:47), the phrases he uses - 'seems to' and 'could be' - and his body language, namely smiling and crossing his hands behinds his head, demonstrate that although he cannot provide a definitive diagnosis for Regan, he is nonetheless confident in his words. Furthermore, a scene that the doctor is more powerful is conveyed by the composition of the filmed shot, in that the doctor is standing, occupying a large portion of the frame, while MacNeil is sitting. However, MacNeil keeps doubting the doctor's diagnosis, and this can be intuited from her puzzled look and rhetorical question: 'A stimulant? My God, she's higher than a kite now' (***The Exorcist*** 00:34:32-00:34:34). Similar visual coding can be seen in scenes where MacNeil is arguing with the psychiatrists and neurologists. As the narrative unfolds, Regan's abnormalities become serious and rational diagnoses are still uncertain, and this contest becomes even more intense. MacNeil's persistent doubts of the doctors' diagnosis lead her to turn to Priest Karras for help. The clothes Karras wears and the atmosphere around him code him as a form of irrational power. For example, there is a scene where a beggar asks Karras for help, Karras' black robe, the dim lighting and echo of a passing train transmit a sense of mystery that is related to irrationality. Therefore, when MacNeil chooses Priest Karras to replace the psychiatrists and neurologists to help her daughter, it can be interpreted as the irrational power surpassing the rational power. Nevertheless, the conflicts between the rational and irrational powers are still maintained in the contest between MacNeil and Priest Karras. Although Priest Karras is visually coded as a form of irrational power, his dialogue reflects his attitude toward rational power, such as 'Think I've lost my faith' (***The Exorcist*** 00:26:57).

Therefore, when MacNeil turns her belief to irrational power, difference between attitudes of MacNeil and Priest Karras create conflicts. The scene in which Karras is refusing MacNeil's request to have an exorcism, for instance, shows a drastic value conflict between MacNeil and Karras: When Karras suggests calmly that 'Six months under observation in the best hospital you can find', MacNeil responses angrily that '...that thing upstairis isn't my daughter' (**The Exorcist** 01:27:32).

This rational and irrational power conflict shifts from the contest between MacNeil and Karras towards Karras' internal value conflict after he sees more evidence that supports the idea that Regan is possessed. This then led the narrative to the peak of crisis—the execution of the exorcism. It seems that the rational and irrational power conflict in Karras' mind will eventually lead to the resolution's end when one power erases the other. However, the film chooses to design the resolution as Karras perishing along with the demon. This led to a rupture that although the expulsion of the demon seemed to bring back the order of the generic community, the conflicting rational and irrational powers continued to exist. Therefore, **The Exorcist** seems to provide a place to negotiate the conflicting rational and irrational power. On the one hand, the film confirms the value of religion through replacing the rational power with the irrational power near the peak of the narrative. Meanwhile, the film also challenges this value since it does not provide a clear resolution of the irrational versus rational power conflict at the end, which allows the audience to make up their own minds regarding the value of science versus religion.

### CONFICTING QUEER AND TRADITIONAL GENDER NORMS

There is also a conflicting value of gender deployed in Priest Karras' exorcism of the demon. In **The Exorcist**, possessed Regan is a typical iconography of horror films — the monster. The film reaffirms the traditional gender norms, as possessed Regan is coded as evil and transgender, and the subtext of this can be interpreted as meaning that transgender people are evil and should be destroyed. Firstly, possessed Regan is coded as a female with masculine characteristics or transgender. For example, dubbed by Mercedes McGambridge, the voice of possessed Regan is coarse (Cull 46). This depicts the possessed Regan as an image that, though with a female appearance, such as her long hair and that she wears a skirt, she also has a man-like voice. Secondly, this image is coded as evil in the beginning of the film. For example, there is a scene where Father Merrin finds a sculpture of Pazuzu, the entity which he believes possesses Regan, carrying magic power in Iraq. In this scene, a shaking handheld camera shoots directly towards the hole where Pazuzu was discovered, which creates a sense of suspense and intensity.

This conveys the meaning that Pazuzu is a threat towards human nature and is thus evil. Furthermore, Creed (74) analyzes the image of possessed Regan as a 'monstrous-feminine' since it produces bodily waste such as blood and vomit and determines that she is a threat towards the symbolic world represented by the patriarchal priest. In other words, possessed Regan, a transgender female or a female with masculine characteristics, threatens the ordinal gender systems where females should carry feminine characteristics and males should have masculinity. Therefore, when the film designs an exorcist ritual to expel the monstrous Regan, who represents evil and a threat to the Church and priest patriarchal symbolic world, it reaffirms the traditional gender norms.

Meanwhile, the monstrous Regan in ***The Exorcist*** provides a chance for an alternative reading that can criticize the values the film intended to reinforce. The rebellious image of possessed Regan allows a queer reading. Scahill's audience's interpretation prove this well. Scahill (45) argues that the monstrous Regan was regarded as an erotic object by female audiences. For example, he noticed that 16 Magazine portrayed Linda Blair, the actress of Regan, as a sex symbol at a similar level as male sex symbols such as Mark Hamill and Roddy McDowell and advertised Blair's sexuality in a poster 'Linda - Exorcist - & Beyond Poster Kit' (Scahill 45). He analyses that these depictions of Linda Blair's star image in the magazine and how advertisements have moved beyond the image of Regan and combined the two images into a single erotic and sacrilegious image. This proves that the image of the rebellious, possessed Regan provides a possibility for a queer interpretation that challenges the traditional gender norms. Therefore, ***The Exorcist*** reinforces the values of traditional gender norms by eliminating the evil possessed Regan, but, at the same time, challenges this norm as the image of possessed Regan deviates from conventional gender roles and thus allows for a queer interpretation.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, following Schatz's analytical approach, ***The Exorcist*** highlights conflicting values including beliefs in science and religion, queer and traditional gender norms as well as both reinforcing and criticizing American values such as those just mentioned. The film conforms to the value of following a religion by replacing the rational power with the irrational power, meanwhile challenging it by providing an ending with unresolved conflicts of the rational and irrational powers. Furthermore, regarding the gender issue, the film conforms to the traditional social norms of the time since it follows the narrative structure of erasing the monstrous Regan with connotations of her transgenderism being evil. On the other hand, the film also discusses this norm by conjuring the rebellious image of possessed Regan, which allows for a queer interpretation.

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SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

# HORROR AND THE FEMALE BODY

IN DARREN ARONOFSKY'S  
*BLACK SWAN*

SHREYASHI SAHA

Since time immemorial, women have often been granted the position of muses, "lacking a subject position or desire and entirely constructed via male fantasy" (Jacobs "Debating *Black Swan*" 59). Although women's lives have changed considerably, one can still find remnants of the past in contemporary literature and other arts. Twenty-first century French philosopher and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, argues in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1987) and *Speculum of the Other Woman* (translated 1985) that women have been constructed as the specular 'other' of man in all western discourses. Keeping her comment in mind, I would like to explore the treatment of the female protagonist and the depiction of horror in Darren Aronofsky's ***Black Swan*** (2010).

At a cursory glance, *Black Swan* seems to embody the 'western male imaginary that Irigaray describes and critiques', where women are reduced to mere muses<sup>1</sup> and all female bonds are either competitive or characterised by hate; and where, as pointed out by Virginia Woolf, 'she pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history.' (Woolf 88) A brief overview of the female as well as male relationships depicted in the movie shall suffice for us to understand this. Firstly, the lead actress, Nina (Natalie Portman), shares an apartment with her overbearing mother, who not only blames her daughter for her own failed career as a ballet dancer, but also her overbearing nature and her close proximity to Nina threatens Nina's subjectivity and sexuality. Mark Fisher draws a parallel between the mother figure in *Black Swan* and the mother figure in Kimberley Pierce's ***Carrie*** (2013).

He writes that 'on the one hand, she can live through her daughter, who can achieve what she herself could not; on the other hand, Nina is a rival who cannot be allowed to do better than she did.' According to Gregory Bateson, this exact double-bind structure was at the basis of schizophrenia, where 'two contradictory demands ("do better than I did" and "don't outdo me") are made simultaneously' (Fisher "Debating *Black Swan*" 58). This becomes visible in the very beginning of the film, where just a moment after she calls Nina a "sweet girl", the audience can see how her mother's expression changes while she hugs Nina.

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<sup>1</sup> Something similar can be observed in Abdellatif Kechiche's *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), despite the fact that the film revolves around a pair of lesbian lovers, Adele and Emma. If it is men who reduce women to the position of a muse, then the same can be seen in this movie, as Manohla Dargis rightly notes, 'Adèle has become Emma's muse, a familiar division of labour that carries into the kitchen, where Adèle cooks the food.' <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/27/movies/the-trouble-with-blue-is-the-warmest-color.html>



Barbara Hershey and Natalie Portman in the *Black Swan*

The other female relationship present in the movie is that of peers. Other women are mostly hostile to Nina or are extremely close that Nina cannot distinguish herself from them.

This is a well-thought-out decision made by Aronofsky, as he claims in an interview that he wanted everyone to look like Natalie, and thus, he "built the entire cast out of what she looks like" (Aronofsky 08:22-08:36). Tony E Jackson observes that in the film, the 'camera, mirrors, faces, and bodies are arranged in such a way that frequently it is impossible to be sure who is exactly where in the room, how many bodies are actually present, or whether we are looking at a flesh-and-blood woman or a mirror reflection' (Jackson "Social Neuroscience" 451).



Mirrors in the Film

This reaches its peak with the introduction of Lily (Mila Kunis) in the film. Nina's paranoia about Lily hijacking the role of the Swan Queen begins with the arrival of Lily. This is fuelled by Thomas's instruction to Nina to "watch the way she (Lily) moves" as her movements are 'imprecise, but sensual' while Nina's are simply 'frigid'.

Even the act of sex appears to work within the patriarchal setup. In the case of this film, Thomas's 'homework' to Nina, that is to go home and touch herself, makes Nina explore her sexuality. When she does that, in an extremely perplexing scene, she rolls over to see her mother asleep on the chair.

The other time she explores her sexuality is in the lesbian sex scene with Lily (which turns out to be her fantasy). Mark Fisher notes that, 'Nina experiences Lily as an erotically confident enemy conspiring to destroy her, as her double ('he made me your alternate', Lily tells Nina at one point), and as a sexual partner, and only fleetingly as a friend or ally' (Fisher, "Debating Black Swan" 59). However, both these scenes are a result of Thomas's instruction to let out the passion, and thus, it can be assumed that they function within the terms of male fantasy. Amber Jacobs writes that the film "reproduces the standard iconography of soft porn; the lesbian scene in particular is replete with porn clichés," even in her own fantasy, and hence 'it functions entirely for the pleasure of the heterosexual male spectator.' Jacobs further makes an observation that '*Black Swan* is certainly not able to think or even suggest beyond the male imaginary that Irigaray calls for—where woman-to-woman relations do not relentlessly reproduce the terms of, and pleasures of, male fantasy.' (Jacobs "Debating *Black Swan*" 59) Art critic John Berger writes in his 1973 book, *Ways of Seeing*, 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at' (Berger 47). Many feminist critics have argued that this statement is rather generalised, but it becomes relevant to a certain extent in this film.

Despite making the above arguments, it would be wrong to claim that *Black Swan* merely reproduces the tyranny of the male gaze. Instead, it can be thought of as the tragedy that results from this 'tyranny' rather than as a film that perpetuates this kind of voyeurism. Thomas is a repellent figure, and as Lily summarises it, 'he is a prick'. The claustrophobic atmosphere of the ballet company is an outcome of its being controlled by this patriarch, 'an almost parodically phallic artistic director, Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel), who routinely manipulates the dancers into competing with each other' (Fisher "Debating *Black Swan*" 59), and where the winner gets to become his 'Little Princess'. Nina becomes the new 'Little Princess' replacing Beth. This scenario, where one woman replaces another, is amplified by the use of reflections. Amber Jacobs criticises the use of mirrors and reflections in the film as a 'worn-out visual cliché' where the *mise-en-abyme* created by the multiple mirrors results in a 'multitude of reflections that immerse us in a maze of feminine bodies and faces,<sup>2</sup> giving us no way of locating the real body as distinct from the reflections' (Jacobs "Debating *Black Swan*" 59).

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<sup>2</sup> *Mise-en-abym*, a term derived from heraldry and appropriated by French author André Gide, refers to the technique of inserting a story within a story. André Gide gives examples of Diego Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, and the play within play in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to illustrate the self-reflexive embeddings in various art forms.

In this situation, one woman is simply replaced by her doppelgänger, while the mirrors bolster this image as 'the infinite image of the reflected, homogeneous bodies and faces of the ballerinas represents a construction of femininity that has no life outside the terms of the mirror/gaze of the male symbolic.' However, this is only partly true. While Leroy becomes the embodiment of patriarchy, the ballet school becomes the site of the damage done by patriarchy.



In fact, the female body in the movie is so much destabilised by anxiety and delirium that it cannot become an object of the masturbatory male gaze and thus, at the end of the movie, what we get is Nina's 'death' instead of any sort of erotic fulfilment. It is only fair to claim that Nina's descent into madness is a way in which she revolts against this damage: 'Nina is tragically mad, and her madness is a black mirror held up to patriarchy' (Fisher, "Debating *Black Swan*" 59).

Now, to understand how the movie depicts horror, it is necessary to look at the central conflict in the movie: Nina's not being perfect. Nina's inability to attain perfection at the beginning of the film lies in the fact that her portrayal of the sensual black swan of Tchaikovsky's ballet was without passion. Unlike Beth, the prim and prissy Nina could not understand that perfection lies even in destructive and imprecise but sensual movements. She was stuck in the role of the white swan both as a dancer and in real life. Her room, all pink and white and filled with soft toys, only reinforced the fact that she was still stuck in the life of a clichéd goody two shoes. The motive behind Thomas's attempt to seduce her was to bring out her dark side, that is, her inner black swan. Through Thomas's 'homework', Nina attempts to access her inner black swan for the first time. Although, it apparently appears to create a binary between the white and the black, and the virgin and the whore, it is not as simple as that. The question arises: how is this binary even possible if there is almost no difference left between the virtuous Nina and her alternate, Lily? Even the mirrors themselves are unable to differentiate one from the other. Nina, on the other hand, feels this change to such an extent that she will see Lily as herself. If remaining as a white swan is seen as a failure, then Nina should not have 'died' after she transformed into the black swan. This alternate ending would also have been in accordance with Carol J. Clover's claim that pleasure for a masculine-identified viewer oscillates between identifying with the initial passive powerlessness of the abject and terrorised girl-victim of horror and her later, active empowerment. However, this does not happen, and thus, the film not only actively undermines the statement that it creates a binary between the virgin and the whore, but it also provides no alternative to female subjectivity under patriarchy. This is what makes it a work of Irigarayan horror, as Fisher notes that 'Black Swan gives us many of Irigaray's negative images of female subjectivity under patriarchy but without laying open any possibility of an alternative' (Fisher "Debating *Black Swan*" 61). The horror also lies in the fact that Nina is unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The audience is almost always inside Nina's paranoid schizophrenia, and as Fisher points out, it is the same as being <sup>3</sup>'inside the madness of Carol (Catherine Deneuve) in Polanski's *Repulsion*' (Fisher "Debating *Black Swan*" 58).

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<sup>3</sup> Noël Carroll notes in *The Philosophy of Horror* that if a character is unreliable then her point of view shots can also be unreliable. This is achieved by rendering the shots visually obscure, the viewer cannot be sure of what she (or the character) is seeing. He writes 'In *The Innocents*, some of the shots of the "ghosts," rendered through the governess's point of view, are long shots that are also somewhat overexposed in a manner that undercuts our certainty about what we are seeing and that opens a space for interpretation—especially given the governess' already psychologically suspect behaviour.' (Carroll 152)

Like Nina, the audience can also see the happenings of Carol's schizophrenic mind, where hands break through the wall, the apartment walls crack open, and men appear in her bed to rape her. In both films, the real confronts the supernatural. As Aronofsky's film moves towards its denouement, the fantasy is transformed into delirium and self-harm, and finally ends with the death of Nina.

The movie's stunning depiction of body horror is not only visually arresting but also confuses the audience. Amanda Ann Klein views the film through Linda Williams' category of 'body genres', identifying the film's use of horror, pornography, and melodrama and arguing that the moments of bodily harm, arousal, and transformation in **Black Swan** are intended to encourage similarly visceral responses in the viewer. The first instance of body horror is Nina's starving, skinny, and anorexic body, while this very body, 'represents its own unruliness in terms of a lack of consumption, a disavowal of food and food culture, and as a conscious or unconscious symbol of political or cultural protest' (Subramanian "Sex love and bodies" 12). Jane Nicholas in 'Hunger Politics' asks certain questions to read the rebellion inherent in self-starvation as a performance. It can be safely assumed that Nina's ambiguous sexual identity, her inability to become <sup>4</sup> perfect, and finally her desire to rebel against the suffocating presence of her mother is expressed through her fear of food. This also leads to horror as Julia Kristeva in 'Power of Horror' writes 'Loathing an item of food' is 'the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection' (Kristeva 2). Something similar can be seen in Han Kang's novel 'The Vegetarian', where Yeong-hye's repulsion towards meat stems from her repulsion towards her husband and father. This abjection, or the feeling of horror, causes the subconscious and unconscious mind to confuse the self with the other:

'I want none of that element, sign of their desire; 'I' do not want to listen, 'I' do not assimilate it, 'I' expel it. But since the food is not an 'other' for 'me,' who am only in their desire, I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself. (Kristeva 3)

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4 Nicholas argues that removing the idea of self-starvation from any kind of pathological discourse (medical, media-related, cultural) is one way to begin considering the hungry body as a kind of critical text. Nicholas asks, "How can we rethink the persistent hunger of the voluntary self-starver? How can we reframe the question, what is she hungry for? Not thinness or food but, more radically, the things that drive the voluntary self-starver to the perpetual mode of hunger. What does her hunger mean?"

See Jane Nicholas, "Hunger Politics: Towards Seeing Voluntary Self Starvation as an Act of Resistance," *Thirdspace: a journal of feminist theory & culture* 8.1 (Summer 2008). Web. 18 May 2011.

The second instance of horror is Nina's transformation. The audience can see Nina slowly transform into the swan queen throughout the course of the film, which starts off with a small area in her back being prickly and raw, like that of a plucked bird, while the transformation finally becomes complete with Nina transforming into a black-feathered Swan Maiden on stage.



The transformation

Matthew Libatique's excellent cinematography, with close-ups of Nina's face and body, physically mimics Nina's mental and emotional entrapment that finally leads to this transformation. This bodily transformation is yet another of Nina's hallucinations, but after a point, even the audience loses the ability to distinguish between what is happening inside Nina's mind and what is happening for real. An instance of this would be the death scene. After Nina kills Lily, she is shocked to find the unharmed Lily congratulating her. She looks down only to see that she has stabbed herself with the shard of the mirror, not Lily. It was the first time she died. Yet she dances as the white swan after this, and with the white swan's final suicidal dive, her second death happens. Thomas notices her bleeding to death and asks her, "What did you do?" She replies "I finally felt it. Perfect. It was perfect." As the screen fades to white, the audience can hardly make meaning out of these two deaths. In the end, we are left with a narrative where the body and the mind swing out of balance.



The Deaths

Nina achieves perfection, and in order to achieve so, her body becomes unstable and is turned into a site of horror. It is Nina's attempt to break out of the patriarchal setup and her inability to find a balance even after breaking out of it, that leads to her destruction. There is no solution, no way to escape from it. The inability to escape from this system is what inspires horror. Rictor Norton talks about this in "Aesthetic Gothic Horror," as he writes, 'horror is an aesthetic experience which exists when the terror-inspiring object is very close to oneself and there is no possibility of escaping it' (Norton 31). As good and evil, reality and illusion, become indistinguishable, the film presents an unstable, paranoid universe, where no narrative closure is available, and violence is a part of everyday life. The only option available is to struggle, but the result of the struggle remains ambiguous. The movie projects an image of a world, where danger to the social order is endemic. Nina's paranoia becomes synonymous with the paranoia toward this social world, while the film simultaneously questions the stability of human identity within this world.

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- *Black Swan*. Dir. Darren Aronofsky. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2010. Film.
- *Carrie*. Dir. Brian de Palma. United Artists, 1976. Film.

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# TO DESIRE, TO DIE: A PSYCHOANALYTIC ANALYSIS OF EYES WIDE SHUT



SABARANO SINHA  
AND  
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## INTRODUCTION

In 2014, Amy Nicholson recorded in her book 'Tom Cruise: Anatomy of an Actor' certain interviews with Nicole Kidman, who reported that the shooting of Stanley Kubrick's final film, **Eyes Wide Shut** (1999), involved experiences that had indeed affected the lead actors as a married couple (*Eyes Wide Shut* at 15). Two years after the release of the film, Kidman and Cruise got a divorce even though they claimed that it had nothing to do with the film. Yet, a simple search on Google yields multiple fan theories and articles on how the film caused the deterioration in the couple's relations. The film brought out many "brutally honest" aspects of their relationship that neither of the two were ready for and thus, the entire world soon witnessed the death of a renowned Hollywood relationship (*Eyes Wide Shut* at 15). However, this was not the only death surrounding **Eyes Wide Shut**. Amy Taubin notes that "The ultimate Kubrick irony is that the director died while making a film that sides with Eros in the eternal struggle between, as Freud termed it, Eros and Thanatos, Eros and the death instinct." (25) Even though Freud would have championed the life instinct, holding that the Eros would win over the Thanatos, neither the film nor the real-life events surrounding it are symptomatic of life or pleasure. Stanley Kubrick's 1999 film **Eyes Wide Shut** is based on the Austrian novelist Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella 'Traumnovelle'. Freud had famously called Schnitzler his "Doppelgänger" in a letter dated 14 May 1922 ("Briefe" 97). Scholars in the fields of literary studies and psychoanalysis have observed that the very many similarities between the two men, with respect to their family backgrounds and position in Viennese society,<sup>1</sup> was conducive to the eventual confluence of their ideas which led to Freud claiming that he found an "uncanny familiarity" with Schnitzler. Geoffrey Cocks observed that both Schnitzler and Freud "saw that behind the stiff conventions of society raged the tumults of love and death within and among people" (140). Thus, while on the one hand, Freud conceived the Id, Ego and Superego as well as the Eros and Thanatos in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Schnitzler wrote of deep psychological conflicts in people as regards to their sexual identity and expectations in society. 'Traumnovelle' is one such work in which Doctor Fridolin tries to come to terms with his wife's desires for other men when he himself is tempted a number of times by other women. However, Schnitzler's novella is centred on the façade of the bourgeois Viennese society which relied on thoughtlessness and a lack of sexual and psychological agency, even though it deals with the psychological conflicts of the Doctor as he continually questions himself while attempting acts of infidelity. **Eyes Wide Shut** is based in a relatively modern setting, in New York City, and it is perhaps more inward as societal expectations and demands are not given as much importance; Instead, Dr William "Bill" Harford tries to deal with his wife, Alice, and her ruminations on infidelity.

<sup>1</sup> Tapsak observes that "Both men were Jewish in Vienna at the turn of the century. Both men studied medicine and were affected professionally by their fathers. The death of Freud's father inspired him to write *The Interpretation of Dreams*, while Schnitzler's father was the reason he studied medicine and with his father's death, Schnitzler was able to pursue his literary career. Finally, both men dealt with the unnatural and traumatic event of losing a child" (8)

Kubrick's emphasis on the association of sex with death is quite evident in the film and there is an exploration of Eros and Thanatos in the sexual odyssey of Bill. Of **Eyes Wide Shut**, Ciment believes that it is an "exploration of the abyss of the psyche in a 'normal' adult couple, where, as in all Kubrick's films, Eros meets Thanatos" (259). We have also observed the many elements of these instincts in the plot and of the film and these will be explained separately and with reference to the film in the subsequent sections. In addition to the idea of sex being a cause of death, Kubrick also deals with the idea of the woman being associated with death and turns it around in very interesting ways to show that the so-called *femme fatale*, who is responsible for the protagonist's insanity and maddening pursuit of lust, is also capable of giving life and rescuing him from death caused due to his own drives. Thus, Dovey observes that the film "concentrates Freud's two drives, Eros, the erotic drive and Thanatos, the death drive -- onto the female body" (177). Hence, where there is a death drive, there is also a force rescuing the man and trying to bring him back towards life. As a result, the protagonist does not really die. Yet, in the end, there is no clear victor between Eros and Thanatos, as they remain to be two sides of the same coin and neither can exist without the other. This is apparent in the concluding scene of **Eyes Wide Shut** as well as the pattern of events that follow in the film. Kubrick has given us no answer to the question of whether the realisation of death brings life and the answers are left vague in **Eyes Wide Shut**. In our paper, we will attempt to show how Kubrick played out these conflicts and how they were answered in the film.

### EXPLANATIONS OF THEORIES

Sigmund Freud postulated the concept of a life instinct through his drive theory. This life-preserving drive was called 'Eros' and it was associated with uninhibited sexual desires, harmony, self-satisfaction, creativity, and a "unifying binding force striving to achieve species preservation" ("Pleasure Principle" 42). Eros was later called the 'sex instinct' or the 'erotic instinct' as Freud believed that sexual release contributed majorly towards the preservation and maintenance of life. Later, in his essay, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), Freud introduced the death drive (Todestrieb), in addition to the life drive. Eros is opposed as it is complemented by the highly elusive death instinct or 'Thanatos'<sup>2</sup> consisting of the drives of death, decay, destruction, sadism, aggression and violence. The death drive is not about survival or self-preservation, it is quite the contrary: it is the impulse to find the shortest path towards decomposition. Both fundamental drives, Eros and Thanatos, are inherently in us from the moment of our entrance into this world. Freud was aware of how provocative and counter-intuitive this is — as this means that death is not something that 'happens to' us, like an accident, but something that is an inherent part of our very being, and hence he considered both drives to be "necessary to understand the processes of life"(Gerber).

2 The term "Thanatos" was not used originally in Freud's essay. It was a term used for the first time in 1909 by Wilhelm Stekel. See Jones 273.

Freud further said, "The goal of all life is death" ("Pleasure Principle" 124) and he pitted the forces of Eros and Thanatos against each other to pursue the goal of maximizing the complexity of life while seeking restoration of a state that was disrupted by the emergence of life. Eros and Thanatos battle within themselves, where Eros tries to overpower the mighty death drive while Thanatos seeks to emblaze the pacifist life drive. According to Freud's theory, the form of energy that drives the sexual instinct is the libido and it is this force that is capable of activating the death drive, implying that pleasure is inherently intertwined with death. However, Freud admits the presence of the destructive death instinct "does not contradict the dominance of the pleasure principle...does not seem to necessitate any far-reaching limitation of the pleasure principle." ("Pleasure Principle" 280). The idea that Eros was about the individual surpassing itself remained, but the core intention was no longer primarily genetic procreation. Rather, procreation, as much as the sexual act itself, became part of a more fundamental and abstract process, namely the process of creating higher unities (Gerber). Narcissism is considered one such higher identity and an extended form of Eros.

It is an erotic unity with oneself, where the libido is directed towards one's own body and its satisfaction, rather than towards external objects. Freud considered primary narcissism as the instinct of life preservation and a form of behaviour where individuals treat themselves as any other sex object to satisfy each desire until they achieve full gratification ("Narcissism" 44). Jacques Lacan however considered Narcissism as a part of the death drive (*Les Complexes* 35). Freud proposed that what Eros wants to restore (repeat) is the primary narcissism at the mother's breast, which is "the first object of the sexual drive" (*Introductory Lectures* 3385) and thus postulated the principle of repetition compulsion, "a principle powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle" (Gerber). The phenomenon in which a person repeats an event or its circumstance over and over again by recalling repressed incidents from the past disregards the pleasure principle in every way ("Pleasure Principle" 288, 308). In Freud's view, the compulsion to repeat was "something that would seem more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (*Introductory Lectures* 21). He further proposed that the death drive was an extension of that compulsion wherein all living organisms have an instinctive "pressure toward death" ("Pleasure Principle" 94). The death drive arises when the primal inorganic condition is somehow disrupted by the genesis of life and the whole intention is to return to that condition, to repeat it. But if Eros is a fundamental drive, then the element of repetition must pertain to it as well. Eros is after all a productive force; the higher unities that it creates are genuinely new.

Hence, Freud insisted that we have to assume *two forms of repetition*, one for each fundamental drive, and we can assume that one of them will be a *productive* repetition, pertaining to Eros creating higher unities, and one of them will be *destructive*, pertaining to Thanatos destroying those unities and approaching the inorganic condition. ("The Ego and the Id" 40). Thanatos wants to repeat, and we know how it does that — either by using the pleasure principle to constantly reduce irritation or to return to the condition of death or destruction by defeating the pleasure principle. The aspect of inhibition brings us to a central point of the theory of drives, namely that both Eros and Thanatos can be displaced ("Pleasure Principle" 119). Displacement occurs whenever the direct route to satisfaction is inhibited or blocked and there needs to be alternate ways to release the tension that is built up in us. Here, the whole activity of the unconscious comes into play: "displacing, repressing, disguising, densifying" (Gerber). The direct satisfaction of the death drive, which strives for the abolition of unities, would mean the immediate self-destruction of the organism. It has been noted to be a fundamental drive that originates within us and nothing can alter or get rid of its consequences. This implies that one needs to find other ways to avoid this from harming them or causing complete destruction, while still somehow satisfying the death drive. That is when the forces of Thanatos can be interchangeable with the forces of the Eros to prevent complete destruction. ("Pleasure Principle" 67).

The Eros instinct may even be experienced passively. But it is through an activity or a process that the Eros is diffused, which means, the cell takes the other as an object and injects its libidinal energy into it. This process is called cathexis, and the "original term for it is *Objektbesetzung*, which, as a composite, can be read either as 'occupation of the object (by the subject)' or 'occupation by the object (of the subject)'." ("Pleasure Principle" 140, 152).

Freud termed it a result of a conflict between the ego and the libidinal object resulting in an accumulation of the psychic energy instead of its expression. This libidinal cathexis may further act as a cause of repressed sexual desires and this repression may lead to compulsive behaviors, as stated by Freud. Sadism was postulated as a means of deriving pleasure from pain, according to Freud. He said that "sadism is antithetical to Eros" ("Pleasure Principle" 251) and although it is actually an extension of the death drive, it is "ancillary to the sexual function". ("Pleasure Principle" 142). He considered it to be the "destructive component lodged into the superego, driving the ego to its death" ("Pleasure Principle" 197). Freud as well as psychoanalysts like Sabrina Spielrein further believed that masochism<sup>3</sup> was a clinical manifestation and indication of the death instinct and secondary to sadism. Thus, the interplay of the forces of Eros and Thanatos is clearly implied in the practices of Sadomasochism.

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<sup>3</sup> Sexual gratification from self-injury. See Jones 509 .

### ANALYSIS

In the very first scene where Bill and Alice are seen together, it can be clearly understood that Bill is reluctant to appreciate his wife's beauty in the true sense. When she asks him how she looks, Bill indifferently tells her that she is "perfect", while staring at himself in the mirror and trying to fix his imperfect bow tie at the time. Even though Bill kisses her and tells her that she "always" looks "beautiful," his tone seems more placatory than convincing as genuinely interested. As opposed to Ziegler as well as the Hungarian Szavost who are both blown by Alice's beauty, Bill seems to be totally ignorant about it in addition to her actual desires. McDougal observes that "Bill's narcissism is striking here. He's more concerned with viewing his own face in the mirror than with responding to his wife. Mirrors are ubiquitous in this apartment, adorning walls...leads to the living room" (195-6.). Bill fails to recollect the babysitter's name even though Alice mentions it to him in the bathroom. Thus, at the very beginning, Bill's narcissistic nature is established. Bill being a "doctor" has profound implications in the story for his daily duel with death has caused a repression in his life instinct, which is what Alice criticises. Bill is seduced by two young models during the Christmas party, and he enjoys that, but he cannot bring it to a conclusion as his medical expertise is soon required. When he pretends to keep his erotic drives at bay and asks where the three of them are going, Bill is obviously putting on a mask, for he too wants to go to "where the rainbow ends." Scholars<sup>4</sup> have associated this with the logo of the rainbow in Milich's shop where he will eventually get a mask to wear to a place that celebrates Eros. On being called by Zeigler, Bill turns to the models and asks, "To be continued?" implying the continuation of the saga of Eros that will lead to the end of the rainbow. Hence, it can also be said that the place where the rainbow ended, the orgy, the ritualistic celebration of debauchery, would also be where Bill's reputation would end due to public humiliation and unmasking. The checking of the pleasure principle by the reality principle is seen at the very beginning. Freud said, "Thanks to the influence of the ego's self-preservation drive it is displaced by the reality principle, which without abandoning the aim of ultimately achieving pleasure, nonetheless demands and procures the postponement of gratification" (Pleasure Principle 90). Lacan specifically believed that narcissism was associated with the death drive and repeatedly, Bill's narcissism reminds us of the apparent absence of an erotic drive within him (*Écrits* 186). This idea is further understood when he is called to check on Mandy, during the course of the party, who was having sex with Ziegler secretly but then overdosed on some drugs. Bill saved her from dying and said that she was "very lucky to be alive." As a result, the girl was indebted to the sexless doctor who had protected her from death and injected new life into her.

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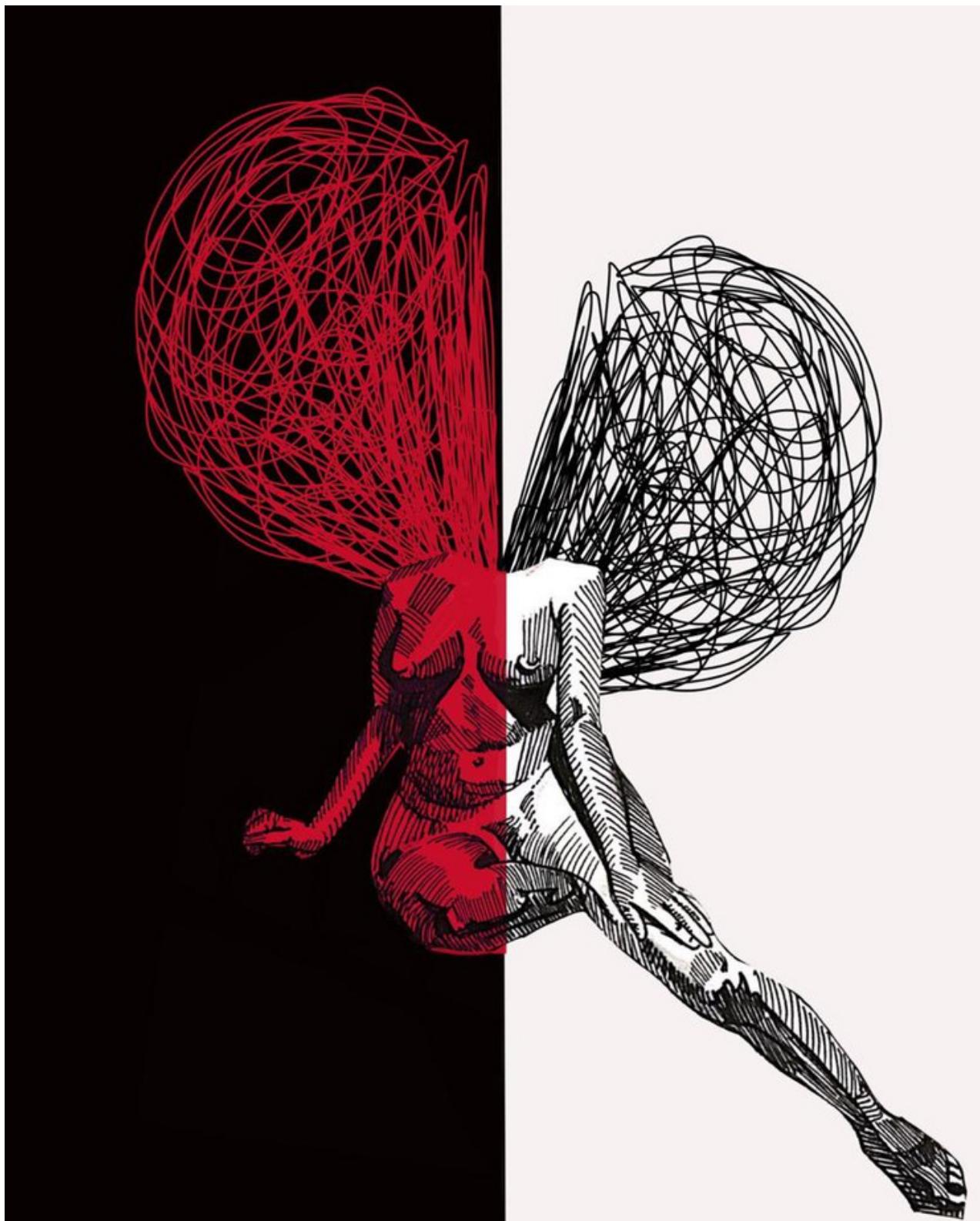
4 Hoffman notes "In a room directly under the brightly lit rainbow that beams the store's icon, the young girl and her male companions introduce another level of sexual transgression at the rainbow's end: both men are wearing makeup and wigs, and they are engaging in sexual activity involving multiple partners, one of whom is underage" (68).

Had there been no medical intervention at this point, the act of sex might have been followed by death. Mandy will transition from an object of desire who is “initially limp and lifeless [to] become the image of death in the film” (Pinto 73). However, once again, Bill does not view the “girl with the great tits” with any sexual desire but as a diseased body that requires treatment, else it will die. This is exactly what Alice talks about later when both smoke weed after a day of work. The defence mechanisms of the mind are given temporary rest for we also see Alice’s repressed desires blurting out, which are triggered by how the Hungarian man flirted with her and wanted to have sex and how Bill was indifferent to that entire scene for Alice was his “wife” and the “mother of [his] children.” Bill does not see women with any kind of lust and thus, Alice’s question of whether he “fuck[ed]” the two models surprises him but at the same time, he is unable to answer about his whereabouts as Ziegler had asked him to keep his infidelity a secret. However, Bill’s ordinary world falls apart when Alice reveals how she felt immense lust for the naval officer who they met during their family holiday (someone Bill doesn’t even remember) and she says that she was ready to give up the life she had built, including her husband and daughter, to sleep with him just one time. She expresses her temptation to destroy the sanctity of her marriage just to have a brief passionate encounter with the naval officer. Thus, sex would lead to the death of marriage. Critic Janet Maslin pointed out how the film “chose the bedroom as the last frontier” and hence marital infidelity is one of the most important themes of the film that highlights the relation between the Eros and Thanatos. Bill is unable to come to terms with his wife’s fantasies for he believes that “women are not like that.” When he realises that Alice prioritised other men over her husband, he cannot understand how such strong erotic drives can be present in a woman who has been tamed by marriage and failure in her career. For Bill, the body of the woman is but an object to be handled clinically, that is plagued by disease and death but for Alice, it is one that is inviting for sex, that bears fantasies, that feels pleasure. His repressed desires come out after this point through the form of a sexual odyssey but even there, he is unable to accomplish what he wanted. Since Alice is willing to go to the extent of destroying everything that she has built so far for sexual satisfaction, he too undertakes a journey in which sexual satisfaction can come about at the cost of one’s life and loss of reputation, something that Bill faces during the night. Thus, the death drive is what powers the life instinct. Alice felt her life drive leading to a death drive, something that Bill couldn’t relate to but after this point, we see that a kind of transference takes place and Bill becomes ready to ruin everything to feel the kind of erotic drive that his wife has felt. Hence, the erotic drives of Alice and Bill are interchanged, providing evidence of how both the drives can be displaced as postulated by Freud. Bill saves Mandy’s life in Zeigler’s bathroom while she was in the middle of sex and Mandy returns the favour by saving Bill’s life at the orgy. Hence, the eros drive is interchanged for both these characters at crucial points in the film.

Several characters and their Eros seem to be interchangeable throughout the film “for example: Domino for Sally, Carl for Bill, and Mandy for the Mysterious woman who redeems Bill at the orgy” as recorded by Charlotte O’Sullivan. Before discussing the sexual odyssey, we wish to mention two noteworthy instances that occur before this sequence. Firstly, when Bill and Alice returned home after the party, they had sex and Kubrick chose the song “Baby did a bad bad thing” to be the background song in this scene. Darrell Pinto has observed in his thesis that the song obviously refers to the Original Sin which led to Adam and Eve’s fall from Paradise. Given the fact that they are surrounded by paintings of natural scenery, Pinto points out that the damnation of the first man and woman is a reminder of the fact that sexual acts in **Eyes Wide Shut** will always have death lingering in them in some way or the other. Sex and life will inevitably be accompanied by death. Secondly, the sequence of shots after this scene shows us an ordinary day in the life of the Harfords and it is interesting to note that the contrast between Alice and Bill’s lives is depicted very clearly in the montage. While Alice is a failed gallery owner who is a homemaker now, Bill is a very successful doctor who looks at naked bodies of men and women in a “professional” manner. However, it is Alice who desires other men and sees them as those who want to sleep with her. She thinks that Bill’s patients might even fantasise about him when he touches them. But Bill thinks of them as nothing but objects of disease that require medical attention as Webster notes that they might have “terminal diseases,” thus linking “sex and death” (150). Bill even refuses to view his own wife as a source of fantasy for other men and admits to never feeling jealous of her. He considers Alice to serve his sexual interests alone, thus revealing Bill’s male-narcissism, as rightly pointed out by critics.<sup>5</sup>

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5 This is McDougal’s main contention in his article “The Dream-Odyssey of Stanley Kubrick”.



The unbridled confession of desire ends when Bill receives a call from Marion who informs him that her father, Bill's patient, is dead. On the way to their house, Bill pictures his wife and the naval officer in bed like a pornographic film. Bill imagines similar sexual scenes obsessively and compulsively throughout the rest of the film. He plays them repeatedly (five times) in his head at various significant junctures of the film which could be "Repetitions due to the tendency of the repressed to find an outlet" (Gerber) and considered an extension of the pleasure principle which aims to "avoid unpleasure" ("Pleasure Principle" 293). The presence of the erotic drive that he had denied in the people around him is let loose inside him and he understands this better when Marion kisses him and tries to convince him to have sex with her. All this happens beside the father's corpse. Bill tells Marion that she is behaving strangely owing to the trauma of her father's death, thereby denying the erotic drive in the female once again. Yet, at the same time, he becomes aware of the fact that he has become the naval officer in this scenario where Marion wants to escape the seemingly dominating Carl, her fiancé, who is the Bill Harford in his relationship. Like Alice, Marion is ready to destroy everything that she holds dear in her life so that she can have an adventure with the doctor. Kubrick presents a classic tableau of sex and death in this scene for we see Bill unable to comprehend how the erotic drive can coexist with Thanatos and yet it does inside that room. In a way, the entire film is about how Bill slowly forms an understanding of how they can exist simultaneously in the same situation, and one can lead to the other.

Bill is unable to take action with the woman willing to have sex with him. Hence, in this film, he does not engage or succeed in consummating a single heterosexual encounter and there is an "ambivalence towards Bill's sexuality" as per some critics (Webster 156). Moreover, Bill's "sexual release is continually withheld" (Webster 150), be it with his wife, Gayle, Nuala, Domino or the women at the orgy implying the accumulation of the sex drive. This phenomenon is called the cathexis and was considered a part of the pleasure principle by Freud. Thereafter, several college students accost him on the road and call him a "faggot," thus symbolically referring to the absence of the life instinct inside him, due to which he seems to be incapable of initiating or even thinking about sex. They further question Bill's manliness by suggesting he may play "for the pink team." Later, even a male hotel clerk tries to seduce Bill and the scholar, Randy Rasmussen believes that the hotel clerk represents a "homosexual option the protagonist does not consciously acknowledge" (350). Thus, it is very evident that the entire world seems to be denying his masculinity and the evidence of sexual inversion leads to an identity crisis. Throughout the film, Bill is seen to be showing his medical identity card, revealing his constant urge to establish an identity to the world, which reflects his confusion regarding his sexual identity. The entire world seems to be denying his masculinity.

However, Bill is not ready to let this happen and thus, the very next thing that he does is agreeing to sleep with a hooker, Domino. He accompanies her to her house and is ready to do whatever she likes to him. This pattern of events returns in the second half of the film, for right after the male hotel receptionist speaks to Bill in a flirtatious manner, Bill goes to Domino's house and encounters Sally, with whom he immediately begins foreplay. However, the difference between the two events lies in the thrust of the actions. While in the former, Bill feels his Eros pulsating even though he cannot give it a conclusion, in the latter, Bill is informed that he had almost touched death. Domino was AIDS-positive and it seems more than probable that she got the virus due to her profession. Thus, sex would cause her death and sex with her would have also caused Bill's death. Bill does not have sex with Domino as he receives a call from Alice who asks him when he would come back. This prompts his superego to check the pleasure principle for a moment and makes him leave the scene. Coitus interruptus saves the day (Pizzato 103). But this doesn't end Bill's thirst for revenge. Pinto notes this as well, as he writes that "Bill begins to think of having his own sexual encounter in retribution for what his wife has revealed" (76). He can only end his sexual odyssey once he comes to see other women as objects of sexual desire who are capable of truly arousing him to the extent of causing his death. As a result, Bill feels no hesitation in going to the orgiastic meeting of the sex cult where his friend Nick Nightingale plays the piano. When he meets Nick in a bar and comes to know about this, he decides to go there the very same night.

"Fidelio" is the password to enter the sex cult where Bill will encounter masked women being "fucked by hundreds of [masked] men" in a ritualistic setting. Originally titled "The Triumph of Marital Love," Fidelio is also the name of Beethoven's only opera. What is ironic is that a lack of (perceived) fidelity in the marriage has led to this situation where Bill must understand the passion of infidelity. Pizzato has observed an interplay of the life and the death drive in this atmosphere as an individual person's having sex would only end with one "little death" or climax but in the setting of a ritualistic orgy where hundreds of men are climaxing, there is an invocation of the "communal force of life and death" (105). This can be compared to the process of catharsis that was described by Aristotle, which did not happen to an individual watching a tragedy but rather to a large group of people who came to watch the play. Fridolin commented that "the delight of beholding was changed to an almost unbearable agony of desire" to describe how the erotic events of the orgy turned into Thanatos in no time (75-6). Besides, there has been a lot of fan theory<sup>6</sup> on whether the masked woman who rescued Bill was Domino and if it is so, the entire cult that ritualises Eros and celebrates the power of the sexual act will only die by the transmission of HIV. Bill witnesses this wild Bacchanalian celebration, a mad Dionysian ritual with his own Apollonian intellect that had been deprived of such boisterous passion.

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<sup>6</sup> Several fan-pages have dealt with this. See BillJV.

However, he can only do so as long as he can mask his identity, which he is unable to do after some time. At the end of the day, he is an outsider who has to pretend to be a part of this erotic circle. Very soon, everyone understands that he is an interloper and needs to be punished for being an uninvited guest. Whatever erotic passion that Bill had felt in the mansion is destroyed when the possibility of death appears before him in the form of the Red Cloaked figure and the other men who are willing to remove his clothes for him if he refused to do it himself. Pinto notes that "Bill's fear of the removal of his clothing, a psychological denuding, stands in contrast to the rest of the film in which women's bodies are on display throughout. In a film in which the nudity of the female body is erotic, Bill's removal of his clothing is associated with the threat of death" (81). Hence, the death drive exists wherever there is life, sex and celebration. It seems that Bill is going to be raped or punished physically for his act of transgression. However, Mandy comes to save the day and much like Christ, says that she is willing to "redeem" him. After the Red Cloaked figure confirms whether she knows the "consequences" of her choice, Mandy is taken away to a separate room after answering in the affirmative. In the second half of the film, we come to know that Mandy had died. When Ziegler later informs Bill that it was Mandy who "got her brains fucked out" for him, he realises how the woman was no less than Christ who sacrificed himself to protect humanity from damnation. Mandy's sacrifice brings a temporary resolution to Bill's problems and stops the death drive. Yet, it is aroused once again in the very next scene, when Alice reveals that she had a dream in which she saw herself being "fucked by hundreds of men" and she wanted to "laugh" in Bill's face. Once again, just like the beginning of the night, at its end, Bill is reminded of the dearth of life and Eros in him. In a way, Alice's dream mirrors the orgy that Bill had just returned from.<sup>7</sup> The events of the following day mirror the events of the first day as everything happens twice. Going to Nick's bar/hotel, Domino's place, the costume store, the mansion as well as Marion- everything seems to happen two times and what is most striking is that while the first encounter possesses some kind of a life drive, the latter bears a mark of the death drive. The first time, Nick directs Bill to the orgy but the second time, Nick is said to have checked out of the hotel with physical injuries; the possibility of his death dawns on Bill who realises that the cult members must have interrogated Nick. Also, his masculinity<sup>8</sup> is challenged once again when the hotel receptionist flirts with him. Thereafter, when he tries to negate this by going to Domino's house and tries to initiate sex with Sally, he is informed of how he narrowly escaped death by not sleeping with the HIV-positive Domino. The first time he goes to Milich's costume shop, the owner shockingly discovers his daughter with two men, without clothes (insinuating sex) but when Bill goes for the second time, Milich offers his underage daughter to Bill for some "extra" money, an illegal act which Bill could not be a party to.

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<sup>7</sup> Kagan says that "the film represents an extended Freudian dream grafted onto another dream" (241).

<sup>8</sup> The first instance occurs when the college students accost him. Thereafter, he decides to reinstate his masculinity by having sex with Domino, a hooker.

If he did, he could be punished with death. Also, most notably, the first time Bill went to the mansion, he was able to witness Eros in all its glorious magnificence (though it didn't end well) but the second time he goes, he is threatened with death if he doesn't stop snooping around. The repetition of the same events but with different conclusions only reminds us of Freud's theory of the repetition compulsion. Michel Ciment stated how "Kubrick's use of doubles, mirrors, repetitions, patterns...corresponds to Freud's ideas on The Uncanny and how 'uncanny feelings' stems from a man's repressed feelings" (259).

He further pointed out how the cocktail party and the orgy scene were eighteen minutes each, depicting an example of double in the film (260). Each of these events being repeated throughout the film proved Freud's hypothesis of the repetition compulsion. Furthermore, the phrase "Lucky to be alive" is used in the newspaper headline on Mandy's death once again, mirroring Bill's words to Mandy two nights prior to her death. When Bill calls Marion, expecting flirtation, it is Carl who receives the call. Lacan believed that "the death drive is simply the fundamental tendency of the symbolic order to produce repetition" (Seminar 326). Kubrick was surely aware of this when he was working on the film's screenplay. All these events that flirt with death culminate in Bill going to the morgue where Mandy's corpse was kept. Bill had read about her death in the papers but was not sure if she was a part of the orgy. Later, Ziegler reveals, to Bill's horror, that it was Mandy who had redeemed Bill. As Bill observes Mandy's body, bringing his face close to hers, the audience is reminded of the first time they had encountered her erotic body that had just experienced sex. This time, it was dead. Pizzato addresses Mandy as "an erotic lure of transcendent power and a reminder of mortal vulnerability" (91).

Amy Taubin placed a special significance on Mandy and her death, claiming that "the castration anxiety that his wife unleashed by telling him her secret fantasies of leaving him for another man, and that has sent him into the night in a sexual panic, is quelled when he fuses his whore and mother fantasies" (30). Furthermore, she says that Bill is unable to understand that "he, too, could be guilty of such feelings [like his wife] is something he can't acknowledge except in the most impossible circumstance - when the object is a woman lying dead on a slab in the morgue, i.e., when it's too late (31)". Linwide Dovey says that "the film reveals a profound fear of death associated with the female" (174).

However, women like Mandy, who have been portrayed as prostitutes able to satisfy sexual drives also end up being saviours for Bill and blocking the death drive. Even though there is a repeated association of the female with death, Kubrick turns the idea of the *femme fatale* around when the two most important women in the film: Mandy and Alice,<sup>9</sup> end up saving his life and arousing his life instinct.

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Alice's call which prevents Bill from going ahead with having sex with Domino

Tim Kreider also observes the unified entity of all women in the film representing the coexistence of the two principal drives and especially highlights how Mandy and Alice are images of each other, "both are redheads, both take a drug and both are fucked by 'hundreds of men' in either dreams or realities" (Pinto 74). After Ziegler tells Bill about Mandy, he decides to tell his wife everything that had happened over the two days. Alice is seen with red eyes once the tale has been told. But, in the final scene of the film, she submits to everything that has happened and even though Bill has done terrible things and others have done far worse to protect him, she tells him that they must start over and the first thing that they must do is to cherish the newfound erotic drive in the both of them and "fuck." The word "fuck" is used multiple times in the film "underscoring the libidinal urges of the characters and the aggressive nature of the sex act rather than an act of making love" (76). This is also viewed by critics as tendencies of sadomasochism in the couple, something Freud considered an indication and clinical manifestation of the death drive (*Pleasure Principle* 322, 328). Neil Fulwood regarded the orgy as a "vision of sex without intimacy, without love...impersonal", adding evidence for the same (124). Sexual violence is also observed in the film when the priest asks Bill to remove his clothing and later threatens to "do it for [him]".

We agree with Taubin when she declares that she is unsure about the power of the erotic drive at the end. Even though Freud would have agreed that in the very end, Eros keeps Thanatos at bay, the ending neither convinces us nor lets us believe that they will "go home and have a good fuck" (26). There is every possibility that the reality principle will have them go back to the same old clockwork in which they deny their Eros, especially Bill, for the sake of their position in society and convenience. Kreider remarks that Bill is "implicated in the exploitation and deaths in the film" (48). Indeed, Bill's desires invoke the death drive with great power which harms those around him who try to charge his Eros (Nick, Domino, Mandy). Pinto ends his thesis by concluding that "Wherever Eros exists, so does the imminent possibility of death or aggression which seems to shadow the erotic" (87). Thus, the events of the film are driven by the twin forces of Eros and Thanatos and not by any one of them. Thanatos appears in the film whenever there is an expectation of Eros. Due to the repeated association of both, we are unsure of whether there is really any Eros at the very end of the film or if it's just a farce, as Taubin believes. What can be undeniably inferred is exactly what Lacan wrote in *Écrits*, "Every drive is virtually a death drive" for every drive pursues its own extinction (844). Nothing can exist eternally. Thus, Bill's desire for life is inextricably attached to the desire for death and neither can exist without the other.

### CONCLUSION

Both Eros and Thanatos are manifested in Stanley Kubrick's final film ***Eyes Wide Shut*** in several ways, some being quite mysterious. The latent desires of a married couple unleash death and destruction not only on themselves but upon others. The woman is depicted both as a subject and an object of desire as well as death. In the first half of the film, Bill pursues Eros and in the second, he realises that the object of his pursuance was Thanatos all along. Desire pursues its own extinction and thus, we cannot say for sure that one triumphs over the other. Like a snake biting its own tail, Eros gives way to Thanatos. Hence, it cannot be said that what happened to Bill was unnatural but rather an extended metaphor of what Freud and Lacan have said, even though the former would have liked the pleasure principle to win. Apparently, that is what happens at the end of the film, but we are unsure. No pleasure can exist in perpetuity. Therefore, traditionally, and even in ***Eyes Wide Shut***, sex has been associated, not with joy but with ruin and death.

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CHALCHITRA DARPARAN

SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

WOMEN'S  
RETALIATION  
IN KOREAN  
HORROR  
CINEMA:

A GYNOCENTRIC  
APPROACH OF  
KOREA'S HAAN

RACHEL NHI PHAN

## INTRODUCTION OF HAAN AND ITS IMPACT ON KOREAN CINEMA

The grotesque and violent vengeance horror films served by Koreans always carry a signature relish that none outside of Korea's film industry has successfully imitated. History has shown that Spike Lee's **Oldboy** (2013) brings out a totally different take on vengeance although it holds almost the same structure with the classic cult originally created by Park Chan Wook in 2003. From a Korean perspective, writer Hong attempts to explain the indifferent behaviors of the transnational cinema community toward the remake version of Spike Lee by pointing out that the reimagination of **Oldboy** lacks a vital component that adds meaning to the violence and horrors embedded in the film.<sup>1</sup> It is "Haan" - a transgenerational collective feeling of Koreans that exists under the form of "*ultra-distilled rage*" and often serves as an endless fuel for their fire of vengeance. (Hong) This Korean unique selling proposition creates distinctive identities for Park Chan Wook's vengeful characters and highlights the long-lasting avenging spirit of Koreans as the subtext of the film, making the American version appear quite shallow when put in comparison.

Hong is not alone when associating the concept of Haan with the growth impetus of Korean culture. Yet, an empirical question might emerge: How does Korean culture find itself intersecting with rage and retaliation? Tracing back to the origin of Haan, one might discover a sufficient explanation for the connection between Korea and the act of reprisal. On a national level, Haan can be traced back to the ancient civilization of Korea - Manchuria and Koguryo kingdoms - when Koreans suffered from "repeated invasions and exploitations of aggressive neighboring countries." (Sung Kil Min 15) During World War II, the atrocities committed by Japanese imperialism reopened the wound of Koreans and perpetuated the primordial Haan feeling. The Korean Civil War followed right after the annexation of Japan ended the dream for a united Korea, divided the South from the North, family from family, and became a great source of Haan for the generations of Koreans to come. In short, Haan is the "*uniquely Korean*" collective, emotional reaction to the country's long history of suffering but can also be caused by a "*traumatic personal life*". (Kim) Surprisingly Haan is not an exclusively Korean concept but also frequently appears in other cultures of the Sinosphere including China, Japan, and Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> However, Korea is the only nation that takes the concept to the level of ethnonationalism. (Kim 260) Korean people regard Haan as a transgenerational concept, meaning that it is "intrinsically and intricately connected with Korean people." (Chung)

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1 Contrasting to the hype of the original Oldboy version of Park Chan Wook, Spike Lee's remake humbly holds a 37 percent of approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes with a disappointing motif in most of the criticism.

[https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/oldboy\\_2013](https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/oldboy_2013)

2 The word Haan is derived from the original Chinese character 憎 that carries the meaning 'to resent' or 'to regret'. The descendants of this character in other countries of the East Asian cultural sphere are "Kon" in Japanese", "Haan" in Korean, and "Hận" in Vietnamese.

They believe Haan is the main impetus of Korea's economical and cultural recovery after World War II, and that it fuels their creativity to help come up with cultural products that exert soft power on a global scale. From an extreme ethnonationalist perspective, Korean culture is a culture of Haan. Sung Kil Min, the psychiatry professor at Yonsei university supports this argument in his work "The politics of Haan": "*Korean poets, critics, social scientists, anthropologists, theologians, and even economists refer to Korea as a nation of Haan, Korean national history as a history of Haan, and Korean culture as a culture of Haan*". That being said, some believe that certain products of Korean culture, especially Korean cinema, are arguably a manifestation of Haan. The concept thus gets employed as a framework by a multitude of film and social science scholars to better study South Korean contemporary cinema, with a focus on films that highlights the act of vengeance. A deficiency that must not be overlooked in recent film studies relating to Haan is their lack of women's perspective when addressing a feeling that is endured by all Koreans no matter what their gender identity. Bjorn Boman has sophisticatedly examined the Haan essence in four critically-acclaimed movies of Korean Nouvelle Vague; Two of those have<sup>3</sup> vengeance-related narratives. Yet, none of them presents how a woman's Haan is cinematically featured. According to research by Dr Sung Kil Min, Korean women endure more Haan than their male counterparts, which will be explored further later in this article. Motivated to present more female perspectives on the Haan discussion table, I will pick up 3 Korean Vengeance Horror films to analyze how their visual elements and themes help us better understand how Haan is suppressed, transformed, and resolved by Korean women. We will have a chance to look closely at how Korean women harness the unique sentiment of Haan to embrace their maternal responsibilities, and attack the patriarchal system with violence for the sake of achieving retribution. The four women of vengeance mentioned in this article come from 3 post-colonial and contemporary horror films: ***The Housemaid*** (1960), ***Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*** (2005), and ***Bedevilled*** (2010). Turning to the idea that Korean Cinema is a Cinema of Haan, I think this argument jumps so quickly to the conclusion that it subconsciously neglects the historical setting of different periods Korean Cinema has gone through, as well as the personal background of each filmmaker's generation. Ryan Gardener proposes this angle in his thesis "Screaming Silently: Haan, Contemporary South Korean Cinema, and Emotional Realism." and I have to agree with him. Thus, instead of assuming that every Korean Revenge Horror film carries the quality of Haan, I will examine the visual and thematic structure to see whether women's retaliation is 'Haan' enough or not. Specifically, character development, story arcs, and mise-en-scène are the three things I care about the most when viewing each film.

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<sup>3</sup> New Wave, or "Nouvelle Vague" in French, is a term initially catered for the film movement during the late 1950s of the French cinema. Directors under this movement mark their name on the global cinematic map with the stylistic individuality manifested in their artwork. A theory that is closely associated with this film movement is the "Auteur Theory": A director becomes the film's author when they dominate the whole film production process. Later on, the term is employed to regard the "New Wave" Cinematic movement, even outside of the French territory such as Mexican Nouvelle Vague or Korean Nouvelle Vague.

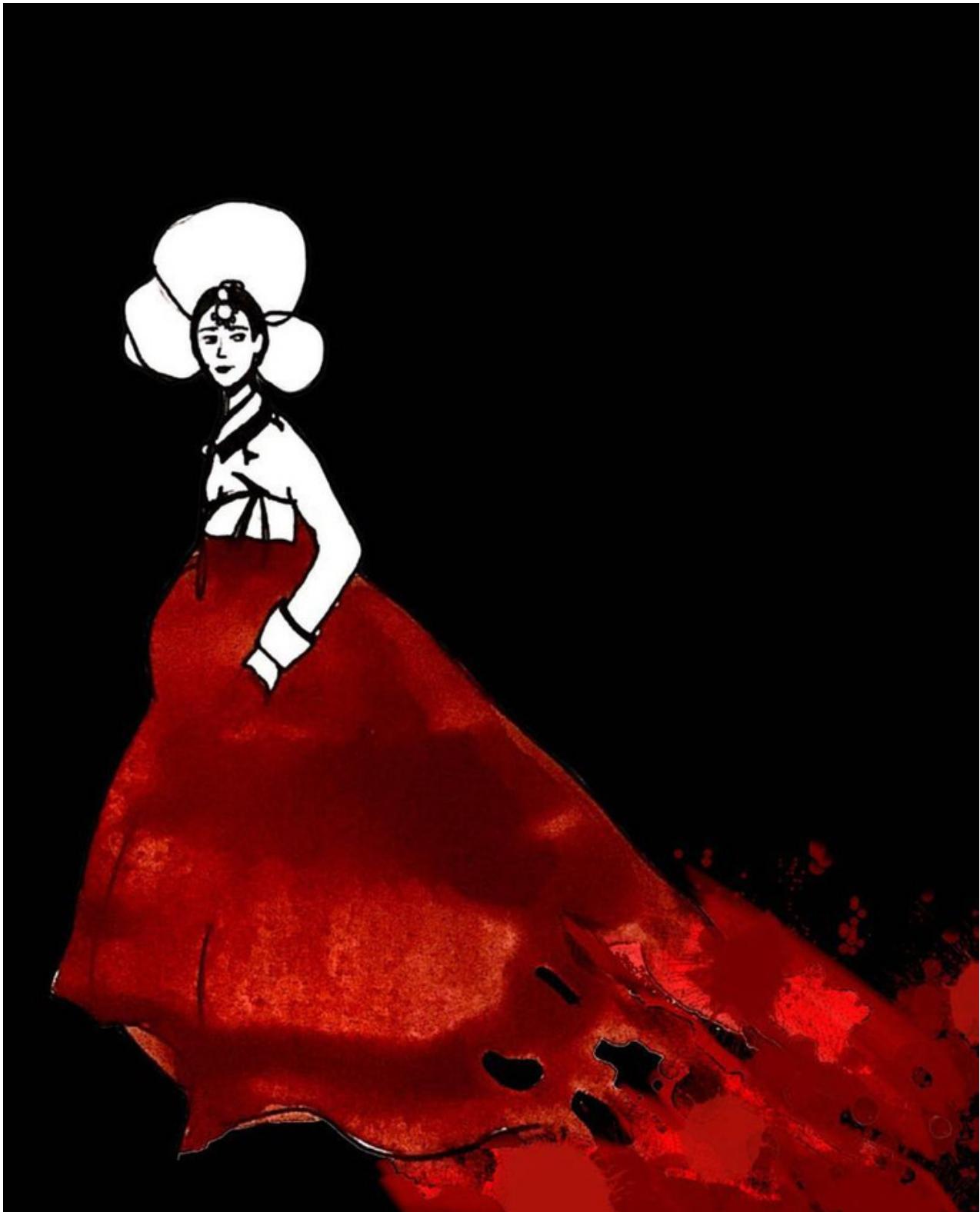
HAAN IN RELATION TO SUPPRESSED WOMEN AND THEIR RETALIATION

"Frost can fall even in May and June, if a woman harbors a grudge [Haan].  
여자가 한을 품으면 오뉴월에도 서리가 내린다."  
- Korean Proverb

Scaling down to an individual level, Sung Kil Min suggests that Haan might occur by a variety of tragic life events such as unreciprocated love, love separation, sexual frustration, domestic violence, poverty, low-class status, lack of education, and so on. (Sung 15) Unsurprisingly, the ones who suffer the most from these social frustrations are women. "Typically, Haan has been associated with women, who have been regarded as the weaker sex in Korean society." (Lee) "Specifically, Haan happens most frequently to low-class women including "maids, servants, butchers, tanners, shamans, and roaming entertainers." (Sung 15)

This highlights how the issue of gender inequality, as well as class conflict, are unabashed in Korean society, forging a lifelong relationship between Haan and Korean women, especially the ones who are not fortunate enough to be born into wealthy families. The findings fit really well with the characterization of the female protagonists in the three vengeance plots. The prolonged injustice and oppression that is inflicted on them has motivated them to enact a spectacle of vengeance with great violence. In the **Housemaid** (1960) of Kim Ki-Young, Myung Sook, one of the two female protagonists, is indeed a maid with a low-class status just like Sung Kil Min has mentioned. Without studying the subtext of the film which highlights the desire for social mobility of poor girls, the audience could easily perceive Myung Sook as a greed-driven, scheming, and mentally unhinged woman who dares to gamble everything for the love of a man. Yet, if we look more closely at her initial position in life, one might realize that she has formed a sense of Haan from living in poverty and developed a sense of feminine resentment and envy when witnessing the happy lives which the other female characters have.

Similar situations of disadvantageous circumstances surround the female protagonists of **Sympathy for Lady Vengeance** and **Bedevilled**. Geum Ja in Park Chan Wook's story is a former inmate who is wrongfully convicted of kidnapping and murdering a 6-year old boy. Bok Nam in **Bedevilled** is the one with the bleakest of circumstances. Orphaned at a young age and living by herself on a remote island, she is later forced into becoming a housewife who suffers from daily domestic abuse and sexual harassment from her husband and brother in-law. Despite the differences in the social setting which these films are produced in, all the characters suffer from bizarre living situations that made them accumulate enough Haan to plan out a vengeful rampage on the cruel patriarchal system, mirroring the Korean proverb which is mentioned at the beginning of this section.



**THE TRANSFORMATION TAKEN PLACED BY HAAN ACCUMULATION**

The production period of *The Housemaid*, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and *Bedevilled* varies from post-colonial, contemporary, to modern; Yet, they share the common point of having female characters with the lowest profiles in Korean male-dominated Confucianist society; A female housemaid who is not afraid to showcase her animal-like desire for social mobility, a former inmate who serves a jail term of 13 years of kidnapping and murdering children, and, a rural housewife who suffer from daily domestic abuse and sexual violence. The conditions from which these characters emerge deeply resonate with Sung Kil Min's description that poor women tend to be the ones who accumulate the most Haan in Korean society. (Sung 15) With such an inception, their grotesque retaliations out of Haan have been signaled from the beginning of these films. I argue that it is the process of Haan accumulation of these suppressed women that has paved the way for their inside-out transformation. The outer transformation could be deduced regarding their differences in clothing and make-up style which are shown most prominently in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* and *Bedevilled*. The inner transformation, on the other hand, is greatly shown in all three films.

Following the slow-paced melodramatic style of *The Housemaid*, the Haan accumulation of two vengeance ladies happens gingerly, manifesting itself through their inside-out transformation on the mise-èn-scene. The film opens by introducing a nuclear family who is eager to move to their new two-story house, representing a sense of social mobility. The pregnant wife in the story was unable to manage all the house chores, so a new housemaid was promptly hired. This proves to be the turning point when everything started going downhill despite the family status improving significantly.

The wife, the first vengeance lady in the film appeared as a role model for the ideals of Confucianist values in a woman. Always seen in her Hanbok - a Korean traditional costume, Mrs. Kim embodies the image of a good mother. She is well-mannered, nurturing, and dedicates her life to protecting the family lineage - a mission that Confucianism attaches to the pride of a woman. On the other hand, the housemaid Myung Sook plays the role of a wanton seductress - an antithesis of the Good Mother image that Mrs. Kim portrays. She smokes, is bad with children, and sneakily observes Mr. Kim whenever he has a piano tutoring session. The two ladies represent the cruel polarized image of women, which has been well-put by Gina Yu as: "One is the "good wife and wise mother" who conforms to traditional Confucianism and is locked into the ideology of chastity. The other is the wicked woman who is either a femme fatale or a seductress.' (Yu 261)

And in this story, the seductress remains evil from start to beginning with no back story or anything for the audience to sympathize with. For the wife, the Haan began to accumulate after a series of events and incidents. After discovering that her husband has cheated, Mrs. Kim quickly acknowledged that she's not the only pregnant lady anymore. Suppressing all her hard feelings, the quick-witted mother comes up with a plan to save the family lineage and the status their family had recently achieved. By convincing Myung Sook to abort the baby, Mrs. Kim sets one of her feet outside of the 'kind mother' label for the mission that Confucianism had given to her. Suh Nam Dong has highlighted that the unequal treatment of Confucianism on a Korean woman's shoulder is also one of 'The Fourfold [Haan] of Korean people'. (The Commission on Theological Concerns of The Christian Conference of Asia 58) which is partly shown as an aspect of Haan that has shined through the characterization and the themes of the story. Does Myung Sook's revenge also emerge from the accumulation of Haan? Yes, it does. The motivation for Myung Sook to tear down the Kim family also derives from Haan. However, the Haan of Myung Sook is not the Haan that is accumulated through private unfortunate events. It is the Haan that stems from the misfortune of her birth: the Haan of rigid social hierarchies and discrimination borne out of them. Myung Sook felt very deeply the unjustice of the discrepancies between her own circumstances and that of Mrs. Kim's family and status. The seductress once said to Mr.Kim that: ;Your family has been happy for too long. I'll tell your wife about your affair with the tutee.' Because of low class Haan, she has to employ her sexual faculties to seduce Mr.Kim in the hope for upward social mobility.

Park Chan Wook - the mastermind behind **Sympathy for Lady Vengeance** is a great fan of Kim Ki Young. (Raymond) He took great inspiration from his predecessor to portray a vengeful woman boiling with Haan but managed to blur the line of a good mother vs. a seductress in his character. Lee Geum Ja, the protagonist of the film, is a beautiful woman who was sentenced to 13 years of imprisonment for a murder she did not commit. Geum Ja spent those years behind bars to establish a good reputation and credibility with her cellmates, at the same time plotting her revenge that would employ their help. Geum Ja's transformation is emphasized from the beginning to midway through the film. From the strange Church priest to her former cellmates, all were surprised that: 'You look so different now. What's with the red eye shadow?' 'I don't want to look kind-hearted.' - Geum Ja replied. Her iconic transformation from an innocent school girl to a seductive woman who pairs red eyeshadow with black leather boots is the visual signifier of Geum Ja's Haan accumulation process. Not only do these visual elements reflect her determination to revenge, but it also acts as a warning sign towards anyone who she came across after being freed. The recurring comment "You look different." made by her former cellmates and old acquaintances not only addresses the change in her appearance but also in her attitude and aura.

The final vengeance created by Jang Cheol Soo in ***Bedevilled*** (2010) once again dug into the Haan of women who live in a heavily patriarchal society like South Korea. Among all three films mentioned, this is the only one that does not portray the archetype of femme fatale. Kim Bok Nam is not a pretty woman. Instead, her husband Man Jong and his aunts usually dehumanize her by associating Bok Nam with animals, by saying to her- 'Eating like a dog.' 'Looking like a pig.' The Haan accumulated within the woman during her entire existence is a result of verbal abuse, violence, and sexual harassment by everyone around her. Nothing's fair in Kim Bok Nam's existence. The only dim light at the end of Bok Nam's tunnel is her friend - the beautiful modernized Hae Won - an inverse of Bok Nam's uncivilized manner and appearance. However, even her closest friend on Earth turns her back when witnessing the death of Bok Nam's daughter and deflecting the truth in a moment of pressure which she's put under by bok Nam's in-laws, which triggers Bok Nam's vengeful rampage. The transformation of Bok Nam is described briefly, not as explicitly established as Geum Ja. After slaughtering all the men and women on the island, the vengeance lady for the first time clumsily makes up her face, donning a dress and high heels. She is neither comfortable with her new appearance, nor with how she feels wearing makeup and feminine clothes. But the enactment of vengeance and the accumulation of Haan have transformed the female protagonist.

#### *MOTHER'S "WON-HAAN": VIOLENCE AS A MEANS TO RESOLVE GRIEF*

In vengeance movies, violence is an expected main course. In ***The Housemaid***, ***Sympathy for Lady Vengeance***, and ***Bedevilled***, this meal is home-cooked with "love" by the mothers. Motherhood is the main theme that is recurrent in the 3 vengeance horrors that we have mentioned above. The loss of biological children has always been the main driving force which makes the vengeful mother to finally unleash their Haan and start venting it out in the form of violence or what Chung Hee Seung termed 'Won-haan': "A Haan of righteous suffering which may lead to justified anger and various actions to bring about justice over a lengthy time, the accumulation of Won-haan in a person tends to become a masochistic and destructive force. But when Won-haan collects in a particular group of persons, it can become a collective, active, and dynamic force." (Chung 14)

To justify this, let's rewind and take a look at the exact frame within which Mrs. Kim, Myung Sook, Geum Ja, or Bok Nam decided to harness their Haan and obtain justice for their children. In ***The Housemaid***, Myung Sook was convinced by Mrs. Kim to abort her child and immediately regretted her decision afterwards. The juxtaposition of her loss of motherhood with the prosperity of Mrs. Kim's motherhood flares the feeling of being dealt with unjustly within her.

Thus, she starts venting out her Haan and kills the middle child of Kim's family. Mourning over their dead son, the grieving Mrs.Kim decides to poison MyungSoo's soup but her impulsive action was easily foreseen by Myung Sook, leading to even more horrific revenge from her. Won-haan in a sense is best understood through the long-planned revenge plot of Geum Ja during her 13 years imprisonment. Her anger and revenge are completely justified when she opens up to her young lover about the truth of how she was wrongfully convicted as the murderer. 19 year old Geum Ja got pregnant at a young age and had nowhere to go. At that time, Mr. Baek was the only one who provided shelter and support for the young student. Naively thinking that he was a good teacher, the man was instead a serial kidnapper and murderer of young children. He forces poor Geum Ja to commit crimes in his stead, threatening violent consequences for Geum Ja's daughter if she did not comply with his orders.

Another aspect of Won-haan shines through the film when Geum Ja shares the sweet nectar of retaliation with the parents of all the kidnapped children whose lives ended painfully under the hands of the kindergarten English teacher, Mr. Baek. 'When Won-haan collects in a particular group of persons, it can become a collective, active, and dynamic force'. (Sung) Following the lead of Geum Ja, the parents democratically vote for the method of torture for Mr. Baek, enacting justice for their sons and daughters. They did become a collective, active, and dynamic force in different ways through which they express the anger, frustration, and sorrow in relation to their Haan. The scene portrays the complete helplessness of Mr. Baek - the serial murderer - in front of a crowd fueled by Haan. The personal traumatic experience of Geum Ja has transcended into a collective pain and then a collective vengeance with discreet violence. The violence in the film of Park Chan Wook was not only there to fulfill the generic role as a feature of vengeance film but also plays an active role in highlighting the physical outlet of Won-haan.

Violence in **Bedeavilled** played two major roles: Triggering Won-haan and releasing Won-haan. The triggering of Won-haan comes from the gendered violence perpetrated by Bok Nam's husband Man Jong and everyone who stands with him on the deserted island. The slaps, the kicks and the verbal abuse have become parts of Bok Nam's routine in her submissive, trapped life; To such an extent that she has surrendered, and stopped defending herself when experiencing abuse and bullying from the close knit and intensely patriarchal inhabitants of the island. The aloofness on her face while she enjoys her mid-day meal knowing that her Man Jong is committing adultery right behind her back displays her hopelessness in this loveless marriage. Such physical and emotional violence inflicted on Bok Nam by her husband and other island inhabitants are the driving force to build up the Haan within her.

Yet, it is not until when such violence is inflicted on her daughter that the real Won-haan truly escapes out of Bok Nam and starts venting. The climax of the film is when Bok Nam teams up with Man Jong's mistress to escape from the living hell. Before they make it to the boat, the two helpless women and Bok Nam's little child are caught red-handed by the infurious husband. Amidst the chaos, the forceful pull of Man Jong has made the little daughter tumbling down, hitting her head onto a sharp-edged rock and being knocked unconscious right away. When Bok Nam is mourning for the death of Yeon Hee, Man Jong and his aunt's minds only focus on accusing her for the child's death in front of the mainland police officer. That's when Bok Nam decides to channel the fury of Won-haan through the violence outlet and sweep down the whole island with the merciless axe held tightly in her hand.

In discussing the inner transformation of these protagonists, we can employ a concept that has been proposed by Anna Fradsen in her working paper where she explores 3 films namely, ***Tell Me Something***, ***Sympathy for Lady Vengeance***, and ***Bedevilled***- and categorizes them as Woman's Revenge Movie - a different form of the more well-known 'Rape/Revenge' trope. In the paper, Anna proposes that Rape/Revenge movies tend to follow a narrative of: Rape -> Transformation -> Revenge. While the three films she analyzed leaned towards a slightly different narrative: Male exploitation -> Transformation -> Revenge. (3, Fradsen). To better extend on this narrative: I would call these films Mother's Revenge Movies: Loss of children -> Transformation -> Revenge. The loss of the children is always placed at the climax of the film that triggers the transformation of the mother. Thus, I will further explore how Haan is embedded in the structure of the film in the next part.

### HAAN IN FILM STRUCTURE: "HAN-PURI" IN CLIMAX AND ENDING

If Haan is a part of Korean culture, then it is natural that Koreans have developed ways for healing from Haan, which is generally referred to as 'Haan-puri' (solving Haan). 'Puri' in Korean means solve, resolve, dissolve, untie, unbind, loosen, unpack, disentangle, unravel, appease, and fulfill. Through Haan-puri, people have been able to release negative emotions in positive and creative ways (Sung Kil Min 16).

Not every vengeance would lead to Haan-puri. There are certain situations that the Haan of one person would never be able to release. The tension in The Housemaid is one great example of how the non-diegetic Haan will always remain until the film ends. At the end of the day, Mrs. Kim was the only one who survived after the seductress had killed two of her children and her husband before killing herself. Mrs. Kim remains in the house, the thing that she took the most pride in.

However, she lost the family which made the house more than just a skeleton of social prosperity. Her house was no longer a home, haunted by the loss of her children and husband.

In ***Bedevilled***, there is a subtle detail of Haan-puri embedded in the ending. After killing everybody on the island Bok Nam seeks to kill her disloyal best friend, but her mission falls terribly short and she dies instead. Her death was one of the most melodramatic moments in the entire course of the film. When she gets killed, Bok Nam is not surprised. Instead, there is a moment of relief passing on her expression.

Among the 3 examined movies, ***Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*** is the one that has embedded 'Haan' in its thematic structure and is also the one which has shown the greatest Haan-puri. There's great detail in the film that signifies the resolution of Geum Ja's Won-haan that has been accumulating for 13 long years. In the opening scene when she was welcomed by a choir after being freed from the cell, Geum Ja was handed white silken tofu as a Korean cultural practice to help her forget the past and move forward in life. In the midst of freed inmates receiving tofu from their family and relatives, the 'new hope' of Geum Ja was handed over by a Catholic priest. Following up was the scene when Geum Ja gave her speech on how she had practiced faith to seek salvation from above, adding a religious color into the general picture of the film. Yet, when the Lady Vengeance stood in front of the tofu plate, she swiftly flipped the plate off, refusing to move on. Only after the social revenge had been conducted, and Mr. Baek had been completely punished, Geum Ja made her own white cake and slapped her face into it while holding her daughter dearly. In an interview featured on [fareastfilms.com](http://fareastfilms.com), director of the Vengeance Trilogy reveals his personal perception on the idea of giving Geum Ja tofu. "*The tofu is salvation from a supreme being, which she rejects, while the cake, after the climax, is judgement and forgiveness for herself by herself.*" Thus, director Park Chan Wook also confirmed that the Lady Vengeance does not follow Buddhist or Christian, she simply followed the "Geum Ja religion". Discussing under the cultural lens of Haan, Geum Ja finally gained the redemption that she has been seeking for all those years after ending Mr. Baek and obtaining justice for the families that have lost their child. The ending scene signifies that all the 'Haan' has been 'Puri', and underwent a conversion from Won-haan to Jeong-haan. After all, the sacrifice is worth it.

**CONCLUSION**

Haan is not diegetically voiced in the films *The Housemaid*, *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, and *Bedevilled*; However, we cannot deny its representation in the film's thematic structure and visual elements. The Haan in these 3 films which starred female protagonists all shared the themes of motherhood and sacrifice. The Haan accumulation, the Haan-puri in the narrative, and the structural development of the character are all connected to their maternal aspects. This confirms that female representation, in Korean films in general, and in vengeance horror movies in particular, is still closely associated with the concept of motherhood and maternity. Only the loss of children can lead the mother to commit such horrors beyond imagination.

In the story of *The Housemaid*, we can see a highly polarized assumption of Korean women. There will forever be a Good Mother and there will also exist a seductress – a Femme Fatale that mercilessly breaks your home. However, in the latter films, we see that lines between the two ideas are more blurred to be well-fitted with the social setting. Geum Ja in *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance* and Bok Nam in *Bedevilled* all represent the new idea of a woman: They can both fulfill the role of a good mother by protecting and providing for their child, and employ their sexual agency to achieve whatever they desire. However, the instincts of the good mother is also what triggers Haan, when they fail to protect their children, as we see in the case of Mrs. Kim, Myung Sook, Geum Ja, or Bok Nam.

The social commentary in these films also displays how one of the reasons why these women are pushed to the wall is the internalized patriarchy created by the Confucian belief. It is not shown vividly in the case of The Housemaid but it is manifested through a by-product of the system that worships men, and breeds female rivalry. "The only possible way for a woman to achieve success in this culture is to have a son and raise him to be a respectful member of society, and to produce heirs of his own." (Sung). In the Housemaid, Mrs. Kim and Mr. Kim all wait in anticipation for the baby, hoping for it to be a boy. Even Myung Sook, when finding out that she is pregnant, also assumes the baby to be a male one. It is the female competitiveness that has to lead to the killing game between the two females, and a loop of 'vengeance'.

In *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*, although the patriarchal system is not the main subject to blame, the root cause of many families' sorrow and despair is a male teacher – one of the three "leaders" according to the Confucian patriarchy traditional ideals.

The idealized leaders “King-Teacher-Father” are the one who are expected to set high moral standards for their followers: The Citizen – The Student – The Children. (Sleziak 31) Such high-moral expectation set for teachers has aided Mr. Baek in getting away with his crime, even paving way for him to committ more perverted child murders after blaming the wrongful conviction on Geum Ja – the former student his former student. The horrendous crime committed by a Confucianist leader like Mr. Baek subtly implies the issues caused by the Confucian patriarchy in Korean society that has pushed several marginalized people, especially women like Geum Ja into desperation.

Finally, **Bedevilled** is the vengeance horror that has done the best job in commenting on the harsh reality of Korean society where every woman from the urban to the rural area, all suffer from toxic masculinity, sexual and physical abuse. While Bok Nam represents the poor women with miserable living conditions in the outskirts of society, Hae Won is the typical urban woman who come across cases of sexual and physical misconducts everyday. Similar to **Sympathy for Lady Vengeance**, **Bedevilled** displays an anomaly of law and a redundant legal system that never sides with the victims.

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CHALCHITRA DARPARAN

SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

# HORROR AND HER LOT:

THE BURDEN OF SEXUAL  
SIGNIFICATION ON THE CHUDAIL  
FIGURE

SREYA CHATTERJEE

"Main nahi chahti ki tumahri dost mujhe chudail samjhe" – Natasha (1)

"Mujhe laga tha ki tum chudail ho" – Bobo. (2)

The first dialogue is from a scene in **Zindagi na Milegi Dobara** (2011), where Kalki Koechlin's character takes a break from playing controlling fiancé, and finally concedes to having dinner with the lads to avoid being typecast negatively. The second is from yet another Kalki Koechlin film, **Ek Thi Daayan** (2013), where her character Lisa confronts Bobo, who is desperate to make amends for his cold behaviour towards her. When asked to explain himself, he only half-jokingly replies that he had feared she was a *chudail*. As seen in these two films belonging to entirely different genres, the fear of the *chudail* is a common motif across many Bollywood movies. In contexts spanning from horror to romance to potboiler 'punchnamas', the *chudail* is a palpable presence. However, she is very different from the lay *pret / aatma / bhoot / pishaach* et all, for the *chudail* almost exclusively terrorises the men in her purview. Used to signify a horrific anomaly even in normative settings and everyday conversations, 'chudail' has sexual connotations, which either pejorate her as an insecure/jilted woman desperate for sexual satiation, or express a fear towards her ravenous appetite. This paper intends to map the chronological association of sexual signifiers with the *chudail* in popular Bollywood horror films, and analyse how the range of significations reinstate patriarchal parameters of female sexuality. Given the rapidly shifting signifiers surrounding the 'witch' across time, texts and genres, although the terms '*chudail*' and 'witch' are used interchangeably in this paper, the purview of the latter is limited to its Bollywood iconographies.

### WITCH: WOMAN, OTHER AND HYSTERIA

Any reading of popular Bollywood horror would be incomplete without a mention of the Ramsay Brothers. Pioneers in the genre, they effectively "took the world around us, turned it upside down and created a mythology of their own." The figure of the *chudail* appears in this mythaverse in the 1988 film **Veerana**, which is essentially an exaggerated, parodied depiction of the inherent fear surrounding expressions of female sexuality. There is almost no allusion at play here, the truth is laid bare outright. *Chudails* like Nakita and Jasmine are to be feared not despite their charms, but because of them. Sexuality itself is vilified, because it is sexuality that draws everyone from the car mechanic to housekeeper Raghu to even the pragmatic Hemant towards the witch. An array of signifiers is invoked to define her insatiable sexuality – from laypeople's comparisons of Jasmine with venomous snakes gulping men whole, to even the family psychiatrist helplessly declaring that Jasmine, a terrifying death incarnate, "*is ghar ke har aadmi ko dheere dheere apni shikar bana degi*".

1 Translation: "I don't want your friends to think I'm a witch."

2 "I thought you were a witch."

As hysteria multiplies manifold, it becomes incumbent on the family patriarch Thakur Saab to curb this excessive hunger in his deviant daughter. He does, however live in denial for the longest time, and his paternalistic ideal of the virginal daughter makes him say, "Main janti hu tum mere vishwash ki tarah Pavitra aur nirdosh ho".<sup>3</sup> It is not just Jasmine's culpability in crimes that troubles him, any blemish on the daughter's sexual reputation would prove as damaging to Thakur Saab's self-image. To be deemed the protector of the people, it is very important to undo these associations, to replace the aberrant witch with the genteel woman. Incidentally, the car mechanic too agrees to a liaison with Jasmine with an innate faith that he can fix her. In a dialogue heavily inflected with raunchy subtext, he claims to have "fixed" many a giant car in his day, the implicit promise being that whatever is the matter with her (which Raghu simplifies as a perpetual "*saathi ke talash*") ,<sup>4</sup> it will only take the mastery of the right man to turn this sexual anomaly into the normative prototype.

Subsequently, the moment after their encounter sees Jasmine and the mechanic in post-coital indolence. With the bedsheet strategically covering and uncovering her torso, she lies asleep, apparently sated, and her body is vested with the customary signifiers associated with the beloved - lascivious, but just for the lover, and modest - for she is respectfully shielded from the audience's prying gaze. However, this momentary lull is disrupted as she wakes. In face of her unending appetite, the mechanic's loverboy credentials are summarily threatened, and he is petrified. The façade of the beautiful woman crumbles, and in her place is a horrid *chudail* with ravenous hunger, literally gnawing into the helpless man. In a milieu where voluntary feminine sexual expression is tantamount to aggression, Jasmine, by not subscribing to the role of the reticent counterpart in intercourse, infringes on the stereotypically masculine role of the aggressor. This belittles the man, and the shame of sexual ineptitude turns to abject horror.

This particular dynamic manifests in a scene where a stranger in a car offers Jasmine a ride, thinking her a hitchhiker. In any other setting, this scene could potentially bear the threat of sexual violence, especially as the man makes unsolicited remarks about her dress and appearance. But because the viewer is aware of the inverted power dynamic of this particular situation, they can anticipate how differently the scene might play out. The man, when denied the usual role of aggressor, finally sees himself at the other end of the line, and his palpable fear of victimhood is consonant with the lack of sexual prowess. So, the fear of the *chudail* appears cognate with the masculine hysteria around unbridled female sexuality.

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3 "I know you are as chaste and blameless as I believe you to be."

4 "Search for a companion"

The *chudail* must be stripped of her unnatural beauty, for female sexuality is only apprehensible as far as it is malleable with the man's whims. The moment it enunciates on its own terms, it becomes an abhorrent thing with positively deadly consequences. The monstrous green face must leap out of Nakita's comely exterior to make her expendable. Her beauty is dispensed with, and she holds no currency in sexual transactions anymore.

This hysteria in **Veerana** is taken to greater heights in **Chudail** (1997), where the freshly witch-ified Sundari Devi is shown to serially seduce and kill men in her bid to gain eternal youth. There are marked similarities between the two films. In both cases, the woman belongs to a prestigious family, and Thakur Saab of **Veerana** is one-upped by the zamindar - Sundari Devi's ailing father in **Chudail**. It is for the sake of her father's convalescence that Sundari agrees to meet with the sage under clearly dubious circumstances, although the question whether she is truly that gullible is conveniently left unanswered. As the daughter cavorts with the man, the father feebly walks out of his room. Despite battling life-threatening ailments, it is his daughter's rambunctious frolicking that finally forces his heart to give out, and disillusioned of the myth of the 'pavitra-nirdosh'-virginal daughter, he promptly rolls down the stairs. Sundari, bereaved of a father-figure, is taken under the wing of the same sage, who corrupts her with the knowledge of dark magic, and the secret to attaining everlasting youth by having sex with thirteen men. But soon, his dormant morality rises to surface. The ascetic, being a man of god, surpasses the social dogma of men. Even in their lovemaking scene, Sundari is invoked before an idol, and in the frenzied orgy of dancing bodies clothed in ritual gear, it is implied that whatever is happening has the covert approval of a higher power. Except, this open-mindedness can never extend to the ascetic's companion. It is all very well to manipulate a hapless girl to provide her the tutelage of "*tantric shakti*".<sup>5</sup> But when it comes to reaping the benefits of the power, he cannot be swayed: "Tum meri priyatama ho. Mai yeh kabhi bardash nahi kar sakta ki koi tumhe chhu bhi le."<sup>6</sup> Despite being as well-versed in dark magic, Sundari must not be given the agency to do with her body as she pleases, because hers is still the body of a woman. A fallen woman, perhaps, but a woman nonetheless. It truly becomes the body of a witch when she makes her first kill, stabbing the ascetic in sexual congress, thus swiftly upending the power dynamic that held them together.

Consequently, mistress in her own turf, Sundari has to bear the brunt of Chacha Ji's righteous indignation, "Kuch to khandaan ka izzat aur maryada ka khayal kiya hota."<sup>7</sup> When she proves indomitable either way, she is brutally killed and locked in a coffin, for as Chacha Ji says, "Humein is kalank ko mathe se utaarna hoga."<sup>8</sup>

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5 "Tantric Powers."

6 "You are my beloved. I cannot bear the idea of anybody else touching you."

7 "You should have at least cared for the respect and honour of your family."

8 "We must get rid of this blemish (on our reputation)."



Thus, the shameful family secret is buried. It is important to note here, that even if Sundari had not been a chudail, the trajectory of her story would not have changed. It is unconceivable that the landlord's daughter would have met a kinder fate had she been just sleeping around with strangers and not murdering them after. Her body is not her own, it is also the receptacle of the family's honour. Hence, the vilification for being a witch only expedites her death.

### THE HEROINE-HARLOT BINARY

However, that is not to say that these movies propound women sans sexuality as the norm. Rather, it is indicated that sexuality is permissible when assimilated into the heteropatriarchal family unit. There are however, clear markers of acceptable sexual behaviours, which gives rise to a heroine-harlot binary, a recurring trope in various horror movies. In **Veerana**, Sahila is the heroine to Jasmine's harlot. Sahila's is a body vested with sexual possibilities, as the viewers anticipate a romantic sub-plot in her entry with Satish. And surely enough, she soon has to play the damsel in distress, chased by one of Baba's murderous disciples, and nothing but the machismo of hero Hemant can save the day. Her first line to Hemant goes, "Main ek larki hoon, takleef me hoon, mujhe madat chahiye."<sup>9</sup> The courtship that follows shows the way the autonomous female sexuality is moulded and rendered acceptable via phallocentric amorous rites. They engage in the usual song-and-dance routine, and Hemant's "*Dil bole lag ja gale*"<sup>10</sup> is dutifully met with a coy "*Na re baba na na na*".<sup>11</sup> As they dance around in an amusement park, the parody of child's play shows the heroine navigating her emergent womanhood with society-sanctioned naivete. Subsequently, the hero acts as an initiator and interpreter acquainting Sahila with the truth of her sexual self.

In **Chudail**, once Sundari has lost heroine status in the newly-gained role of the vamp, enters Seema - reporter, archaeology aficionado and (but obviously, as a heroine must be) a dancer. Even though she is quite outspoken, even flirtatious, her exchanges with the hero Umesh differentiates her role as a heroine from that of Sundari as the harlot. For one, even though Seema initiates several conversations and is surprisingly agile on her feet in itsy-bitsy cholis, her relationship with Umesh is seen as the precursor to their marriage - "Oh Uncle, I love him. I really love him", she confesses after a few days of torrid courtship - and Uncle readily acquiesces to the union. Thus, it is quite alright to be a heroine and have a few suggestive dances in the night, as long as it leads to marriage - the culmination of the respectable woman's sexual adventures. For Sundari, however, copulation is definitely not for the sake of matrimony.

<sup>9</sup> "I am a girl, I'm in distress, and I need help."

<sup>10</sup> "My heart calls for an embrace."

<sup>11</sup> "No, no, better not, no, no, no."

It is copulation for copulation's sake, that too only for Sundari's sake, because for the man, copulation ends with death. In this parasitic leeching off of youth, the partner gains nothing from the sexual (non)transaction. Religion, naturally, is constantly evoked throughout the films to reinstate this binary, but the esoteric devotional practices by Chudail's ascetic or Veerana's Baba does not qualify in this classification. Only Hinduism unadulterated, from 'Om' symbols to the (quite phallic) trident can stop the witch in her tracks. Nakita too, has to prostrate herself before Shiva, worshipped as a phallus in many cultures, and then the unbridled female sexuality is reigned in. Normalcy is restored, Sundari is killed off, and the affianced Seema and Umesh emerge from the pit, attesting to the tenacity of the heroine's normative sexual union over the harlot's transgressive desires.

**Pari (2018)** too incorporates this binary, wherein Rukhsana and Piyali effectively act as foils to each other. Although Rukhsana does seem like the doe-eyed heroine in desperate need of saving ("Bechari ka koi nahi hai ma",<sup>12</sup> Babai says), it soon becomes clear that she is not as victimised in the world she inhabits, if still not completely acclimatised to it. It would be, however, a disservice not to acknowledge that Pari is an attempt at flipping generic conventions. Even though Qasim Ali cautions Babai about Rukhsana's true nature : "Kha jayegi sab ko ek ek karke",<sup>13</sup> and the overused metaphors of consumption become trite with every reiteration, Pari underscores that the locus of power always lies with men like Qasim, a representative of the influential, affluent intelligentsia. It is women like Rukhsana who are relegated to the periphery, that their 'differently-abled' bodies are not assets but instruments for survival, borne out of the desperate need to stave off predatory invasions. Pari inscribes the body of the *chudail* (*kalapori*) as one of systemic abuse. Extant power structures brutalise her at every juncture, for the witch is brought to life without her consent (by members of the Oladhchakra cult), and then subsequently bludgeoned to death (by the Qayamat Andolan clan). It is against this backdrop that Rukhsana becomes a force of reclaiming sexual agency, a force so subversive that it highlights the oppressive structures subjugating heroine Piyali in turn.

The film begins with an interaction between Babai and Piyali, where they meet over tea to discuss their wedding. Even though they are all alone on the rooftop, the audience is aware the exchange is unfolding under parental supervision, as is wont in a conservative arranged marriage setting. Driving home after, there is a tonal shift as the background score foreshadows the meeting with Rukhsana – sung from the perspective of a vagrant (Hassan Raja), who sings of his perpetual homelessness not as an exile but as freedom in the face of a transient life.

12 "The poor thing has nobody by her side."

13 "She'll eat you all up one by one."

Whereas Piyali is just the right ‘homely’ fit for the middle-class, “nervous type” Babai, Rukhsana appeals to the loner in him who had no friends and spent days under the bed, frightful of guests. But Pari does not limit these two characters to their relational identities with Babai. In fact, in the climactic meeting between the two women, the intermediary male presence is completely nullified, and even seems unwelcome – it could very much pass the Bechdel test, although no verbal interchange transpires between them.

But **Pari** validates the binary in showing their vastly different ways of negotiating personal sexual choices. While Piyali, a nurse, acts as the nurturer, a role stereotypically associated with femininity, Rukhsana is violent, capable of momentary compassion but finally overruled by an instinctual ruthlessness – poignantly depicted in the scene where she caresses a dog only to maul it the next second. The women’s approach towards their romantic relationship with Babai is also comparable with their personal characteristics. While Piyali is mostly subdued, terribly embarrassed after her sole advancement in his room is rebuffed, Rukhsana aggressively asserts her feelings till Babai gives in. In antagonism, she is vociferous, stating outright her misgivings about Piyali: “*Usse baat mat karna.*”<sup>14</sup> Even though Piyali stands up for her freedom to leave Babai, she is coaxed back to a second confrontation simply because she is held culpable for her ex-fiance’s mental breakdown. This malleability characterises Piyali’s equation with her previous partner as well, when she agrees to a late, traumatizing abortion, not just to acquiesce to the man’s demands, but also because it is improper to birth a child without a father, something Rukhsana has no such qualms about.

Rukhsana’s impropriety frees her from the shackles of responsibility/respectability that binds a heroine, her harlotry is immensely self-affirming. Shunned by the world, and even the very father of her child, she stands indefatigable and viciously retaliates against the oppressive forces. Her opposition is so momentous that it changes the very core of her being, and sheer will power stands guard before her physiology, till a child is born untainted by the Ifrit bloodline. The childbirth scene is an acknowledgement of the other woman from across both sides of the binary. There, the heroine and harlot gain cognizance of the signifiers that only limit and bind them further in order to contrast and classify. In an act of empathetic collaboration, they establish a ground of commonality between these two identity categories, and successfully erode the existing division.

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14 “Do not talk to her.”

**UNNATURAL, UNMATERIAL, UN-WOMAN**

But **Pari** is clearly an anomaly in depicting the *chudail* as a maternal figure. The common sexual signifiers associated with the witch are anything but, for female sexuality is not limited to congress with a partner. It also falls under the remit of normative gender roles, and for many, motherhood is considered a definitive, even the ultimate mode of female sexual expression. For example, in **Makdee** (2002), the eponymous *chudail* is no mother. Conversely, by killing her husband, she severs her ties to motherhood. Entirely devoid of all maternal instinct, she terrorizes the sole surrogate daughter she might ever have – for the brave heart Chunni calls her Amma during their interactions – and when it comes to her nephews, she dispenses with them as easily. It is by utilizing the garb of the *chudail* that no demands of maternal empathy can be made from her. This is emancipation as well, for unlike her contemporaries who play the role of the witch to seek sexual companionship on their own terms, **Makdee** plays it to escape being embroiled in one.

The bad mother-good mother divide, as seen from fairy-tale archetypes, simply reinstate the heroine-harlot binary in its watered-down version, made palatable to children who are ignorant of sexuality but must be educated of normative and subversive gender roles. One such instance is found in the popular bedtime story anthology *Thakurmar Jhooli* (1907) – Bengali for ‘Grandmother’s Bag (of Stories)’. Across several tales, there appears the characters of Suyorani and Duyorani, two queens of a kingdom – the first a paragon of virtue and maternal love, subservient to a fault, dutifully playing second fiddle to the king; and then the latter – devious, insolent, often conniving to carve out a fleshier deal for herself in the royal hierarchy. While Suyorani, still childless, wastes away in isolation, Duyorani utilizes this window to ascend the ranks as the king’s favourite consort. Suyorani plods on, undeterred by this lack of marital companionship, and it takes a hermit’s magic concoction cum fertility potion to finally give her a purpose to life. But even when the prince Dalimkumar arrives, Duyorani refuses to cede her newly-earned place, and ploys to kill him. Variations of this archetype exist across various texts, and in every case, the woman sans natural maternal instincts is read as a deviant non-woman. Filicide of course, is considered the most heinous of crimes a woman can commit. She who goes against every instinct of womanhood, taking her “milk for gall”[1] is ‘unnatural’ to the core. Makdee, by being the very antithesis of the mother, ceases to be the woman and embodies the *chudail* in the popular imagination.

**Ek Thi Daayan** (2013) also repeats this trope. Diana aka the ‘daayan’ is shown as an invasive presence in the life of Bobo the magician, one part of the self-sufficient father-daughter-son trio.

Bereft of his mother at a young age, Bobo believes hell to be chockfull with obnoxious figures like the spoilsport neighborhood uncles, and of course, the “*gandi waali stepmoms*”.<sup>15</sup> Against this backdrop, although Diana initially enters their life as a governess, her actions are interpreted by Bobo as less of a surrogate mother and more as their father’s companion. Furthermore, the very first time the children discover this liaison, the father comes out in a state of undress, with Diana in tow, dressed in his shirt. It is primarily this sexual dynamic that foregrounds Diana’s presence in the family. An intruder, she not just usurps the maternal role, but also eats into the children’s share of their father’s affection. Thus follows Bobo’s honest confession: “*Lag raha tha is chudail ko gaari se dhakka de du.*”<sup>16</sup>

As iterated, the *chudail* does not only generate sexual significations, she also embodies them. So it is that Bobo analyses from the text ‘*Kaal Daayan aur Shaistaan*’, “*chudail ki asli rup khubsurat aur darawna hota hai.*”<sup>17</sup> These apparently contradictory traits must coexist, to simultaneously lure the father and drive away with the children, and so it does in Diana. Dr Palit, the psychiatrist too analyses Bobo as a child traumatised by abandonment issues, who perceives the new stepmother as a threat. Palit is a foil to Bobo, as he inhabits the world of reason, while the magician reigns in the world of make-believe. The intent of magic is to deliberately mystify and obfuscate, while Palit, working as a mesmeriser, unearths the conundrums buried deep in people’s psyche. Given this antagonistic dimension between their worldviews, Palit’s analysis runs parallelly with Bobo’s, but as is always the norm of the genre, the medical counter-discourse is only invoked to be ceremonially quashed when the doctor himself is killed by Diana in the end.

Subsequently, within the space of the movie, generic expectations dictate that Diana’s otherwise very commonplace actions (example – playful banter with Misha “So sweet I could just eat you up” during a game of hide-and-seek) be seen as a grotesque parody of maternal affection. Just how deeply the *chudail* is entrenched within a paradigm of sexual significations is evinced when Palit, the veritable man of science, invokes a myth that a person who sleeps with a *chudail* can never fall asleep ever again. Indicating his humdrum life could do with some premium reason-defying witch action, he guffaws, “All my girlfriends are getting old.” What this shows is that although Palit does not believe in the veracity of a witch’s existence, he is aware of the lore associated with her, and that even if the *chudail* is just a hoax in medical science, she does exist as a discursive, sociocultural entity. When Bobo grows up, his abandonment issues are projected on to the orphan Zubeen, whose life he suspects is in danger from the Canada-returned *chudail* Lisa.

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15 “Disgusting stepmoms”

16 “I felt like pushing the witch out of the car.”

17 “The witch’s real image is beautiful and terrifying.”

Even as the theory is revealed as erroneous (only in that Bobo had suspected the wrong person), his belief that the chudail can never be a mother remains intact, as Tamara confesses that even though she loves Zubeen immensely, she must sacrifice him to sustain her powers. Motherhood must always be usurped by self-interest, which can only be sustained by wrecking the familial unit of father, mother and child.

In *Ek Thi...*, the *chudail* can only be defeated by cutting of her plait, the source of her powers. This too has connotations of sexual violence, given that hair has been consistently associated with female sexuality[2]. Although there is the caveat that the cutting off must be done by an innocent soul, neither young Bobo nor Zubeen are ignorant of the associations entwined with the *chudail*. If the former is well-trained in the realm of the preternatural from a young age, Zubeen has been taught from Bobo himself, and therefore although they seem to bear no agency in generating the sexual significations of the *chudail's* body, they are complicit in perpetuating it. As children, they reiterate the social rejection of the witch in the role of a mother.

### *WITCHERY, A PERFORMANCE*

The aging *chudail* in **Makdee**, however, seems an exception to the seductive witch trope. A hag dressed in dowdy robes with an assortment of odd accessories, she is meant to be grotesque throughout. There is no attempt on her part to don flimsy clothing to lure others into her lair, even the song and dance routine that follows every time she makes a kill is terrifying rather than titillating. But the climax of the film reveals that it is not just the beauty of the *chudail* that can act as an effective trap for unsuspecting men. The entire construct of the witch, which includes *Makdee*'s repellent hairdo and horrifying visage, is the trap. What **Makdee** does so brilliantly is that it highlights the performative aspect of witchery. Rather than an intrinsic "witch-like" quality, it is how one plays the role to perfection that makes a *chudail*. The film reveals that there cannot be an essential quality that distinguishes the chudail from the laywoman. Even though some other films depict the witch as an anomaly from a physiological point of view, **Makdee** reveals that it is not in the being but in the seeing of the witch that she first comes into existence. The *chudail* is exposed to the collective gaze, and it is only when the arbiters of normalcy sound the judgement of her witchery, that she comes to life. This of course is not isolated to Bollywood, the "witch" has almost exclusively existed as a discursive category rather than a biological one. Till date, cases of gendered violence[3] attest to the fact that the signifier 'witch' belongs to the domain of public opinion. She is completely outside the social purview but always subjected to public scrutiny. **Makdee** utilizes this very discursive space by using her grotesqueness as a disguise, and generates intense curiosity around her person.

By creating an aura of proscription around herself, she drags in sceptics like Masterji and rebels like Kalloo. In a setting where she is simultaneously invisibilized and ubiquitous, she efficiently serves her interest.

**Stree** (2018) too engages with the performative aspect of witchery, wherein the chudail is encoded with and manifests the sexual significations of a woman, albeit a woman gone wrong. The unnamed *chudail* played by Shraddha Kapoor and the ubiquitous Stree both embody the traditional tropes associated with the witch – her voracious hunger (*shikar pe aane wali hai woh*),<sup>18</sup> the sexually suggestive nature of her advances ( “*sirf vastra chhorti hai*”)<sup>19</sup> and her extraordinary, unnatural and presumably unreal beauty (“*swapnasundari ke tarah*”).<sup>20</sup> The *chudail*’s sexuality, rather than a mere vessel for male desire, is weaponized as a tool in her cat-and-mouse charade. But underneath it all, what transpires in Chanderi for three days a year is an elaborate performance. The *chudail*, despite being an inherently transgressive presence, must abide by the laws of the game, for only that would validate her existence in the social structure. Stree (which stands for woman and/or wife) is seen not just as a woman, she is Everywoman. She is femininity distilled to its very basic needs (as enumerated by social perception), and subsequently magnified, for the *chudail* is not just a mythology, but also a cautionary tale. So Stree’s role as *chudail* is contingent on a skilful handling of feminine performativity. It is only by being complicit in the performance that she will be granted the deference of a spectacle.

Much like *Pari*, **Stree** reveals that it is not the *chudail* who inhabits the powerful centre of the discursive space. By limiting the bounds of what act is permissible and what not, she is conveniently predefined and confined to the role tailored for her by the likes of Vicky. Thus, by being complicit, the Stree is reinstated in the ironic category of the powerless aggressor – she has agency, but only as much as is allotted to her, the potential violence of her actions is always circumscribed by the intricacies of ritual – for as Rudra explains: “*Stree purusho ki tarah zabardasti nahi karti.*”<sup>21</sup> As a monster, she is perfectly domesticated. In repeated acts of complete self-sabotage, the Stree sticks to the polite routine of “*Kal aana*”<sup>22</sup> and goes on her nightly hunts with the coyness of a maiden, never initiating an exchange until she has explicit consent. Even as an aggressor, her sexual expressions must adhere to a feminine code of conduct, for as Stree her desires metonymically stand for that of all the women of Chanderi. In fact, it is the very lack of a culmination of the normative woman’s desires that has led to the existence of the Stree, as her origin story states she was a courtesan – thus on the fringes of respectable society – and just when she seeks to be indoctrinated within a normative union, she is bereft of her lover.

18 “She’ll be coming to hunt.” 22 “O Stree, Come Tomorrow” – read the walls of Chanderi.

19 “(She) only leaves (her victim’s) clothes behind.”

20 “Ethereally beautiful, as in a dream.”

21 “Unlike men, Stree ( the woman) never forces herself on others.”

The sexual significations associated with the chudail in most Bollywood films follows two major streams – 1. That of the hypersexualised vamp, and 2. The abandoned woman. These two streams coalesce in *Stree*, with the latter explaining and fulfilling the former condition. But both, in fact underscore the chudail's inability to stay away from men. Therefore, speculations about her condition ("*koi majboori hogi...aise koi maa-ki pet se chudail banke ate hai?*")<sup>23</sup> only serve to reinforce her helplessness ("*adhoori suhag raat pura karna chahti hai*").<sup>24</sup> In this all-roads-lead-to-phallus explanation, the chudail's fearsome performance is thus always inflected by victimhood – she is terrifying, but at the heart of this terror lies loss, and elicits paternalistic sympathy.

Vicky's intervention reinterprets this performance – he suggests it is not attention the chudail wants, but an acknowledgement. "*Naayi bharat ka chudail*",<sup>25</sup> as he defines her, would not be appeased with a three-day carnivalesque [4] subversion of gender roles (as seen in scenes when men roam the streets of Chanderi in sarees, and their wives advise them not to stay out late at night), they demand people to take cognisance of their situation, "*pyaar*"<sup>26</sup> cannot suffice, until it is liberally supplemented with "*ijrat*".<sup>27</sup> So the next year, the walls read "*O stree, Raksha karna*"<sup>28</sup> But this deification of the stree is as much a fallacious measure as any. This problematic trope of 'devi-fication' only denies women legitimate social space to exist with the rights, frailties and follies of fellow humans. The *chudail* of the 'naya Bharat' is actually the unnamed visitor, who rejects such stray handouts of a pedestal or two, and candidly confesses, "*Lagta hai mere bhagwaan se zyada banti nahi.*"<sup>29</sup> Chanderi needs to re-evaluate the conventional tenets of masculinity, as Rudra advises, "*Sher mat bano, lomdi bano.*"<sup>30</sup> In some ways, Vicky too subverts the conventional expectations of heroic machismo. Being involved in a somewhat effete profession, he is a far-cry from the hypermasculine heroes tugging at cholis and bursting into songs. An endearing local figure, he is at home in a gynocentric milieu, and the women too find themselves comfortable enough in his presence to be given the famous Vicky once-over for measurements. But what *Stree* does so wittily is that it dismantles the saviour trope entirely by highlighting the inefficacy of Vicky's intervention. Vicky provides a counter-myth to the mythology of the *Stree*, but his vision is still effectively blinkered. Even as the myths surrounding the chudail proliferate and remould themselves, the identity category of the transgressive woman finds new classifications to latch on to. The new-age *chudail* is not driven by an intense desire for men/marital union, her quest is entirely governed by personal motives. The film spends hours deliberating on which woman fits the mould of the witch. It does not, however, get to decode the entirely revamped mythology associated with the newest prototype. Perhaps she remains unnamed because Chanderi does not know what to call her, yet

23 "There must have been some compulsion – can anybody just come out of the womb as a witch?"

24 "...wants to enjoy her unfinished honeymoon." 25 "The witch of New India."

26 'Love' 27 'Respect'

28 "O Woman, protect us." 29 "I don't seem to get along that well with God."

30 "Don't be the lion, be the fox (in a herd) instead."

**REWRITINGS - RE-READING THE CHUDAIL AS AN OTHER 'OTHER'**

These slipping signifiers ensure that the identity category of the chudail keeps moulding and remoulding to accommodate newer interpretations. Much like Stree, recent films in the genre have attempted re-reading the chudail. In this vein, Roohi (2021) successfully muddles the woman-witch binary by vesting the female protagonist's body with the sexual significations of both the heroine and the harlot at the same time. Roohi and Afza, respectively the victim/vessel and the witch/symbiont, cohabit the same form, and in their individual manifestations they generate a range of discursive paradigms surrounding their bodies. To appease the male gaze, Roohi plays the normative damsel-in-distress. She is the quintessential girl-next-door in need of boy-next-door-turned-saviour to rescue her from her own self, or rather, her other self. She lisps her *sotto voce* requests, barely looking Bhawra Pandey in the eye. Acutely conscious of the transgressive nature of her body that keeps mutating to accommodate Afza, she is given to fits of sobbing, and even tries throwing herself off of a cliff, a tried-and-tested remedial measure for girls who transcend their physical/sexual purview. But because she also embodies Afzah, she is capable of excessive gluttony and violence. The body of the woman, alternately housing the monstrous chudail, is thus identified by two rapidly changing, contending discourses, as read by the normative male gaze. In a hilarious banter Bhawra spells out this slippery-slope of witch/woman by exclaiming, "*Yeh Emily Rose ko Simran samajh rahi tu.*"<sup>31</sup>

But the traditional trope of loving the woman 'just the way she is' is foiled by the presence of Kattanni, who poses a counter-narrative to Bhawra's interpretation. Marked from the beginning as the customary second fiddle, the over-weight, slightly obtuse companion Kattanni exists only to play out a comic trope and establish Bhawra's status as the hero. The hero analyses the love interest, and taking a look at her glaring flaws, either sets out to rectify them, or simply make peace with them. The Bridget Joness of the world must eventually get out of their spanx and reveal a still very attractive, if slightly more realistic body. An uglier flaw must be dealt with more punitively, so that the movie ends with the heroine regaining her comely/homely/bubbly credentials. But the very idea of "just the way you are" is complicated in Roohi, when Kattanni successfully subverts Bhawra's idea of the "normal", and thereby also challenges the larger social consensus that it is the witch who encroaches on the normative body of the woman. An unabashed admirer of all things otherworldly, be it too strange or even grotesque for the rest, Kattanni considers a situation where Afza is as legitimate a manifestation of being as Roohi. Emerging from this context, an attempt to 'cure' Roohi of Afza only translates to the erasure of the latter.

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<sup>31</sup> "You've mistaken Emily Rose (Exorcism of ... (2005) ) for Simran (DDL (1995) )."

**Roohi** does not always attempt to radically alter the range of sexual significations surrounding the chudail, it only hints at the permeability of the categories of heroine and harlot. So it is that the DDLJ-inspired '*palat*' scene parodies the very generic expectations of a romance, and the lingering glance left by Afza simultaneously elicits a fawning smile from Kattanni and a horrified exclamation from Bhawra. But Kattanni's expression of adoration is not devoid of the normative significations as seen in other heteropatriarchal courtships. Although content with a platonic relationship with Afza, he soon exhibits a proprietorial air. This display of typical masculine ownership shows Kattanni's attraction for what it is – a fantasy concocted to complement his self-image, hardly more benign than that of Bhawra. If Roohi is to grace local hero Bhawra's sense of self as the saviour of the damsel in distress, Kattani's Elon-Musk-praising space-girl loving self would be validated by the presence of the preternatural chudail, misunderstood by the rest of the world, but valued by his discerning eye capable of seeing beyond the confines of Baagadpur.

In this scheme of things, Roohi and Afza are reduced to "*meri wali*"<sup>32</sup> and "*teri wali*"<sup>33</sup> and their body forms the site of a testosterone charged pissing contest, where both the men eagerly mark territories while warding off the other's advances. Roohi/Afza soon becomes the 'bhabi', and as these relational identities gain precedence, their individual agencies are rendered marginal. It is only the very end of the narrative that puts a feminist spin on things, that this erasure is addressed. Roohi and Afza, so far pitted as contentious bodies, coalesce their existences, and decide to marry each other. Afza and Roohi share an acute awareness of each other's weaknesses. As Afza says, "*Tera takat hu main*"<sup>34</sup> to the reticent and submissive Roohi, she is also aware how she is perpetually disadvantaged in a society that values women on the basis of their marital status and relational identities. Afza, a mudiyapairi, the *chudail* par excellence, cuts a terrifying but also pitiful figure for she is driven by the sole desire of male companionship, as in the case of **Stree**. Her only dream being that of marriage, she is a vindictive *chudail* whose violence towards men only undercuts her ceaseless attraction towards them. Even as she lashes out against the patriarchy, she is effectively subjugated by it. Despite her ability to incite terror, she is pejorated by the male gaze, as becomes clear in a conversation where her very tenacity ("*piccha chhuranu mushkil*")<sup>35</sup> is equated with the neediness of a nagging wife. Roohi and Afza's union amounts, foremost, to their existence as an autonomous being, transcending the binaries that seek to dissect and categorize them. It would also be remiss to overlook the scene where a social worker, disguised as a witch-hunter, raises awareness about wrongfully suspecting and abusing women as witches. By addressing the scientific discourse surrounding the figure of the witch, Roohi delegitimizes the range of significations it confers on the *chudail*, thereby demystifying the very genre it works within.

32 "Mine" 33 "Yours"

34 "I am your strength."

35 "Hard to get rid of."

**Bulbbul (2020)** too tries to produce a counter-discourse surrounding the *chudail*, wherein the body of the *chudail* is not just the site of sexuality, but also of sexual violence. Space as a leitmotif is used masterfully throughout the movie. From the very beginning, the Thakur haveli becomes a symbol of the oppressive power structures that characterise the Thakur clan. As Binodini warns: “*Badi haveliyo mein bade raaz hote hai*”.<sup>36</sup> The landowning Thakurs are firstly a family that reigns over space. As Satya’s return is greeted with questions about him coming back to claim a share of his inheritance, it is understood that to be a Thakur is to be allotted a space, as demarcated by seniority and lineage. It is this innate demarcation that makes it so hard for Bulbbul to navigate the mansion, for she never finds a space that she can call exclusively her own. From the cul-de-sac of corridors to the arabesque walls decorated with a casually slung machinegun or trophies from hunts – reminders of the potency of the virile Thakur men does much to intimidate the newly-wed Bulbbul. The reason why the idea of space gains importance is because the body of the Thakurain also manifests similar spatial demarcations as within the haveli. It is not just that the woman must know her place in the house, as a receptacle of family honour she must also keep away encroachers who seek to intrude upon her modesty. Bulbbul’s body, a changing space with mutating sexual significations thus must be circumscribed, be it even with a mere toe-ring. Otherwise, as the well-meaning aunt lets her know, “*Ladki udd jaati hai*”.<sup>37</sup> The bodies of the women in house, even that of Binodini are carefully monitored and policed. Sexuality is permissible, but only as far as it falls under the domain of the senior-most Thakur of the mansion, who says, “*Ek patni ka uske pati ke alawa aur kya neeji hota hai?*”.<sup>38</sup>

Because Bulbbul’s body forgets its spatial delimitation, Binodini suggests getting a new toe-ring (“*dheele se ho gaye hai*”),<sup>39</sup> as exploration – be it spatial or sexual, is not going to be tolerated. While men are readily shipped to London to avoid a familial faux-pas, for the woman, the ultimate threat is of spatial regression: as Satya parrots back to Bulbbul years later “*Mai ke bhej dena hi thik hoga*”.<sup>40</sup> When the body as a space fails to accommodate the veneration due to the Thakur in her hankering for Satya, Bulbul’s personal space is further infringed – alone in the bathtub, in a private moment of contemplation, she is brutalized by her husband. The mansion as a space stifles Bulbul, till she is barred from movement, quite literally. With her legs pinned to stilts, she endures the final act of ownership by a Thakur spawn, till her body’s space is permanently inscribed with the violence of the altercation. At this point, the *chudail* comes into existence by subsuming the body of the woman, thus re-inscribing the site of violence as the site of meting retribution. Like in Satya’s childhood tale, the *chudail* waits in silence, “*kab rajkumari ghar aaye aur woh use khaa jaye*.”<sup>41</sup>

36 “Big mansions often guard big secrets.”

37 “Girls fly too high otherwise.”

38 “What else can a wife call her own, other than her husband?”

39 “...has become loose.” 40 “It’ll be best to send you back to your mother’s house.”

41 “The witch eats up the princess as she comes inside the room.”

Consumption too reappears in this vein, as 'shikaar'<sup>42</sup> is invoked in different ways through the narrative. The Thakurs, known for their penchant for sport-hunting, are represented by their drive to combat, and subsequently invisibilize any threat in their way. When Bulbbul's supposed infidelity makes Satya label her an indecent woman who has no deference to spare ("na sharm ki, na ghar ki, na maryada ki, na pati ki."),<sup>43</sup> then too he sees the body of the woman as vulnerable territory, threatened by and ought to be protected from the presence of Doctor Sudeep. Satya remarks that Sudeep the opportunist must have preyed on gullible Bulbbul.

But the *chudail* deliberately encroaches in the Thakur men's domain ("Thakur-thakur khel rahe ho?",<sup>44</sup> as Satya mocks and Binodini reminds her, "Thakurain hain aap, thakur nahi.")<sup>45</sup> She consumes the body of the respectable Thakurain and in her places stands the witch who redefines the very act of consumption, so far associated with the territorial zeal of the Thakur men. The forest, rather than being an outlet for the machismo and generational violence of the Thakurs, serves to emancipate her. Away from the *haveli* and its intricate rules and bounds, even as people believe she is cowering in fear, the *chudail* prowls, lurking for her prey. So it is that the very reticent Bulbbul, once unable to express her love for Satya in the body of the woman, effortlessly musters the courage the peep into his room as he sleeps at night or hang face down in front of his carriage! She finally carves an autonomous space for herself.

Despite Bulbbul's shortcomings as a movie, it definitely does much to challenge the range of sexual significations surrounding the body of the *chudail*. Maybe it has simply been long overdue, or perhaps because women are finally writing and reinterpreting their own stories, the journey has come full circle from **Veerana** and the likes. The Thakurs, from being the custodians of aberrant women and ensuring their rehabilitation from the state of witch-hood, are finally shown as the aggressors who systematically catalyse such a transformation.

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42 'Hunting'

43 "For shame, for the family, for respectability, nor the husband"

44 "Playing at being a Thakur, are you?"

45 "You are not the Thakur, you're only his wife."

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- Noted theme across many texts, but most popularly in Alexander Pope’s Rape of the Lock (1712). For contemporary or period-specific sociological analyses see Anthony Synnott 1987, Galia Ofek 2016, Alexandra Hoffman 2018.
- As detailed in the article <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/world-human-rights-day-is-an-india-free-of-witch-hunts-possible-80579> .
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# FROM SCREAMING TO STANDING: (POST-) POST FINAL GIRL NARRATIVES IN MODERN HORROR MOVIES

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Without a final girl, it is no slasher film. This statement proves to be true when one has an opportunity to experience a slasher film. Since the dawn of American slashers in 1960, *Psycho* (1960), until the present, apart from a psychopathic killer who causes a massive and cruel massacre, we have seen quite a number of final girls. Who is the final girl ? Carol J. Clover states that a final girl is, as she is named, the last one who has witnessed the massacre of her friends who are murdered or usually stabbed to death by a psychopathic killer, "whom we see scream, [...], fall, rise, and scream again", who is endlessly brutalised, and most importantly who survives long enough until the end to tell her story, until her sequels, until she is rescued, or even until she gets the chance to avenge the killer herself (201). She is most oftentimes the last person among her peers who remains virginal and has never engaged in sexual activities nor in what is perceived as anti- social misconducts, including addiction to drugs, or alcohol, unlike her friends, thus setting her apart from them. Due to her adherence to traditional sexual scripts, hegemonic feminine clothing, and projection of prosocial behaviours prescribed upon women, she is likely rewarded with survival (Cabrera et al. 33). She usually exhibits the moral codes that a society expects a woman to comply with. Through her portrayal, she hence showcases predominant cultural beliefs.

It is significant to notice that the narrative telling a story of a final girl since then until the present day has never been the same but it is constantly changing. This research paper examines how the final girl narrative has been developing since its initiative during the late twentieth century until the present day. I argue that the final girl narrative has composed of three stages from different time period: stage 1 from 1970s until 1980s, stage 2 from 1990s until the early twenty-first century, and the final stage from post-2017 when the rise of global feminist movements has become prominent.

The narrative of the final girl in stage 1 employs theoretical frameworks of the final girl that are coined and defined by Clover in her book "Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film: Gender in Modern Horror Film" (1993) in which she investigates horror films by applying gender studies, resulting in the neologism. In addition, the narrative of the final girl found in stage 2 is a rejection of the definitions that Clover stated, thus reforming the term into Post final girl. Lastly, a selection of slasher movies in stage 3 offers a new aspect to understand and perceive a final girl in a different manner that engages with feminist theories and inclusivity, consequently producing the (post-) post final girl narrative in the present day.

### *THE DAWN OF FINAL GIRLS FROM 70S TO 80S: ESCAPING THE CHAINSAW AND THE BOOGEYMAN*

In spite of the cancellation of the implementation of Hay Codes, a set of standards for Hollywood film industry to strictly follow so as to produce a motion picture that prohibited a depiction of violence, nudity, and sexual misconducts, over the representation of women on the media that aimed to frame how and in what ways women should behave to fit into the societal norms imposed upon them, it was still possible to see its legacy during the dawn of the portrayal of final girls during the rise of slasher films during the late 20th century. As Chloe suggests, slasher films are meant to present the "satisfaction of unconscious psychological forces", a misconduct, performed by characters in a film, that one needs to suppress and is socially expected not to enact in order to "function properly" in a given context of a society (2). It is also able to invite audience to observe somebody else acting out unacceptable behaviours that they would not do themselves through characters with anti-social aspects, most oftentimes sexual misbehaviours, who are rooted to be punished at the end to sublimate their desire in a socially acceptable way (2). In contrast, it illustrates the only one who complies the social norms through a final girl whom people hope for her survival (2). Thus, these gender and sexual scripts imply characters who are depicted as "deserving" and undeserving of survival (Cabrera, Menard, and Weaver 621).

In order to justify the survival of final girls in a given slasher film, it was important for a narrative to portray women by separating them into two different groups: one obeying the norm and the other violating it. Not only is the early slasher genre infamous for its violence and abusive acts towards women, but it also specifies women's position in the narrative: as helpless victims who are destined to either be killed or saved by a man. The most interesting question to be considered is: who should be killed and who should be rescued? However, before the question is answered by the end of the film, the audience gets to see women in the slasher narrative depicted in a particular manner: as a naive and powerless character who always screams and is served as a traditionally sexualised terror.

In this era of slashers, girls who are murdered are mostly those who step out of a traditional sexual script prescribed for women. They often dress in a way that women are not expected to, by revealing parts of their bodies, thus looking conventionally attractive. Moreover, they are most likely portrayed with a sexual scene on a screen which is only often a few minutes prior to their death by a killer, hence leading to a narrative that justifies their death as punishment and a result of violating the sexual expectations for women.

It is also notable that the regulation does not seize male figures to the same customary since it is mostly female characters that appear on screen making sex and then getting murdered (Jubran and Sa'eed 16). As Menard, Weaver, and Cabrera summarize, women "who were shown nude on screen", "dressed in a revealing fashion", [...], and "engaged in fewer types of prosocial behaviours" were more likely to be killed (621). These girls are led into being considered as "bad girls", experiencing a victim blaming claiming that they deserve the murder due to the noncompliance of traditional femininity.

In contrast, girls who survive, mostly by being rescued at the end of a narrative by a man, are specifically those who check all qualities that are imposed on their traditional feminine behaviours. They are most likely found to dress in a more conservative style, unlike their female peers (632). She tends to be more of a good girl who is the most likable character, usually non-sexualised, and never engages in a premarital sex (Bosch 2). Hence, according to the analysis of final girls in two films in this particular era: Sally from ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** (1974) and Laurie from ***Halloween*** (1978), they are depicted with the above-described characteristics.

As a prototypical example of an early narrative of a final girl, Sally foregrounds the definition that fits in hegemonic femininity, dominant social beliefs of behaviors that are placed on women. Comparing the way she and her friend, Pam, dress up, Sally tends to dress more "conventionally properly" than Pam who only covers her body with a small shirt, thus revealing most parts of her body and making her traditionally sexier than Sally. It is also notable that the camera perspective most likely centers the focus on Pam's sexualised physical representation. In addition, Sally is portrayed as fulfilling the expected status of a woman which is a maternal role that can be perceived through her relationship with another character, Franklin, her brother. The role of Franklin's character serves as a means to highlight the feminine duty that Sally needs to fulfill to qualify her behaviour as acceptable prosocial behaviour for women by nurturing and mothering him. As a result, both women are led to follow the early understanding of final girls in which those who comply with the socially expected role survive; meanwhile, those who step out of the social boundaries die.

Furthermore, ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** also projects the unequal pre-established power between men and women in the narrative. Despite the fact that not only women are murdered in the film but also men, it is significant to notice that the death of men and women is depicted quite differently. Women oftentimes express fear more evidently in the death scenes than men do. For instance, Kirk is immediately killed even without us hearing him screaming, similarly to Jerry who screams only shortly and is suddenly dead. Even though it is the death scene of Franklin, the only projection on screen is not Franklin being murdered nor mourning but Sally terrifyingly screaming. In contrast to Pam's longer death scene than her male peers', she is constantly portrayed as screaming, running to escape, and being tortured and frightened. Bosch argues that sexualised female characters are not only terribly murdered but also tend to project longer death scenes than non-sexualised female victims or men (2). This narrative applies to even the final girl, Sally. In spite of the fact that she is meant to survive, Sally never defeats the psychopathic killers but only escapes, screams, begs them for her life, runs away, and is forever left traumatised as seen from the later part of the film which is entirely devoted to her being depicted as described by suffering 18 distinct PAT-level violent interactions: abduction and confinement, hitting with a blunt tool, threatening with a weapon, slashing or cutting, grabbing or restraining and stalking or chasing (Sfakianakis 19). At the end of the film, she is then rescued by a male truck driver. Representing men and women in the death scene in this particular manner serves as a means to both avoid the degradation of expected masculine values and to justify socially imposed feminine roles.

There are a lot of similarities in ***Halloween*** (1978) as well through its final girl, Laurie. She is portrayed as possessing expected feminine values, thus qualifying her as a sole survivor. Whereas other female victims are murdered only a second after their sexual engagement, Laurie is depicted as conservative and sexless who does not give in to her body's desire. She is more or less non-sexually engaged and has no interest in dating, unlike her female peers. It is notable that the murder in ***Halloween*** in 1978 has a strong connection to sexual senses, right from the first opening scene when Michael kills his sister after she has had sex with her boyfriend. Mostly, victims in the film are distracted by their sexual activities that they are involving at the moment when Micheal is approaching. In contrast, due to her non-engagement in any sexual relation, Laurie is able to escape the murder.

Additionally, Laurie also constantly possesses an important feminine quality which is that of motherhood, through her babysitting. It is observable that despite other female friends of Laurie presumably doing the same babysitting job, Laurie is clearly projected doing the job while it is barely represented with her friend, Annie.

To emphasise the argument, Annie even refers to the job as boring, thus, to an extent, violating socially expected female prosocial behaviours. As a result of both engaging with sexual desire and breaking the feminine role, Annie becomes another victim of this massacre. The same situation also applies to Linda who is killed after having had sex with Bob. Those who obey traditional feminine traits as non-sexually engaged and fulfilling the hegemonic femininity survive whereas those who invalidate the traits as dressing improperly, shown as fully or partially naked, and avoiding the feminine qualities, will be punished.

In addition, Laurie is portrayed as totally unfit to those anti-social behaviours that are employed by her female friends to further set her apart from her other female fellows. While Laurie obeys the patriarchal command of her father who asks her to be home by 10 P.M, Annie, in contrast, decides to disobey her father who asks her to not smoke.

It is then notable that women who comply with the pre-established patriarchal orders will be awarded with survival in the slasher narrative, thus qualifying them as a final girl. Laurie is, moreover, portrayed as totally unable to engage with a trait that should not be behaved by a proper woman as seen when she is struggling trying to smoke in order to fit herself in. She is undeniably "a prime example of an innocent high school girl (Health 18).

Similarly to the final girl narrative analysed in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Halloween also implements the narrative to project the representation of unequal pre-established power of masculinity, compared to femininity. The film constantly depicts women screaming and begging for life when it comes to their death scene much more than men. As seen from Annie's death scene, she is portrayed with scenes of her screaming, being tortured, and getting tragically killed on screen in order to validate feminine traits. This can be more evidently seen when comparing Linda's and Bob's death scenes in which Bob is not even screaming when he is stabbed and there has been less torturing scene projected on screen whereas all the representations of weaknesses are clearly tied with Annie's to justify her expected feminine traits. Female victims and final girls are constantly portrayed in extreme fear by being jumpy, nervous, and anxious in order to justify her stereotypical femininity (Brewer 27). Depicting them in the respective manner still serves as a means to validate the expected masculine and feminine roles. Moreover, the narrative still offers a way to highlight the value of masculinity at the end in which Laurie must be saved by a police officer who becomes a hero in the narrative rescuing the girl in risk. Both final girls still need to be dependent on an external savior (Wee 58).

Nevertheless, what is more interesting to note is that Halloween also emphasises the power of masculinity another step higher than what is observed in ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** in which the final girl must reject her femininity, or masculinise herself, in order to survive. While Sally only showcases her traditional feminine behaviours throughout the narrative when she is being chased: screaming, crying, running to escape, and begging for life, and she is then rescued, Laurie has gone beyond that by not only repeating the expected traditional feminine reactions to the slashing but also removing them by the end of the narrative by picking up a weapon to fight against Michael. While final girls before Laurie only project their femininity in slashing scenes and entirely become non-engaging with masculinity: Lila Crane from ***Psycho*** (1960) who merely screams while being stabbed in her bath and Sally from ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** (1974), Laurie is the first to show how female individual agency could be implemented only when masculinity is carried out. This process is conceptualised as that a final girl is "phallicised" or masculinised by the moment of choosing the phallic weapon to stand against a psychopathic killer. This eventual masculinisation or phallicisation of the final girl is to prove that for the final girl to survive is to deny her own femininity and embrace masculine traits, thus still elevating the superiority of masculinity. The final girl narrative in this film also invalidates other opinions that are perceived as inferior to the patriarchal order as insignificant. To further emphasise, women, children, and animals are excluded from the process of knowledge production. It can be seen that warnings from children or animals are disregarded and will not be considered, thus oftentimes missing the chance to survive. As seen in the film, despite Tommy's and Annie's dog's constant warning, both Laurie and Annie entirely ignore them, therefore easing the way for the killer to succeed with his plan. In contrast, it is important to notice that if the warning is produced by the patriarchal order, for instance from Annie's father or police, characters in the narrative are more likely to listen and conform, hence confirming the fact that only the patriarchal order is included in the production of knowledge while anything less than it will never be carefully considered or must be proven by the patriarchal figure. Conclusion, it is prominent that the final girl narrative during the 1970s to 1980s was heavily centered on applying the narrative to justify expected roles of women through the final girl characters and their fellow female friends. The narrative connotes the traditional feminine behaviours in which women are expected to obey through the final girls and their survival in contrast to the fact that it suggests anti-social behaviours that women are not meant to conform through the other female characters who are later murdered. Furthermore, the narrative also proves the unequal balances between masculinity and femininity that can be seen in the death scenes between male and female characters. In addition, femininity is shown as unnecessary for survival in which it is only highlighted when it comes to women being in terror but needs to be eliminated by the final girls to survive, simultaneously with their masculinisation, thus additionally accentuating masculine values.

**ENTERING POST FINAL GIRL NARRATIVE: FROM 90S AND SUBVERSION OF THE RULES**

The narrative of the final girl starts to develop and gets subverted as it approaches the 1990s. While the narrative preceding this era attempts to verify women's roles according to traditional expectations of femininity through female survival and death, the final girl narrative examined in this period invalidates the significance of traditional sexual expectation imposed upon women as an essential factor for their survival, the final girl narrative in this decade invokes this ideology to let their final girls embrace their femininity and sexuality as a means to empower themselves, as a result leading them to survival. All these subversions of the traditional belief of the final girl narrative, consequently, modify the definition into post final girl narrative.

As examined in ***Scream*** (1996), its final girl, Sidney, serves as a prime example of the final girl in the post final girl era. She becomes one of the first final girls to be a non-virgin survivor. Sidney is totally differently characterised and set apart from preceding final girls. While a final girl is expected to follow traditional feminine traits and it is examined that the survival of a female character is strongly associated with the absence of sexual behaviour (Cowan and O'Brien 194), Sidney is not entirely innocent, acknowledges the rule, and has an agency over the control of her sexuality and narrative. It is notable that ***Scream*** truly employs the narrative to differentiate Sidney from the previous final girls in which it first depicts the resemblance of the traditional understanding of the prototypical final girl at the opening scene as Casey Becker. She embodies what it conventionally takes to become a final girl: merely projecting her own traditional disempowering feminine traits like crying, screaming, running away, and begging for life as examined from the preceding category. Sidney, on the other hand, defies all these aspects when she takes control over her sexuality, is able to decide whether or not to give her virginity to a man, and still manages to survive until the end. Post final girl narrative is strongly emphasised in the film in which it constantly criticises the rejection of feminine traits as a source of power to survive, especially in sexual relations while projects the protagonist who possesses an agency over her sexuality and still survives. She also makes jokes to the traditional trope of a final girl and is represented as fighting, less screaming, smart, and resourceful. It is notable that while final girls in the preceding era must rely on a patriarchal rescue for her survival, Sidney manages to become the hunter herself and is supported by another female reporter at the end.



Nevertheless, it is still quite prominent to see the unequal projection of masculine and feminine pre-established powers. From the opening scenes where Casey Becker is depicted as resembling traditional final girl concepts, she indeed showcases traditional feminine traits that women or final girls are expected to express before they are killed: crying, running, begging for life, and screaming. In contrast, Steve, her boyfriend who is being held captive by the killer, does not even reveal such traits to ruin the pre-established masculine expectations. It is argued that when a killer confronts "victims of different sex, he chooses to end the man's life first, which in turn increases the suffering of the woman, who not only sees her partner/friend die, but must remain alert to the imminent attack on her person" (Raya and Hernandez-Santaolalla 19). Male characters in the film are still likely to die faster than women who are more tortured and given more time to project their disempowering reactions.

Post final girl entity is still present in **You're Next** (2011) through its female protagonist, Erin. Similar to Scream, the film opens with a scene where a couple is murdered while having sex with a woman partially naked to still connect to the conventional understandings of final girls. On the contrary, Erin is set to break the conventions through her portrayal. Unlike other female characters in the film during the house invasion, Erin is the only one who remains careful, skilled, and not screaming. She is the only one who picks up the weapon and keeps others focused while most of them freak out and remain desperately lost, subverting expected behaviours to be seen from a prototypical final girl.

Yet, the inequality of masculine and feminine powers is still highlighted in the film. Similar to previous final girls, women's ideas, opinions, and experiences are depicted as existing outside of knowledge production and must be first validated by masculine figures. As seen in the film, while the mother of Erin's boyfriend attempts to warn her husband of the possibly upcoming threat, her opinion is completely disregarded despite the fact that they could have prevented it or even survived if she had been considered. Moreover, in spite of being that careful and smart, Erin's opinion is constantly dismissed by her own husband.

The idea of a post-final girl narrative is most evident in **Happy Death Day** (2017) and its sequel **Happy Death Day 2U** (2019) through their main final girl, Tree. She entirely reworks traditional narrations of a final girl in a number of ways. While final girls are conventionally restricted over their sexuality and body, Tree is sexually liberated. She is one of a few final girls to be represented as fully naked on screen. Her femininity becomes the source of power where she could utilise to ease her own survival. Despite showcasing expected and disempowering traditional feminine traits: freaking out and screaming, she learns and develops until she survives.

Tree proves that it is no longer necessary for a woman to stay virginal as socially expected in order to qualify herself as a final girl and promotes the idea that women should take control over their own femininity and regard it as an empowering entity. Additionally, whereas final girls in the preceding era are likely murdered when engaging with anti-social activities that women are not expected to be involved with as a punishment, Tree truly gets herself around those socially imposed as negative misconducts: taking drugs, drinking alcohols, and etc. For the moment, previously, the survival in slasher films is equated with virginity and death is equated with female sexuality (Kimsey 30), Tree has invalidated these assumptions throughout the film as the final girl.

What is more important to be noted is that both films serve as prime examples that connect to the next stage of the final girl's concepts: (Post-) post final girl, by starting to engage the narrative with feminist ideas. The narrative starts to bring the patriarchal oppression to the forefront to criticise its suppression over women and marginalised groups through the main final girl herself. It is prominent in the narrative that the role of the sorority house serves as a means to depict how women are systematically shaped by the patriarchal expectations: for instance, to always be in a good shape in order to attract a man, thus resulting in daily habit and diets that emerge from women's disempowerment. In contrast, Tree defies all these ideal norms for women by breaking these difficult diets and daily habits. In addition, the narrative illustrates men's oppression over women in a form of a patriarchal figure, a lecturer Dr. Butler, who optimises his power in an educational position to sexually exploit his female students, including Tree and Lori, her roommate. While he insists on using his authority as a teacher over Tree when she is trying to break up with him, Tree resists to conform by dropping out of his class, thus liberating herself from the patriarchal control. Besides, Happy Death Day 2U also emphasises on this matter through Lori who also has long been oppressed by him in one of many alternative realities that Tree has entered. It is notable that Tree not only liberates herself from this patriarchal control over women in her own reality but also helps set another woman, Lori, free from a man's abuse. All in all, it is evident to examine that the ideas of post-final girl, a rejection of pre-established definitions of a final girl that serve to disempower women and their agency over their femininity, is escalated throughout the representations of the final girls in this period of time. This post-final girl supports the idea that new final girls not only survive but they thrive by embracing their femininity that once must be denied in order to survive. The post-final girl ideology produces a possibility to depict a final girl who is blonde and traditionally feminine but still possesses agency and liberty over her sexuality. Moreover, final girls arising from this definition are no longer engaged with the need to masculinise to survive because they are now empowered by their own femininity.

(POST-) POST FINAL GIRL: LIBERATION, DIVERSIFICATION, AND INCLUSIVITY OF THE FINAL GIRL IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Despite the fact that the definition of the final girl discussed in the preceding session has been marked as a shift of the definition, the concept has also further transgressed beyond the post final girl ideas in the present day by prominently bringing in feminist concepts as well as intersectionality that criticise not only the patriarchal oppression over the concept in terms of sexual aspects but also race, consequently leading to a set of final girls who are racially and sexually diverse, marginalised, oppressed by the patriarchy, joined by other fellow sisters to bring down the issues, serving as a (post-) post final girls.

It is notable that most final girls on screen are Caucasian, as a result of having the narrative that is systematically oppressed by the patriarchal ideas and lacks inclusivity by constantly portraying a disproportionate panic that surrounds only white women while featuring marginalised characters: black people, Native Americans, LGBTQIA+ community, and etc., as disposable. They are usually treated as only a part of the show while only a white final girl is rooted for her survival. A study states that final girls are not more likely to be distinguished from each other in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientations, meaning that they are mostly depicted as white girls who are heterosexual (Cabrebra et al. 37), thus promoting the idea that those who are excluded are to be killed and never become a final girl.

This attitude on the insufficiency of inclusivity in the narrative is also reflected in settings found in several slasher films. The massacre oftentimes takes place in a familiar confines of high schools or safe suburban white-dominant neighborhoods that show that a terror of invading into a white community is impossible. For instance, the murder in **Halloween** (1978) is clearly stated to set in Haddonfield, Illinois where it is depicted and described as a safe white-dominated community from a psychopathic killer. Likewise, in **Scream** (1996), the narrative is located in an area named Woodsboro in which it is said to be an unbelievably safe neighborhood and a peaceful town square with only a handful of black population. Meanwhile, there is no representation of marginalised groups in **You're Next** at all. Yet, a selection of slasher films to be analysed serves as a prime example to see how they revise the narrative of a final girl which optimises it to use as a tool to strongly criticise patriarchal issues oppressing both women and marginalised groups who have always been underrepresented in the narrative and also to function as a platform to advocate feminist ideas and promote inclusivity through not only one final girl at the end but a group of racially and sexually diverse who have been victimised and suppressed by the patriarchal power and will be final girls whom everyone can now identify with.

**Black Christmas** (2019) works as one of the primary examples that uses the final girl narrative to speak out about issues that women need to experience such as being stalked in a public, thus using a key as a potential weapon, and paranoid being followed by a man even though he is just simply walking on his way. The way that the film works on criticising these issues is reflected during the rise of #Metoo movement, a social phenomenon where women and marginalised groups come out to speak up about their sexual harassment caused by men in power but still are unable to reveal these experiences due to the patriarchal suppression. One of the cores that this social movement emphasises is not only to speak up for themselves but also to call for a solidarity to unite with one another and to become one to fight against the patriarchy. The film, thus, offers an obvious stance on feminism (Health 26).

The film exclusively kicks off with a toxic masculine quote to foreground what needs to be expected in the narrative. Additionally, the film places a strong emphasis on the separation of fraternity, where male characters are deeply rooted with misogynistic ideas towards women, and sorority where women lend out each other a hand for a help when one is in need: borrowing sanitary products, or texting friends if they are home safe which is likely acted as a nature despite the fact that it should not have been. It is important to note that the film names the college in the setting as "Hawthorne College" to imply Hawthorne's infamous misogynistic ideas studied in his publishings. The fraternity is depicted as a source of brainwashed male killers who are deeply instilled with hatred towards women and hold power in a society that is able to shut women, who have been sexually harassed by them, up. Moreover, it is notable that killers in the film are narrated differently than above-studied psychopathic killers. While earlier, male killers murder women due to their rooted misogyny with reasons to back them up: having been terrorised by a girl or a mother, thus turning and validating them as a psychopathic killer. Nolan and Ryan state that a psychopathic killer is often a product of either a sadistic mother figure or a dysfunctional family (47). In contrast, **Black Christmas's** killers are totally made of patriarchal power and toxic masculine characteristics aiming to exercise power over women as well as to disenfranchise them, hoping to suppress them to become "a naturally placed girl". The film uses female characters in the sorority house as representatives of victimised women in the actual world through their portrayal of struggles and difficulties as being a woman under a patriarchal society filled up with a strong misogyny: constantly being over-sexualised, assaulted, murdered, or reporting sexual assaults but ending up with getting no help but deemed untrustworthy since the patriarchal power is still highly upheld. Members of the sorority house experience harassment from social media direct message, a common theme of police's mistrust, and the trauma of being raped (Health 26).

While the portrayal of sorority on screen has always been disempowered to become a place full of Regina George type of girls whose attitudes and behaviours have been patriarchally framed by depicting sorority girls competing each other on a man or trying to get themselves in a good shape to attract a man, whose physical representation also qualifies hegemonic masculine beauty standards, Black Christmas' sorority girls, instead, help each other out on societal obstacles they are meant to experience in order to pave the way for the narrative to bring in the concept of sisterhood, an idea advocated by current feminist theories that support a joint union of oppressed women to lend each other a hand to fight against the patriarchal oppression. As seen in the end of the narrative, Riley is joined by a group of multi-gendered and racial friends who have been victims of the fraternity's harassment, thus offering not only one white heterosexual survivor but a group of sexually and racially diverse final girls. Hence, the changes provide the end of traditional survival and point out towards more realistic female characters (Health 27).

Likewise, **Assassination Nation** (2018) not only employs the narrative of the final girl to produce the film but also revises the narrative into (post-) post final girl where it projects life obstacles sprung from the patriarchal power that not only women face but also marginalised members: LGBTQIA+ people, and black women and also criticises its systemic oppression through its primary characters: Lily, Bex, Sarah, and Em. While the previous two stages of the final girl narrative barely bring up the issue of patriarchal power that truly lies beneath the depiction of a final girl, due to its feminist involvement, **Assassination Nation** explicitly uses each final girl to represent a horror of being considered as socially inferior in a patriarch society and to offer an empowering call into action by the end.

As previously discussed, both the final girl and post final girl narrative frequently engage with women's sexuality but in a different manner. The original final girl employs the aspect to validate a punishment upon women so as to justify women's position in a society while the post final girl narrative turns sexuality into a source of feminine empowerment. Yet, (post-) post final girl narrative transgresses beyond both by showcasing the reasons why sexuality is negatively tied with femininity and who has set up this belief as well as how to resolve such an issue. The narrative not only showcases that female sexuality is costly (Cowan and O'Brien 195) but also what lies behind this societal adversity.

As a result of depicting the film through feminist lens, **Assassination Nation** reveals that it has always been the internalisation of misogyny in a patriarchal society that takes away women's autonomy over their own agency in dressing. In the male-dominant society, female dressing and bodies have always been sexualised and denigrated by men, claiming that the reason for a woman who wears revealing clothings is solely to be sexually attractive to men, consequently rejecting her own liberty in her own fashion and thus being considered "a slut" in spite of the fact that she just exercises her right over her dressing. While it is proclaimed that women with provocative dresses, flirtatious attitudes, sexual engagement, and nudity are mostly killed (Kinkade, Meitl, and Wellman 139), the girls in the film, in contrast, have checked all above-mentioned aspects but still survive. Feminist ideas strongly advocate for women's autonomy over their bodies, clothes, and choices by legitimising the fact that it is not up to anyone else but her own to choose what to wear and she should not be punished for it. This idea is prominently reflected through the primary characters as the representatives of women in the real patriarchally-controlled world that suppresses this autonomy and punishes them for not complying.

What is also interesting to be noted is that **Assassination Nation** promotes and emphasises an important core of feminist advocacy which is the power of sisterhood, as found and stated in **Black Christmas**, in which the primary characters, who are racially and sexually diverse and have been subjected to the oppression of toxic masculinity arisen from the patriarchal control in the society, lend each other hands to help one another from this systemic oppression and to fight against the root of the problem. The narrative reveals the brutal fact that women need to experience in a patriarchal society in which men act as a sexual aggressor while women are those who suffer the sexual abuse (Raya and Hernandez-Santaolalla 18). The film not only states clearly how toxic masculinity threatens their lives but also highlights that it is important for the oppressed not to fight it alone but with the union of sisterhood, a group of people, regardless of race, class, and gender, who have been victimized by the same societal issue. Furthermore, the four girls not only rely on each other but they also call out for a bigger union of sisterhood by inspiring others and encouraging them to join the fight against anachronistic gender lines, thus becoming the fight of feminism against toxic masculinity, not women against men. At the end, the narrative offers a huge group of racially and sexually diverse final girls who share the same societal hardships and are standing against what has always been suppressing all final girls, the patriarchal power.

### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the final girl narrative has been changing throughout decades. During the prominence of this narrative in slasher films between 1970s and 1980s, the narrative was heavily lied on an aim that attempted to justify women's place in a society by setting expected behaviours and imposing upon women to comply, especially concerning sexual manners. Those women who obey the norms of traditional femininity are likely rewarded with their survival at the end. In contrast, those women who violate them and engage with anti-social behaviours by breaking hegemonic feminine traits, particularly regarding sexual misbehaviours, are meant to be punished and murdered by a psychopathic killer who serves as a prime judge for this non-compliant manner.

Moreover, it is equally important to consider that the narrative during the time established a clear representation of imbalances of masculine and feminine power through male and female victims. It is quite notable that death scenes of male victims are barely depicted to be as long and torturing as those of women's in which they are more likely projecting feminine expectations: screaming, crying, begging for life, and escaping, which are not anticipated to see in men's death scenes as they would degrade masculine values. Likewise, the narrative oftentimes provided another path to uplift masculine superiority through the end of the narrative in which a final girl is rescued from this burden by a man. Similarly, the narrative devalues what is not considered masculine as inferior and excluded from the process of knowledge production. To be more precise, any opinions apart from masculine figures are not worth considering as reliable knowledge or must be first validated by the masculine figures, thus deemed untrustworthy. Furthermore, the narrative also highlights the fact that masculinity is more superior than femininity since after a final girl has been showcasing her feminine expectations while being chased by a killer, she must eliminate all those femininities and be masculinised to survive, thus becoming a "masculinised power icons" of the genre (Cupp 4).

The narrative had been found to develop itself during 1990s onwards in which it started to rework how the narrative had previously emphasised the relations of masculinity and femininity, hence diverging into the post-final girl narrative. The post final girl narrative allowed a final girl to rethink about her agency over her sexuality and femininity which, consequently, produced a narrative that the final girl could now embrace her freedom over her bodies and sexual desires. As a result, there were, at last, final girls who were no longer virginal but still qualified to survive. While final girls in the preceding decades needed to sacrifice their femininity for the sake of survival, final girls in the post final girl era utilised their femininity and sexuality as a source of power, granting their own survival without the need to masculinise themselves.

Additionally, the narrative has recently been once again changing during the present days by using the narratology of a final girl as a way to reveal the patriarchal oppression that has been alive beneath the narrative, resulting in several projections that suppress women. In addition, the narrative also revises the insufficiency of inclusion and diversification of the representation of final girls, which there have been only white heterosexual final girls, by engaging with feminist ideas to represent not only one but a group of final girls who are not only white and heterosexual but who are different and diversified in terms of races and sexual orientations and identifications. As a result, this (post-) post final girl shows what has been lacking in the final girl narrative: the inclusivity and diversity, as well as what has been a true issue in portraying final girls throughout decades: the patriarchal oppression. By involving the narrative with feminist theories, the narrative is then able to transform into the (post-) post final girl narrative that could work on both aspects, thus enabling itself to criticise the patriarchal power in the narrative and to depict an ideal image of final girls according to feminist advocacy.

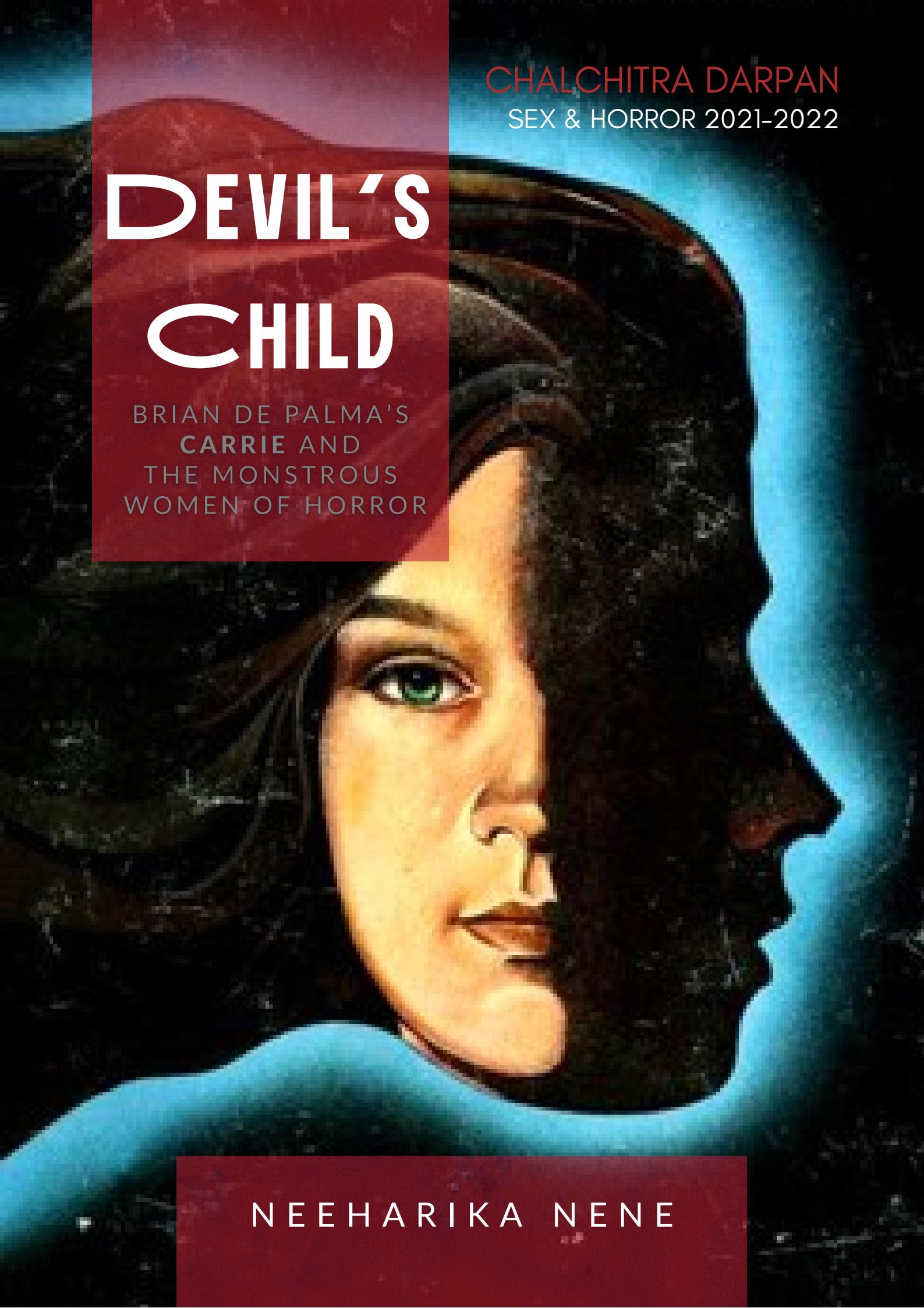
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SEX & HORROR 2021-2022

# DEVIL'S CHILD

BRIAN DE PALMA'S  
**CARRIE** AND  
THE MONSTROUS  
WOMEN OF HORROR

NEEHARIKA NENE

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Guttmacher Institute, the 1950s and 60s saw a range of approximately 200,000 to 1.2 million illegal abortions per year in the United States. In 1969, when Norma McCorvey sought an abortion, it was only legal in her state of Texas in order to save a woman's life from a dangerous pregnancy. McCorvey had previously given birth to two children and put both up for adoption. Attorneys Linda Coffee and Sarah Weddington, who were keen on challenging abortion laws, took up McCorvey's case. From then on, she would be referred to as 'Jane Roe' in court documents. On 22 January, 1973, the Supreme Court of America abolished the law banning abortion in Texas, which effectively legalised it across the nation. The early 1970s were also the time when women began to question the shameful connotations of menstruation and inquired into the safety of menstrual hygiene products. Both the reproductive rights and menstrual hygiene movements were centred around women's agency. Their proponents argued that the male dominated medical system denied women the right to their own bodies and health, and ignored their unique experiences (Bobel & Lorber 42, 43). It was against this landscape that Stephen King published **Carrie** (1974) – a pivotal juncture in feminist politics where pressing questions of the female anatomy and reproductive rights were already in the spotlight. The first film adaptation of **Carrie**, directed by Brian De Palma and starring Sissy Spacek in the titular role, was released only two years after the novel, in 1976. It was widely appreciated by both audiences and critics, and one can argue that it has gone on to achieve the status of a cult classic horror film. In her piece on the film published in The Guardian, Eva Wisemen calls it a film that portrays "a bloody world of shame and unwanted power". Watching the scene as a teenage girl there is something particularly chilling about seeing her onstage covered in blood, because this experience is something that haunts you. This fear of blood in the wrong place, usually spreading quietly on the back of pale jeans, shame, and of everybody seeing.

## VICTIM TO VILLAIN: MAPPING CARRIE'S JOURNEY

When we begin to consider Carrie White's character arc, it becomes evident in the initial few scenes of the film that she is victimised on all fronts of life. She is bullied at school and abused at home, and she lacks social and conversational skills because of her upbringing. In the opening scene of the film, Carrie gets her period for the first time in the girl's bathroom at her school. Having no prior knowledge of menstruation, she believes she is bleeding to death, and panics, begging the other girls to help her. Instead, they begin to mock her and throw tampons at her. There is ample evidence in the novel and the film to suggest that Carrie's telekinesis was in some way set off by this harrowing first encounter with her period.

When the gym teacher, Miss Collins, comes to Carrie's aid, the lightbulb in the bathroom stall suddenly goes out. Her powers seem to show their full potential when she feels most humiliated and victimised. Carrie's relationship with her mother, Margaret White, is a particularly horrifying and interesting one. Religion becomes the most important vehicle that Margaret uses to physically and emotionally abuse Carrie. She even goes as far as telling Carrie that the 'Curse of Blood' (menstruation) came upon women because Eve was weak and prone to sin. This kind of language is used frequently by Margaret to chastise Carrie – morally loaded words like 'sin' and 'curse', and calling her the 'devil's child'. Not only is Margaret prone to frequently beating Carrie, but she also locks her up in a small, narrow closet for hours on end to repent her sins in the presence of a figurine of Jesus on the cross with glowing yellow eyes. Growing stronger and easier to control since her first period, Carrie's telekinesis becomes a way for her to regain agency over her life. She embraces her powers, gives in to her desires, and begins to assert dominance over Margaret. To make amends for bullying Carrie, her popular classmate, Sue Snell (Amy Irving), asks her boyfriend, Tommy Ross (William Katt), to take Carrie to the prom as his date. Carrie accepts after he refuses to take no for an answer, and stands her ground when her mother attempts to forbid her from going. Swallowing her fear, she says, "I'm going, Mama. And things are gonna change around here." In that moment, Carrie has regained the power she had been deprived of under Margaret's shadow.

Tragically, Carrie is offered a glimmer of hope and acceptance, only for it to be taken away. Not only is Carrie's reclamation of her power met with resistance from her mother, but she also faces utter humiliation from her peers. With the help of the rebellious Billy Nolan (John Travolta), Chris Hargensen (Nancy Allen) empties a bucket of pigs' blood on her, just as she is crowned Prom Queen. Here, the image that De Palma creates is eerily similar to the bathroom scene. Carrie is once again covered in blood while her classmates laugh and mock her. It is this non-acceptance that becomes the final nail in the coffin. Instead of finally being accepted for doing the things a 'normal' teenage girl would, she still continues to be ostracised by her peers. This becomes the crucial turning point in her character arc. Her female power (in the form of regained control over her mind, body, and sexuality) becomes uncontrollable, and we see an explosion of her rage. Douglas Keesey calls this transformation "patriarchy's worst nightmare concerning women and their bodies" (37). Carrie is no longer a victim – for the rest of the film, she assumes the role of the 'monster', destroying everyone who played an active or passive role in her repression. At the end of the killing spree, Carrie returns home. She bathes and washes the blood off of herself before falling into her mother's arms and telling her that she had been right all along. Here, Margaret reveals that she regrets giving in to her sexual desires the night that Carrie was conceived. She attacks Carrie with the intention of killing her, but Carrie uses her telekinesis to stab her to death with multiple knives.

This scene plays out quite differently in the novel, and De Palma's choice to 'crucify' Margaret to the doorframe is another allusion to her religious indoctrination and Carrie's desire to break away from it. But this final confrontation is also a moment of complete vulnerability. Margaret, who was always fearful of Carrie's power on some innate level and tried everything to repress it, is now confronted with its true potential, and Carrie, who has perpetually lived in the shadow of her mother's oppressive fundamentalism, is finally able to overpower her and exact the ultimate revenge. To truly understand Carrie's character arc from victim to monster, it is essential to consider the most important aspects of her victimisation: menstruation and the female body. The film begins at the precise moment that triggers her transmutation from victim to villain. From that point on, she slowly and steadily begins to understand and control her powers, 'flexing' her mind to try and move objects at will. At the same time, she is also embracing her sexuality and newly discovered 'womanhood' while struggling to battle the shame ingrained in her by her mother. Carrie tries to tackle the paradox that Western society creates for women when they start menstruating - on the one hand, their entry into womanhood is celebrated, but on the other, this womanhood is to be kept a secret (Bobel & Lorber 31). Thus, her telekinesis can be understood as a metaphor for an outburst of suppressed power through which she reclaims her sexuality. As Jaber posits with reference to the novel, Carrie transforms fully at the stage where she experiences the greatest shock and hurt. The female body is central to her journey as an instrument of trauma as well as a source of power, and this connection is established right from the beginning (Jaber 5). In 'Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation', Elissa Stein discusses how various religious texts, from the Bible to Vedic scriptures and the Koran, have perpetuated and solidified the taboo around menstruation (83-93). Under the scope of her fundamentalist beliefs, Margaret knows that menstruation and the onset of puberty lead to bodily changes, such as the development of breasts (which she calls 'dirty pillows' in the novel), and the temptation of sexual attraction that will drive her daughter off the righteous path and threaten her salvation (Cowan 161). A significant part of her fear comes from her own guilt of having sex with Carrie's father. She uses Carrie's puberty and sexual desires to demonise her. In Margaret's eyes, every sign of puberty, be it breasts or pimples, becomes God's way of punishing Carrie for her sins. Elizabeth Kissling suggests that it is not menstruation that makes a woman *Other*, but instead, it is because she is the *Other* that menstruation becomes a curse (Bobel & Lorber 28). Carrie is made aware of the otherisation associated with menstruation and puberty time and again, and she is forced to internalise it through the disgust of her mother and female peers towards her. Due to the social construction of menstruation as negative, women and girls view it as a shameful process, one that should not be openly spoken about (McHugh 410, 411). This disgust is then projected onto other women. As M.C. McHugh writes, menstrual stigma

forces women to "engage in surveillance and control practices" to hide the fact that they are menstruating (412). By bleeding in front of the other girls, Carrie had broken this unspoken code, thus inviting ostracisation from them. De Palma's clever use of colours throughout the film helps highlight this idea of menstrual stigma further. Margaret mistakes Carrie's pink dress to be red, and comments on the colour disapprovingly, which confuses Carrie. This could be read as an eerie foreshadowing of the pig's blood that covers her dress not too long after, and symbolic of menstruation becoming a corruptive, dangerous force. During the prom scene, the lights in the room change from soft pinks and blues to a sinister red as Carrie begins her massacre. The process of menstruation can then be understood as a channel of power, a way to unlock a certain potential within Carrie that patriarchal society fears. Here, the potential is a supernatural, telekinetic one.



**THE ABJECT AND THE EVIL**

Having established the character trope of the monstrous woman and how she is victimised, we can now identify themes of Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection within **Carrie**. For Kristeva, the 'abject' is something that does not respect boundaries or order. It is in-between and ambiguous, and disturbs identity. A wound oozing with blood or pus disturbs us because it shows us what we push aside to live. The corpse, which Kristeva believes is the "utmost of abjection", causes a breakdown in the clearly demarcated border between life and death, the 'I' and the 'Other', and thus, makes one feel disgusted (Kristeva 3, 4). Barbara Creed argues that the monstrous feminine is abject because she exists at the border between supernatural and human, and between victim and monster. Creed's work has been seminal in understanding the abject within what she calls the 'monstrous feminine' in horror cinema. According to Kristeva, the feminine is seen as a "radical evil that needs to be suppressed" across societies that try to establish a male, phallic power (70). Upon being confronted with the full potential of Carrie's powers, Margaret discourages her, saying, "You must renounce this power, you must give it up, you must never use it." Further, Kristeva asserts that the fear of the mother is a fear of her generative power (77). This can explain the existence of pollution rites and taboos associated with menstruation. The disgust and stigma associated with the female body have been represented in several novels and films, most notably in **Carrie** and **The Exorcist** (1971), where women have been portrayed as the most explicit forms of "radical evil" - demons, witches, and monsters.

Further, Kristeva explains the abject nature of bodily wastes such as urine, defecation, and pus. Excremental and menstrual wastes are deemed to have polluting value. However, as Kristeva observes, certain other bodily wastes such as tears and sperm are not seen as pollutants. Unlike excrement - which threatens identity from the outside - menstrual blood poses dangers to identity from within, by threatening the identity of each of the sexes as well as the relationship between them (Kristeva 71). As discussed earlier, the girls in the bathroom and Margaret White express extreme revulsion and disgust towards Carrie's menstrual blood. Another aspect of Kristeva's theory that becomes important to **Carrie** is the maternal figure and the mother-child relationship. Kristeva asserts that the earliest experience with abjection is in breaking away from the maternal entity (13). Maternal power is secure, yet it is stifling. While the child struggles to separate itself from the mother, the mother's very existence is authenticated by the child. The moment of abjection is when the child begins to withdraw or reject the influence of the mother to create a space between them (Hanson 139). This kind of conflict forms the basis of Carrie's plot. Margaret's existence is validated by Carrie in two ways.

Firstly, she becomes a dominating maternal figure upon whom Carrie is dependent for her needs. Secondly, through the way she chooses to raise Carrie, Margaret tries to prove that she is still on the righteous path towards salvation, and will not be punished by God. She carries the burden of committing the sin of having engaged in sexual acts, and regrets enjoying them. Thus, by ensuring that her daughter is kept far away from sinful thoughts and behaviour, she is validating her own faith and beliefs. It can be argued that Carrie's sudden and angry outburst of power is an attempt to release herself from Margaret's dominating maternal influence and establish a separate identity of her own. In doing so, she creates an abject space. Creed points out that this can be seen in horror films where the father figure is absent, such as *Carrie*, *Psycho* (1960), and *The Birds* (1963) (29). Maternal authority, which is experienced first, impresses the differences between the proper or clean body and the improper or dirty body upon the self. Perhaps the worst of Margaret's indoctrination of right and wrong comes in the form of the punishment closet. Creed describes the closet as 'womb-like' (115). It is thus another manifestation of Margaret's imposing and overarching maternal authority over Carrie. Even in her dying moments, as the house begins to collapse around her and bursts into flames, Carrie returns to the maternal womb of the closet, dragging her mother's corpse in with her. It is there that both mother and daughter finally meet their end.

#### *POST CARRIE: THE MONSTROUS WOMAN REIMAGINED*

Horror films in the twenty-first century have given us new ways of imagining the monstrous woman. But her broader arc and the symptoms of her monstrosity bear striking resemblances to Carrie White. In 2000, she assumed a form that has – in the words of Natalie Holderbaum – been largely associated with masculinity: the werewolf. The protagonists of *Ginger Snaps* (2000) are two outcast sisters, Ginger (Catherine Isabelle) and Brigitte Fitzgerald (Emily Perkins), who have a morbid fascination with death. Due to their unconventional clothing and behaviour, they are frequently subjected to strange looks and judgement from peers at school. Their teachers and parents do not understand their photographic 'death projects'. They speak often of suicide and escaping, but it is seen simply as odd behaviour rather than a cry for help. Having been released just at the onset of the 21st century, there is a drastic change in the larger perception of menstruation. Ginger's mother tells her that it is the "most natural thing". At school, it is explained through a strictly scientific and anatomical lens. What remains, then, are Ginger's internalised feelings of inferiority and insecurity. Much like we see in Carrie, she also refers to her first period as a 'curse'. Before the werewolf attack, Ginger is painfully aware of the male gaze. Despite being picked on by the girls in class, Ginger receives attention from the boys in unwelcome ways.

Jason, her classmate, makes her uncomfortable by staring at her and passing comments about her body while she is playing field hockey. As Wiseman writes in her article about Carrie, puberty becomes an unwanted and dangerous power associated with the female body that women cannot control. Another striking similarity is that Ginger is attacked by the werewolf on the same night that she gets her first period. Exactly like Carrie, she is also sixteen at the time. This is the beginning of Ginger's transformation into a monstrous figure. She murders her school teacher, janitor, and the neighbour's dog. Blood, as Kristeva notes, is symbolic of murder from which man must cleanse himself, but also refers to women and fertility. It is the crossroad where death and femininity, murder and procreation, and cessation of life and vitality all come together (Kristeva 96). Ginger experiences extreme discomfort in her monstrous new body. She begins to grow fur-like body hair, sharp canines, and worst of all, a tail that she struggles to conceal. In one of the last scenes of the film, Brigitte walks in on Ginger attempting to cut her tail off with a knife in the bathroom. As embarrassed as she is by these monstrous aspects of her physical appearance, she equally enjoys her new power. She begins to embrace her femininity after the werewolf turns her. Brigitte observes that something is "definitely wrong" with Ginger. She begins to dress in the conventionally feminine clothes that she used to reject earlier. She embraces the attention she gets from Jason and uses it to satisfy her own monstrous urges. One of the most interesting explorations of female sexuality in the film comes when Ginger likens killing as a werewolf to masturbating. She tells Brigitte, "You know every move, right on the fucking dot. And afterwards, you see fucking fireworks, supernovas." She says that her powers make her feel like she can do just about anything she wants to. As Wood argues in 'Return of the Repressed', this is a classic example of horror films representing the release of sexuality as something monstrous, perverted, and excessive, often manifesting in the form of sadism, violence, or cannibalism (31). Even when Ginger has sex with Jason, she is violent and causes him injuries, as though her repressed sexual expression is bursting out of her. Despite being powerful and taking pleasure in expressing herself, Ginger is aware that she cannot escape being labelled and vilified. When she accidentally causes the death of her classmate, Trina Sinclair, she tells Brigitte "No one ever thinks chicks do shit like this. Trust me, a girl can only be a slut, a bitch, a tease, or the virgin next door."

**Jennifer's Body** (2009), too, puts the bond between two women at the centre of its story. Although quite different from each other, Jennifer Check (Megan Fox) and Anita 'Needy' Lesnicki (Amanda Seyfried) are childhood best friends. Needy is the more shy, submissive one in the relationship, while Jennifer is the dominant, popular one. Jennifer is confident, promiscuous, and wears her sexuality on her sleeve. She goes to the Melody Lane bar, where a band called Low Shoulder are playing, with the intention of flirting with the lead singer.

She tells Needy, "They're just boys, morsels. We have all the power." This is one key difference between her and Carrie – she is aware of the power she holds right from the beginning. During the performance, a fire breaks out in the bar Jennifer and Needy are forced to escape through the bathroom window. Jennifer is in a state of shock, and taking advantage of this, the lead singer Nikolai asks her to come back to his van. Needy refuses to go. When Jennifer steps into Low Shoulder's van and Nikolai closes the door, we see the bar explode into flames behind a concerned Needy. This scene cleverly foreshadows what is to come – an explosion of Jennifer's own female power after being manipulated and murdered. Falsey believing that Jennifer is a virgin, Low Shoulder tries to sacrifice her in an occult ritual. Jennifer thinks they are going to rape her, and so when asked if she really is a virgin, she lies that she is and therefore doesn't know how to have sex, so they should find someone who does. This is a particularly interesting point in the film. In a culture that fetishizes 'purity', Jennifer's virginity acts to her disadvantage. In her research on the 'virgin cleansing myth' as a possible cause of child rape in South Africa, Suzanne Leclerc-Madlala describes the "dirty" and negative associations of the vagina of a sexually active woman. It is this idea that gave birth to the myth, according to which, having sexual intercourse with a virgin woman can cure HIV / AIDS (Leclerc-Madlala 12). Thus, much like we see in ***Jennifer's Body***, a woman's virginity can become the reason she is subjected to violence. However, the ritual backfires and turns Jennifer into a flesh-eating succubus who needs to feed in order to stay happy, confident, and beautiful. Low Shoulder became national sensations after making it look like they had helped people escape during the fire. At least temporarily, the sacrifice is successful regardless of Jennifer's virginity. The band takes advantage of her and exploits the people of the town to become rich and successful musicians, while Jennifer is vilified as a monster. She begins to lure her male classmates with the promise of sexual intercourse, only to kill them and eat their flesh. She also becomes apathetic, belittling the deaths caused by the fire and invading Needy's personal space.

This monstrosity associated with female sexuality is seen in both ***Ginger Snaps*** and ***Jennifer's Body***. As Creed writes, women who were accused of witchcraft were often blamed for crimes of a sexual nature. In order to put an end to the torture, they would confess to these crimes, which contributed to ideas of depraved and monstrous female sexual appetite in popular mythology (Creed 107). Megan Fox, who plays the titular character, revealed in the Eli Roth's History of Horror: Uncut podcast that she believed the film did not do well because of her strong image as a sex symbol during the time. Audiences and critics understood the film in that same light. Fox further said that the backlash proved the point the film was trying to make. She said: I think somewhere inside of every girl they can relate to this idea of feeling like, "My power has been taken away from me and what would I do if I got all of that power and then some back."

I imagine that's one of the things that they relate to, that vicarious letting loose, what's referred to in our hippie circles as 'the inner wild woman,' 'the inner wild woman,' 'the inner wild witch' that we all have.

Both **Ginger Snaps** and **Jennifer's Body** highlight another aspect that is hugely relevant in **Carrie** - the solidarity that upholds the relationship between two women, as well as the hatred that can potentially destroy it. In **Carrie**, this hatred comes in the form of internalised disgust for the female body, which makes Sue, Chris, and the other girls throw tampons at Carrie when she starts menstruating in the girl's bathroom. In **Jennifer's Body**, Jennifer often undermines Needy and makes decisions for her. She kills her boyfriend, Chip, out of her own insecurities and feelings of inadequacy. But the climax of the film implies that Needy understands that Low Shoulder are the real culprits, and takes revenge for the deaths of her best friend, her boyfriend, and for her own trajectory.

**The Witch** (2015) is an unnerving fictional depiction of perhaps the most well-known type of demonisation of women - through accusations of witchcraft and black magic. The film borrows heavily from written accounts, folklore, and fairytales of witchcraft, and its dialogues have been taken directly from period sources such as diaries, journals, and court records. In 17th century New England, Thomasin and her family were banished from their colony over religious differences. They move to the edge of a forest and build their own farm, and Thomasin's mother, Katherine, gives birth to baby Samuel. Once when Thomasin is playing peekaboo with him outdoors, he mysteriously disappears and Thomasin is blamed. Later when Katherine discovers that her silver cup is missing, she blames Thomasin for that too, asking repeatedly "What is the matter with thee, Thomasin? What is the matter?". In actuality, the father, William, had sold the cup in exchange for hunting traps. Thomasin voices the concern that her youngest siblings, Jonas and Mercy, have summoned a demon by communicating with their goat, Black Phillip, but she is not believed. Much like what we see in **Carrie**, there is constant talk of sin, forgiveness, and shame throughout the film. The family strongly believes that humans are inherently sinful and destructive beings, and through prayer, this belief is instilled into the children. Caleb is heard reciting "Aye, I was conceived in sin and born in iniquity", and wondering if his baby brother was born a sinner too. In her first monologue, Thomasin prays for forgiveness for living in sin, disobeying her parents, and "following the desire of my own will, and not the Holy Spirit". This prayer sets the tone for the rest of the film, indicating a culture that cages human desire, especially female desire, and equates it with sin. As the family's troubles grow, Katherine tells William that Thomasin has begotten the "sign of her womanhood", and that she must be sent away to "serve another family" soon.

cording to Joseph Campbell, women were associated with witchcraft and magical powers before men because of their ability to give birth to life. Some cultures also believed that a woman who has prophetic dreams during her first menstrual cycle would become a witch or shaman in the future (Creed 105). Therefore, this connection between the female body, her ability to procreate, and her menstrual blood with witchcraft and the supernatural becomes evident.

The family's condition spirals out of control when the oldest son, Caleb, goes missing in the woods while hunting with Thomasin. Once again, Katherine accuses her of hurting him. Meanwhile, Caleb is lost in the woods and stumbles upon the witch's house. She takes the physical form of a young, attractive woman and kisses him. Days later, he suddenly appears outside the house, naked and freezing in the rain. Thus, the inherently sexual nature of the witch that is often placed at the forefront of her representation in horror cinema (Creed 107) is established as a central aspect of her monstrosity.

Ultimately, Caleb passes away after days of being ill, William is killed by Black Phillip, and Jonas and Mercy disappear. Katherine has lost her sanity by this point, and her confrontation with Thomasin bears a likeness to the scene between Carrie and Margaret White. Katherine calls Thomasin a "proud slut", and accuses her of bewitching her brother. "Did you not think I saw thy sluttish looks to him, bewitching his eye as any whore?" Similar to how Carrie begged Margaret to hold her before crucifying her, Thomasin desperately tries to get through to her enraged mother one last time by saying "I love you, I love you", before slashing her with a knife in self defence. In the context of ***Carrie***, Creed explains this as a movement from child to woman, and back to child. Thomasin, too, attempts to break away from the maternal entity by speaking up to defend herself from the accusations. In the final confrontation with her mother, Thomasin moves back into a state of 'childlike dependency' (Creed 115) that is similar to Carrie, and seeks solace and protection from Katherine.

Early on in the film when William and Caleb are contemplating how to hunt in the unknown woods, William says, "We will conquer this wilderness. It will not consume us." But in the climax of the film, of course, the monstrous wilderness does consume Thomasin. Thomasin commands Black Philip to speak to her. He asks if she would like "the taste of butter", "a pretty dress", and "to live deliciously" – all luxuries that were previously denied to her. She agrees and is led into the forest, where naked witches chant around a fire and levitate. Thomasin levitates with them, and revelling in her newfound freedom, begins to laugh. The symbol of fire is once again used to signify this freedom. ***The Witch*** diverts from ***Carrie*** and the others in the sense that Thomasin's transformation takes place at the very end of the film. She seeks solace and comfort with the same witches that terrorised her family.

Black Phillip asks her to take off her clothes before joining him – signifying that she is freeing herself from the constraints of religion and sexual repression that tie women down and prevent them from living a truly happy, or ‘delicious’ life. **Bulbbul** (2020) is the journey of the loss of innocence at the hands of misogyny, jealousy, and cruelty. The plot follows Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri), a child bride, who marries Indranil (Rahul Bose), the ‘Thakur’, or Elder Lord of a wealthy household in 19th century Bengal Presidency, India. During her childhood days, she develops a strong bond with Satya, Indranil’s youngest brother, who is closer to her age and encourages her to write a book

Here, the woman-on-woman hatred emerges once again as a deciding factor in Bulbbul’s fate. Binodini (the wife of Mahendra, Indranil’s brother who has an intellectual disability), convinces Indranil that Bulbbul is in love with Satya. Enraged, Indranil sends Satya off to London and brutally beats Bulbbul, mutilating her feet. This is especially telling of Indranil’s desire to not only hurt Bulbbul, but control and imprison her. The message sent out by breaking her feet is clear – she must not dream of running away from her marriage. The love and friendship she feels for Satya is already demonised, made out to be something monstrous that threatens her marriage with Indranil, and so he sees it fit to punish her.

When Bulbbul is bedridden from her injuries, Mahendra rapes her without quite realising what he is doing. It seems that Bulbbul dies at this point. But the moon turns red, illuminating a statue of Goddess Kali, and she is revived. Her pain, rage, and humiliation erupts as an ear-piercing scream. It is at this breaking point that Bulbbul is reborn as a supernatural being. She begins to kill the men of the village who have brutalised women in some way, including Mahendra. Still damaged from the abuse, her feet turn backwards. But she now uses them to climb trees and leap across branches. In Indian folklore, backward feet are commonly considered the mark of a *chudail*, or a witch. Mirroring Carrie, the part of herself and her body that was used against her becomes the very thing that empowers hers and facilitates her quest for revenge.

Blood takes on an abject quality in **Bulbbul**. The film is gruesome in its imagery of the blood between Bulbbul’s thighs and the towels used to clean her up after she was raped, the blood and wounds on her feet after being mutilated, and the blood dripping from her mouth after she attacks a carriage driver. Creed asserts that wounds are abject because they signify a woman’s reproductive abilities and alliance with nature (116). Bulbbul’s wounded feet, therefore, signify not only her physical imprisonment, but also the suppression of her sexuality and her connection with the world of nature. Much like Jennifer Check, Bulbbul’s transformation into a monstrous woman also comes with significant behavioural changes.

Cruelly robbed of her innocence, she becomes a strong, dominating force presiding over the household. The widowed Binodini can no longer command influence after Mahendra's death, and since Indranil has left the village, Bulbbul assumes the responsibilities of a matriarch-esque figure. She befriends Sudip (Parambrata Chatterjee), a doctor who visits regularly to check on her feet, and receives the friendship she was denied with Satya. In **Bulbbul**, we once again see the image of fire as a symbol of female power and energy. Suspicious that Sudip has been murdering the men of the village, Satya plans to accompany him to Calcutta. On the way, Bulbbul kills the driver and is wounded when Satya shoots her. Sudip discovers her identity and tries to stop Satya from finding her, saying "She is not a demon, she is a goddess". In a scuffle with him, Satya accidentally starts a forest fire. Bulbbul, who hides in the treetops, is engulfed by flames and presumed to have died in the fire. When Satya realises that she was in fact the *chudail*, he is distraught, and begins to cry. He feels resentment after learning about what Bulbbul endured, and leaves home. Indranil returns to an empty house. In the final scene, he wakes up in the middle of the night to see Bulbbul materialising from the embers of the fire, and it is implied that she kills him to exact her final revenge. Yet again, she draws her powers from the fire that was intended to destroy her.

### CONCLUSION

It was William Congreve who wrote, "Heaven has no rage like love to hatred turned, nor Hell a fury like a woman scorned." Female rage and revenge has been an oft explored and well- documented concept in every artistic field: from Euripedes' play Medea in 431 BCE, to Taylor Swift's haunting ballad 'Mad Woman' in 2020. Even the association of puberty and female sexuality with monstrosity has a long, complex history that is worth exploring further in itself. Samm Deighan, as quoted in an article on Mashable, suggests that it can be traced as far back as traditional fairy tales. "The root of a lot of these female coming-of-age horror films is the fairy tale, which (typically originate in) the 16th or 17th century," Deighan says these stories involve "young women going on adventures where they're inherently transformed. And usually, these girls are going on a journey to find a husband." But if there is one film genre that has always made room to truly understand and often justify female rage in all its beauty, power, or grotesque ugliness, it is horror. Through slasher and serial killer films, horror cinema has given us timeless male villains - Michael Myers, Jason Voorhees, Freddy Kreuger, and Leatherface are just a few prominent examples. The woman, however, was situated very differently in these films. It was slasher horrors that gave birth to and popularised one of the most well-known character tropes of all time - the Final Girl. This characterisation remains largely dominated by women.

The Final Girl is the last woman standing, or the only one from the group who survives the serial killer's attack. Take Sally in ***The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*** (1974), Laurie in ***Halloween*** (1978), or Sidney in ***Scream*** (1996). The term was first coined by Carol J. Clover in her book 'Men, Women, and Chainsaws'. However, this trope is anything but static, and has changed greatly over the years to create more complex Final Girls.

Both the monstrous woman and the Final Girl fight back in order to survive. But they differ in the sense that the monstrous woman is the victim and the villain at once. Final Girls fight off the evil, but monstrous women become it. Further, as Courtney Helm suggests in a piece on 'Wicked Horror', the Final Girl follows certain rules, such as abstaining from sex, drugs, and alcohol. She is the least 'sinful' member of the group, and the only one who survives. In stark contrast, the monstrous woman is sin personified – an abject, sexual being who threatens a breakdown in the boundary between good and evil, pure and impure. The element of sexuality is indispensable in the construction of the monstrous woman. In this light, many consider the Final Girl to be a highly misogynistic trope – one that rewards celibacy and purity and punishes promiscuity. ***Carrie's*** raging popularity in 1974 and the subsequent success of the cinematic adaptation in 1976 seems even more monumental given that it succeeded in pushing for an entirely new and revolutionary character arc at a time when Final Girls were dominating the horror film scene during the 'classical' era of slasher films, which lasted from 1974 to 1993 (Petridis 47). The objective of this research has not only been to map the journey of the 'monstrous woman' from ***Carrie*** to the present day, but also to highlight the importance of horror films that have given birth to nuanced female characters and have made them the focal point of the story. It was important (and still is) to put women at the centre of the narrative in a culture that encourages their repression. In order to do this, it became even more important to view the explosion of repressed female power through the lens of sexuality. The last two decades have seen an increase in horror films portraying the woman as a monstrous, sexual being. Aside from the ones discussed in this essay, Julia Ducournau's ***Raw*** (2016), Joachim Trier's ***Thelma*** (2017), and Friedrich Böhm's ***Wildling*** (2018) experimented with ideas of the monstrous woman and her repressed sexuality in some ways. Although they were different in their portrayal of the female protagonist as a dangerous being, ***Black Swan*** (2010), ***Suspiria*** (2018), and ***Midsommar*** (2019) are all excellent examples of women claiming the centre stage in the horror film. This surge could have also contributed to the major shift in film criticism which led to a re-examination of films like ***Jennifer's Body*** and ***Ginger Snaps*** and their re-claimation as the poignant feminist films they were always intended to be.

What the women of horror still require, though, is to shed their whiteness and heteronormativity. The ‘social thriller’ or ‘socially-conscious’ horror / thriller film has emerged as a notable subgenre in the recent past. ***The Witch*** can be categorised as such, along with ***The Purge*** (2013), ***Get Out*** (2017), ***Parasite*** (2019), and ***His House*** (2020), to name a few. These films offer the essential elements of horror, but it is the poignant social commentary and portrayal of real world issues that makes them truly terrifying to watch. Among 2021’s most successful horror films was Leigh Janiak’s ***The Fear Street Trilogy***. Three classic horror storylines from three different time periods are tied together in a thrilling series. The protagonist is a black, queer woman who fights against the odds of ancient curses and the undead to be with the girl she loves. Jordan Peele’s ***Us*** (2019) also puts a black woman at the centre of its chilling story. But these examples are few and far between. While many have been quick to point out the homoerotic subtext of Jennifer and Needy’s relationship, along with the former’s iconic admission, “I go both ways”, the horror cinema industry still lacks queer characters and women of colour as monstrous beings. Such characters could then open up previously unexplored opportunities to address race, queerness, and their associations with monstrosity.

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**SEX & HORROR**  
**2021-2022**

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Prantik Ali** is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree in English at Presidency University, Kolkata. He writes regularly on films, and topics of socio-political relevance in his blog. He has previously been published twice in the Historical journal of St. Stephen's College, Delhi, and is constantly looking for ways to expand his knowledge on issues that interest him, which include, but are not limited to, art, politics, society, music, and everything poetic.

**Briti Bhattacharyya** is an undergraduate student of Anthropology at Indira Gandhi National Open University. She is a presenter for the seminar "A Haunted Structure" at the 2022 NeMLA convention. Her research interests include pop culture studies, ethnomusicology, folkloristics, and ritual studies. She enjoys making music and generally ends up drinking her tea gone cold.

A cluttered mess who ironically thrives on organisation, **Sampada Jain**, a Second year Economics student, is full of ideas and humour. From 4am rants to good music recommendations, she is always ready to be of assistance. She is keenly interested in a wide range of areas like guitar, golf, stitching and learning languages. When not working, you can find her reading books and binging YouTube videos about philosophy, Greek mythology, economics and maths among others.

**Vasundhara** is an Economics student fuelled by her own contradictions and the conviction that love is the only reality in the world. She refuses to be restrained by stereotypes, adopting new traits every month and living in a conflicting 'classical+pop' aesthetic. A huge dessert lover and entirely subjugated by her cat, she is usually making fairy tales out of the mundane when she isn't hiding her real thoughts behind the silences of her words. You can often find her fangirling over anything under the moon, or waiting for her magical powers to suddenly appear and her fantasy adventure to begin.

**Tanishka Aggarwal** is a second year honours student of English Literature from Miranda House. Like a photographer finds his photographs in the uncanniest of places, she finds stories, old and new, in places known and unknown. This childhood fascination with stories has led her to develop a keen interest in theatre, films and books. Simultaneously, she also enjoys elocution and writing. Being an eager learner, she can often be found researching new ideas, unusual words and even the odd sentence, contemplating them during the day.

## CHALCHITRA DARPAR

**Aakriti Rawat** is a second year honours student of Mathematics in Miranda House. She makes her way through life with Bratmobile blasting in her headphones and tries to do her bit for social, environmental causes. A comic book fanatic and a nature enthusiast, her areas of interest also include existentialism, oneiric, surrealist cinema, 2000s Hollywood rom-coms and everything by Agnès Varda.

**Srushti Saravade** is a second year student of Political Science and Sociology in Miranda House. An art enthusiast, anything thought provoking inspires her, be it poetry, music, dance or theatre. She is a TV buff and especially enjoys dark comedy, absurdist humour with a soft spot for family dramas. Intrigued by the tendency of films and TV shows to challenge our morality, she is interested in exploring the sociological implications of the same.

**Songborto Biswas** is a student of English Literature at Scottish Church College, Kolkata. He is an aspiring writer with a lifelong interest in all things cinematic.

**Fei Mo** is in her fourth year of studies in Media and Communication at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University. Her research interests include gender and film, ethnic and film, slow cinema, and eco-cinema.

**Shreyashi Saha** is a third-year student of English literature in Jadavpur University. She likes to write and yet does not do that quite often. She usually spends her spare time watching movies and reading books and has to confess that these are some of the things she enjoys doing the most. If she is not doing these then one can find her strolling aimlessly around the city.

**Sabarno Sinha** is a second-year undergraduate student of Jadavpur University, Kolkata and is pursuing a BA in English. His academic interests lie in Romantic literature and Film Studies. Sabarno also enjoys writing short stories and screenplays. He has worked in several films in various capacities and is also learning Japanese at the moment. He has also worked closely with the Consulate-General of Japan in Kolkata for the promotion of Japanese culture in the city.

**Sreejita Sarkar** is a second-year undergraduate student of Loreto College, Kolkata. She is currently pursuing a BSc in Psychology. She is interested in Freudian psychoanalysis and wishes to specialise in analytical psychology. Sreejita has worked with her professors in several academic pursuits. An ardent lover of Bollywood and classical Hollywood cinema, Sreejita wants to use her knowledge of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of films.

**Rachel Nhi Phan** grew up in Ho Chi Minh City and is among the first 54 students of Fulbright University – the pioneer of liberal arts education in Vietnam. She is interested in studying the reflection of different Asian cultures in the visual language of film and photography. Besides being a rising junior at Fulbright, she has three years experience as a conceptual photographer and two years as a social media content creator in the fashion industry

**Sreya Chatterjee** just completed her Masters in English Literature from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her research interests include postcolonialism, gender and feminism, and popular culture. She also writes poetry in her spare time and recently got published on Setu and LiveWire. She's currently spending her pandemic days formulating her research proposal, and strumming her ukulele thus greatly upsetting the neighbourhood dogs in the process.

**Thanong Aupitak** is currently an MA graduate in the department of American Studies, the university of Tübingen, Germany. During his studies, he worked as a graduate teaching assistant responsible for fundamental cultural studies' subjects that are mandatory for American Studies undergraduate students. His research interests include 19th century ghost stories by American women, gothic fiction, American heroism, slasher genre, popular culture, feminism, postfeminism, queer studies, and gender studies. He completed his Masters with the thesis entitled "From History to Herstory: Disney's Feminist Re-Conceptualizations of Princesses in the Post-2010 Era" with Prof. Dr. Michael Butter who is one of the top Americanists in Germany. He also completed his Bachelor Degree in Business English from Assumption University of Thailand with Summa Cum Laude (G.P.A. 3.88) after he had hold the positions of the faculty's Vice President Student Committee, Business English Student President, and Graduate Student Representative.

**Neeharika Nene** is an undergraduate student at Jyoti Dalal School of Liberal Arts, NMIMS University, Mumbai. Her specialisation is Literature, and she is currently in her third year. Her research interests include pop culture, horror novels, and cinema. She is the co-editor of Push up Daisies, an independent online platform that publishes written pieces, art, and photography surrounding the theme of death. In her spare time, she writes essays and film reviews as a freelancer, and enjoys watching classic slasher films.

**CHALCHITRA DARPAN TEAM 2021-2022**

**Faaria Hilaly** (*Editor-in-Chief*), Creative Head of Celluloid, The Film Society of Miranda House (21-22) is ambitious, altruistic, and a graduate in Philosophy from Miranda House (2022). A radical feminist and a hopeless romantic, she harbours an intense love for movies- especially horror and rom-com; theatre- she tenured as the President of The Ariels, The English Theatre Society of Miranda House (21-22); SpongeBob and everything in the general vicinity of Bikini Bottom; cake- something she feels deserves its own separate sentence; Lord William Shakespeare- not the Bard, but her rabbit, also known as God's Greatest Feat; Karl Marx and the orchestra. One could now say that she harbours an intense love for the art of expression. With her Master's and preparation for a career in the Civil Services right around the corner, she hopes that this, her final swansong, will be as enjoyable for the reader as it was for her team to put together. If you need her, she will almost exclusively be found in her room indulging herself in smut or Crime Patrol or some other cringeworthy content, inundated by cake, or ice cream, or some ghastly existential crises. Not to worry, that will be just another day in her life.

**Kizhakoot Gopika Babu** (*Illustrator*) is a recent graduate from the department of Sociology, Miranda House. She holds a keen interest in drawing, creative writing and reading. Sociology as a discipline helped her wrap her head around different and oftentimes conflicting perspectives. In her first year she was an active part of the art society and the creative writing club at Miranda House. Although the pandemic halted the campus life for the majority of students, on good days, she utilized the lockdown to dwell into the intersection of two of her major interests in life, art and sociology. She had her illustration works published with reputable research institutes, websites, international exhibitions and as book/magazine covers and also received an art fellowship by reFrame institute of art and expression. Her illustrations are on display on the Instagram handle @colourfulcharcoal. She was also part of the editorial board of one of Delhi University's first student-led art magazines, Parcha. She would love to pursue sociology of art in the coming years and sociologically analyze the unique ability of art to inspire social change.

**Sejal Maheshwari** (*Journal Design*) is a 3rd year undergraduate student who is majoring in Economics and Political Science. She is currently the President of Celluloid, the Film Society of Miranda House and was the Graphics Head for the year 2021-22. Her avid interest in movies, sitcoms, cinema in general is why the paths of sejal and celluloid have aligned. Sejal is a professional guitarist and a music critic (a career she pursues in her free time). During her leisure time you can find her watching asmr videos or scrolling through cat memes.

## CHALCHITRA DARPAN

### CHALCHITRA DARPAN TEAM 2021-2022

**Asra Malik** (*Editor & Journal Design*) is a final-year student at Miranda House, University of Delhi. In the dwindling process of her yearning to figure out her passion, she came across movies and films and couldn't get past the satisfaction they presented, which explains her interest in being a part of Chalchitra Darpan's team. She's currently the Vice-President of The Ariels: The English Theatre Society of Miranda House (22-23). She has been an important production member in all the productions we have had since her first year in the Ariels—online and offline. She has also been a part of Celluloid as a graphics member since her first year. With her impromptu ideas and constant spontaneity, she comes up with doable-fun stuff to do, and you'll have the best time. She's a calm person who doesn't get worked up much and likes to dive into things by questioning and resolving her choices in transit.

**Akshika Goel** (*Editor*) is a literature major (22-23) from Miranda House. Proficient in the analysis of visual culture, she is invested in the theory and practice of films, photography, and art. She herself is an aspiring academician. Besides academic writing, she heads the editorial department of her college's newsletter and engages with content writing and ideation. She handles the accounts for the Literature department. Empathetic and curious, she brings home with her the characters she sees and reads. Great cinema, she thinks, is not the one which has the best shots or a grand narrative, but it is what submerges you enough that you drown in its world and come back alive from it with a piece of yourself, like a pearl from the depths of a bottomless ocean. A learner in earnest, she tries to dabble in multifarious fields of knowledge including economics, philosophy, cultural studies, and art history.

Hello my name is **Aryama Ghosh** (*Editor*) and my pronouns are she/her. I just finished my graduation in English Literature and am now pursuing my Masters in Women Studies. Occasionally dabbling in scriptwriting and sometimes the audacious filmmaking films make up a large part of my life, hence, Celluloid. Chalchitra has been a distant dream and it makes me excited beyond measure to see it actualise. I hope you all enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed making it.

## CHALCHITRA DARPAN

### *CHALCHITRA DARPAN TEAM 2021-2022*

**Anushka Joshi** (*Editor*) is a student of English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. Fascinated by stories in all their iterations- be it photos, films, books, or visual arts, Anushka is interested in studying the intersection of society and its creative churning, and how the two form each other in turn. She aspires to venture into media studies in the future. In her free time, she enjoys painting, long walks, and bickering with her dog, Balu. She wants to be the kind of person who never shies away from extending help or assistance to those who need it. She wishes to cultivate a novel perspective for all that she encounters. Although not quite there yet, she would like to be the life of the party- or the sweet eye of the bitter storm.

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