

Catering or Creating? : The Role of Media in Select Bollywood Horror Movies

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Horror movies are a very popular genre of media, which is greatly appreciated and enjoyed by our Indian audience. Horror is something that has been a subject of intriguing discussions from the ancient times. In literatures throughout the ages, authors have depicted women figures in horror themes. However, it has been repeatedly seen in numerous Bollywood horror movies that women are presented as the 'damsel-in-distress' and there is always a male 'knight-in-shining-armour' protagonist who comes to her rescue. This generally puts the role of gender into question as it puts women in the patriarchal categorisation of feminine roles. Although it is a fact that providing aesthetic pleasure is one of the role of a movie but creating a plot where women are always dependent upon the courage and valour of a man, fails another purpose of a movie, that is, to teach the audience. Often times it is seen that the female protagonist is objectified by the cinematographers, which instead of contributing to the theme, diverts the theme of horror and also mars the mood of the tasteful audience. A horror element should be presented in the proper manner, incorporating elements of uncanny, grotesque and fear. However, many popular movies in Bollywood has incorporated sexuality and female body objectification as their content, which suppress the element of grotesque and uncanny. Examples of such movies are replete in Bollywood popular movie genre. For the sake of this paper,

only *Ragini MMS 2* will be considered as primary text. As popular movies, it is a well accepted fact that these movies will cater to the taste of the audience. But in some ways these movies by promoting female objectification has contributed in creating the taste among Indian audience. This paper shall discuss the role of media in popular genre with special focus on Bollywood horror movies.

At the very outset the definition of 'popular' should be discussed. Popular culture is basically practices based on collective choice, which may be expressed via media, entertainment, education and many more aspects of any society. In Kidd's words:

Popular culture is the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system. It includes media objects, entertainment and leisure, fashion and trends, and linguistic conventions, among other things. Popular culture is usually associated with either mass culture or folk culture, and differentiated from high culture and various institutional cultures (political culture, educational culture, legal culture, etc.). The association of popular culture with mass culture leads to a focus on the position of popular culture within a capitalist mode of economic production. Through this economic lens, popular culture is seen as a set of commodities produced through capitalistic processes driven by a profit motive and sold to consumers. In contrast, the association of popular culture with folk culture leads to a focus on subcultures such as youth cultures or ethnic cultures. Through this subculture lens, popular culture is seen as a set of practices by artists or other kinds of culture makers that result in performances and objects that are received and interpreted by audiences, both within and beyond the subcultural group. Holistic approaches examine the ways that popular culture begins as the collective creation of a subculture and is then appropriated by the market system. Key issues in the sociological analysis of popular culture

include the representation of specific groups and themes in the content of cultural objects or practices, the role of cultural production as a form of social reproduction, and the extent to which audiences exercise agency in determining the meanings of the culture that they consume. (Kidd, 2017)

It is evident that popular content be it a movie or a literature is very much influential and generally affects the young generation. It is driven and directed by capitalist mentality and therefore cares less about the aesthetic value of the content. But it has been seen in history that popular literature or popular movies have transcended into classics. To be far more clear about the characteristics of the popular genre, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* should be consulted:

The categorical boundaries of popular literature are not strict, and the classification of specific works may change over time. While books that sell in large quantities and appear on bestseller lists are by definition popular, sales figures alone are insufficient criteria for a work to be regarded as popular literature. Many works of literary fiction have become best-sellers, just as many works of genre fiction have failed to find an audience. In addition, literary distinction is often awarded to works that have “stood the test of time,” by transcending the context of their initial reception, but such an assessment cannot be made until long after the work’s publication. For instance, William Shakespeare’s plays were considered popular literature in their day but are now widely recognized as artistic works. Nevertheless, some common attributes of popular literature have been defined.

First, it is crafted primarily to entertain the reader, as entertainment is a quality that attracts and appeals to a wide audience. To promote a pleasurable reading experience, works of popular fiction are usually written in a simple and straightforward style. They are largely plot-driven, rather than character-driven, and adhere to conventional narrative

structures. As such, they are intended less to provoke deep reflection or aesthetic appreciation than to be read casually and quickly. Books that are successful at this aim, especially through their employment of techniques that stimulate readers' interest and compel them to continue reading, are praised as "page-turners." (Cunningham, 2023)

Now it is clear that popular culture is something that is created based on the collective choice of contemporary milieu and thus is meant to entertain and cater to those choices. However, time is a huge factor in these cases as, popular culture is not permanent and it changes over time. Once an element of popular culture stays for a long period of time in the collective choice, while other contemporary trends get obsolete, the long lasting collective taste becomes a classic. But how is the collective taste created? Is popular culture only caters to the collective taste or does it influence it and thereby changing it? As already mentioned before, popular culture is controlled by capitalists and they change the trends based on the consumers' choices. But it may also happen that sometimes the capitalists create a culture that gradually becomes popular. More simply said, a capitalist may influence the milieu in following a certain trend that proves profitable and thereby making the trend a collective choice. Similarly, movies which are elements of popular culture, which are meant to entertain people and cater to their taste, may also create the collective taste to fulfill the agenda or propaganda of the power. It may serve as a tool of power to create a discourse. Popular movies therefore are not always based upon the consumers' requirement, it may create the requirement. For example, movies in Hollywood and Bollywood have a major difference, that is, the incorporation of songs. Songs in Hollywood movies are very rare, whereas, in case of Bollywood movies it is a requirement. Does this mean that western audience lack the taste of music? No. This is basically a trend set by the makers, which grew in popularity and gradually became a characteristic feature. The same goes with the 'item songs', where a female body is ob-

jectified in seductive wardrobe through a song, which in most cases are replete with sexual connotations. These 'item songs' were introduced as a method of entertaining the young milieu. An early example such song can be found in the movie *Sholay* (1975), where Hema Malini is seen dancing in front of a gang of dacoits to save the hero. The entire sequence is imbued with the plot and that is why does not seem out of place. The lyrics also contributes to the plot. (Sippy, 1975) But later this seemed very profitable and producers and directors started using unnecessary 'item songs' which contributed neither to the plot nor to the taste, thereby, making a requirement by creating a need among audience for a sexually appealing and seductive objectification of female body.

But apart from entertaining, the duty of film or any mass media is to educate. But it is often neglected as seen in movies like, *Ragini MMS 2* (2014). In both the movies we can see that the sexuality have been used in such abundance that the element of horror becomes overcast by it. In *Ragini MMS 2* it is seen that an entire crew of a film moves to a haunted house to shoot a film. That house has its past where a woman was brutally persecuted by the villagers, because that woman was trying to resurrect her son by sacrificing her daughters.

Now, as per the plot of the movie, the ghost has no reason to indulge in sexual ventures with the male members of the crew. But in the movie we find that by incorporating Sunny Leone's experience of acting in adult movies the director unnecessarily includes scenes where the ghost possesses or shapeshifts into the Leone and indulges in sexual activity with the male members of the movie. And as a cherry on the cake, an 'item song' is also included which seems not only out of place but also diverting to the mood of horror. (Patel, 2014) Therefore, we understand that these kind of movies does not only cater to the taste of the milieu but also create their taste thereby making it necessary to incorporate the female body objectification.

References

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