

Commercialising Ghosts: A Study of Various Illustrations in Entertainment Industries

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Abstract:

Ghosts very frequently feature in media but it has been commonly observed that in different entertainment industries, their depictions greatly vary depending on the culture of the particular geographical location. This dissertation will aim to explore the significance of their appearances in different contexts and each of their connotations. Even their nature and their acceptance in the society seem to be quite different. In Bengali culture, while there are designated categories of ghosts having unique traits and roles and thereby are known by various names accordingly, in western culture there is not much relevance of this. Not all ghosts are fearsome, often in films and television shows, there appear ghosts who protect and safeguard the interest of the characters around or their own successors from unwanted circumstances. Likewise, we also find very similar contexts in the Western media presentations, where there are different mentions of household gods who function in a very similar manner, preserving the members of the houses along with the assets of the families.

Keyword: *Bengali culture, Ghosts, household gods, Western culture*

According to the Occident, ghosts are considered to be spirits of dead persons who try to establish connection with the living world through various methods. Numerous tales are conceptualised which involve different spooky adventures of these spirits and their interaction with the human world. In the ancient Greek literary tradition, eminent literary figures starting from Homer, Virgil up to the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and others, including Herodotus and Tacitus who wrote the historical narratives of civilization, have featured a number of terrifying stories about spectres. Greeks always had well refined beliefs regarding the concept of spectral beings. They have categorised Ghosts into three types – the deads who had not received proper burials, ones who have died a premature and untimely death and the third category includes war victims. In such circumstances, it was believed that men were trapped between the two worlds which forced them to return again and again in this mortal world as they cannot reach their final destination. However, their purpose of repeated revisiting this world can be either due to seek revenge or it can also be for the benefits of the living. There was also a parallel belief among them that these supernatural beings often came amongst the mortals to provide them esoteric knowledge or advice which they may require to save themselves from challenging situations.

The Oriental concept of paranormal creatures is not much different from the westerners. Interestingly, in the Bengali culture, we have fascinating ideas of varying types of ghosts. They have their own traits and special appearances. The first one is named *Bromhodoityo*, who are considered to be the most elite category of ghosts. It is believed that a Brahmin after having an unnatural death turns into a *Bromhodoityo*. They continue to wear dhoti, the sacred thread and have pure vegetarian food. They are quite amiable and helpful but a bit obnoxious at the same time due to their knowledge of Sanskrit and *Shastras*. *Kobondhos* or *Skondhokatas* are headless and continuously seeks their lost heads. *Shankhchunnis* are

married ones who continue to maintain their marriage symbols, while Petnis suffer endlessly as their dreams and aspirations could not be achieved in their life time and thus they have a vicious and cunning character. *Mamdos* are Muslim ghosts with long beards wearing skull caps, who have died an unnatural death. *Gechho bhoot* on the other hand generally are to be found in trees and *Mechho bhoots* are always obsessed with fishes. Aleyaa is another weird category of ghosts who have a tendency of attracting and misguiding people who have lost their way and ultimately they are led into marshlands or water bodies and meet their end. *Ekanore* resides on palm trees and have got their name from their feature of having one leg. They generally hunt down naughty children. The western witches have a version even in our culture in the form of *Dainis* who live in a secluded area and are reputed to be practising black magic and also abduct children, thereby turning them into animals. Lastly, there is the *Kanabhulo* who picks men from deserted places, hypnotises them, and drags them to isolated places where they finally kill them.

Depicting these spectral figures onstage has been a very old practice since the ancient Greeks. Later, we see its widespread use in Shakespearean plays like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* etc. Victorian spiritualism and Dickensian depictions feature these spectres usually for entertainment purposes. Later, horror movies and soap operas have become popular genres in the world of entertainment industries. *Topper* (1937), *The Uninvited* (1943), *The Innocents* (1961), *The Haunting* (1963), *The Shining* (1980), *Ghost Story* (1981), *Poltergeist* (1982), *Ghost Busters* (1984), *Ghost* (1990), *The Sixth Sense* (1999), *The Others* (2001) etc. are some of the famous Hollywood movies of this genre. Most of the plots of these films include a haunted house with glowing lights, creepy castles, chilling scenes, surrealistic world of the supernatural beings, isolated graveyards etc., all being common elements that generally aid in creating a spooky atmosphere. Often these horror movies are confused with another very close genre known by the name

of psychological thriller. Spiritualists and psychical researchers from the very beginning have given their utmost effort to capture evidences in order to prove the existence of human spirits.

In the Indian Entertainment Industry, depiction of ghosts is very common. Besides featuring tormenting ones, we can notice a number of popular films, featuring a ghost as the protagonist who won the hearts of the audience by displaying their potential of love, care and concern which supercedes all earthly creatures.

Bhootnath, a Bollywood movie of 2008, recounts the story of an initially unfriendly ghost, but later undergoes a complete transformation as he befriends a little boy. The bond between them was cherished by each and every viewer as it gave a complete new definition to the general notion about ghost. A Bengali movie named *Gosainbaganer Bhoot* was released in 2011 where we have a resembling plot, celebrating an adorable bond between a small boy who is known to be very weak in Mathematics and a ghost named Nidhiram Sardar, who fights together against an evil character Habu. The story is based on a novel written by the famous author Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay. The film is very popular among the children who cherish the bond.

Bhooter Bhabisyat (2012) is a Tollywood comedy film directed by Anik Dutta, which feature a host of ghosts who protect their resting place, i.e., a dilapidated house from getting turned into a shopping mall. Numerous funny scenes portraying idiosyncratic activities of the ghosts are shown which made the audiences laugh through the film. In the first part, one can even see that the ghosts themselves could not gel up with themselves but later they got united to fight for a noble cause and thus claimed moral high grounds when compared with the greedy promoter or plot dealer being a representative of the mortal world.

Goynar Baksho is a 2013 famous Bengali film released in 2013 where we find a widow matriarch who could not enjoy any moment of her life as she had been married off in her very early age. Just like any other adolescent girl, she wanted to lead a happy married life but her husband died quite soon and she had to restrict herself to the various norms of the society. All that she had was a jewellery box that she could call her own. After becoming a widow, she had to return to her paternal home, where quite evidently she was an unwelcomed guest but all her family members had their eyes on her jewelleries and so even after death, she returned from her grave to save it from her greedy relatives. Her only trust was in her niece-in-law. She gave her the box and made her promise to hide it from others. Surprisingly, twice she herself gave her jewels to be used – once when her niece had to set up a business to save his family from starving and finally when the Mukti Bahini needed funds during the Bangladesh Liberation War. She gave all that she had been preserving for so long to her grandniece who was a part of the struggle. Hence, here we come across a ghost who saved the lives of hundreds of people of her motherland by donating her most treasured wealth.

According to the psychologists, horror scenes and the presence of supernaturalism seem to attract audiences to a large extent as they seem to reflect the deepest fear of the unknown or death and thus stimulate the rush of adrenaline by tapping into the primal instinct in man. At the same time, horror movies also give an opportunity to taste fear in a safe environment and this perhaps adds to the popularity of ghost tales. “Moving images rouse our consciousness keeps it at alert. They inform us that ‘something’ is about to happen even before the why and wherefore can be specified...each shot is a surprise effect, a pure emotional shock...” (Mitry 84)

An eminent psychiatrist Dr. Glenn D. Walters identified three prime reasons behind the popularity of horror genre – the first being the use of scenes that use elements like

shock, gore, suspense and terror that prompts feelings of tension and this helps to retain the curiosity in the viewers till the end; second, these movies or daily soaps and opera try to maintain some level of relatability and relevance with the common lifestyle and universal ideas of audiences regarding fear of death, the unknown, and other social issues; and lastly, the scenes are designed in such a manner such that the spectators do not preserve the false notion of considering the contents to be real; thus the reality is clearly distinguished from the world of fantasy.

A popular website named Harmoniamentis puts forward an interesting perspective of the effects of horror scenes on mental health of man. According to it, while on one hand there is a magical element in the depiction of ghostly actions as the audience after witnessing these sights surely suffers from shock, fear, and stress; nevertheless, they are assured regarding the fact that they are absolutely safe and this very security gives them an enriching, cathartic, and a very satisfying experience at the same time. According to Margee Kerr's interview to *The Atlantic*, a phenomenon named excitation fear is the main reason behind it. As the accelerated heart rate, fast breathing and abnormal bodily mechanisms slowly starts to ebb away, the audience starts to experience a sense of relief and a positive feeling seems to take its place. In the words of The Huffington Post, "fear floods our brains with feel-good chemicals". (Web) The contrasting sensation for a huge number of people is a great source of entertainment, but it is not a very peaceful feeling for people suffering from different mental disorders since quite often the terrifying images seem to trigger repressed thoughts and feelings and in turn tends to stimulate levels of anxiety. Often the sensitivity gets increased to such levels that these sufferers seem to have a negative response and thus misinterpret these sensations as real threats in their own lives. They often fail to clearly distinguish between fantasy and reality which too often leads to serious physical and mental conditions. Several physical

disorders follow such traumatic experiences which include insomnia, fast heartbeat, and high cholesterol due to flooding of adrenalin and hormones like norepinephrine and cortisol. Most of the times, the viewers fail to realise what is actually happening with them as the brain being too complex, the fear psychosis triggers a chain reaction which starts to function with stressful stimuli but finally ends with the fight-or-flight response. Smithsonian points out to some important players which are directly involved with the cognitive processes that influences the psychology of fear, keeping in mind the main role of the brain to transfer impulses on a continuous basis – the ‘thalamus’ which decides the final destination of the incoming sensory data in the body; the ‘sensory cortex’ reads this sensory data; the ‘hippocampus’ helps to store, retrieve, and finally process the stimuli, thereby giving it context; the ‘amygdala’ recognises the plausible threats, decodes the emotions, and ultimately registers the memories of fear; and lastly, the ‘hypothalamus’ instigates the fight-or-flight response to get activated. Thus, all the physiological elements actively participate to help the viewer to determine the fear factors and react accordingly. Nevertheless, there are other elements which inspire people to get obsessed with horror entertainment as explained by several theories. Some of them have been well identified by Pacific Standard – The first being ‘Excitation transfer’ theory which states that one who experience a strong emotional response to paranormal activities also seem to enjoy more in situations of threats; second, ‘Individual empathy’ theory claims that less empathetic people tends to enjoy horror scenes more as Professor Ron Tamborini suggests, “viewers with high levels of empathy should dislike horror films because they react negatively to the suffering of others.” (Web); and the last, ‘Sensation-seeking’ theory spells out that people who are obsessed with paranormal events actually are seekers of sensory reactions and are generally aggressive in nature. Hence, it can be concluded that biological mechanisms working behind fear psychosis are actually quite complex and varied. However, the cultural curiosity involv-

ing paranormal activities has its root in the interest to know who human beings are as a species and the different psychological mechanisms they go through.

References

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