

‘I Wasn’t Born with Enough Middle Fingers’: How low-budget horror films defy sexual morality and heteronormativity in Bollywood

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Abstract. In the early 1980s the Ramsay Brothers gave Bollywood a new genre of monster flicks with blockbusters like *Purana Mandir*, *Hotel*, and *Veerana*. Following the work of the Ramsay Brothers, low-budget horror films that were made exclusively for the small towns and rural market increased in the decades of 1980s and 1990s. These films are primarily known for their unintentional humor owing to poor production and acting, but they have never been acknowledged for their actual content. This article argues that Bollywood low-budget films fulfilled the basic function of horror movies—that is, they subverted mainstream moral order and sexual morality. These films opened up space for dialogues that the mainstream cinema had totally neglected; particularly, in the areas of incest, female lust, ‘othering’ of male sexuality, and transgendered identities. On a different register, the relationship between low-budget horror films and mainstream Bollywood can be compared to folklore and canonical literature, where folklore repeatedly resists the conformities endorsed by the mainstream prescriptive texts.

I start by describing a scene from a movie released in 1993. A group of young women decide to have a ‘kitty party’. They get together in the Mumbai suburban farmhouse of one of their friends and there, they party hard, get drunk, and soon they want more. As the lone male servant quietly brings drinks, one of the women comments on his attractive appearance. The ladies start to dance and one of them goes inside the kitchen to seduce the servant. He rejects her overtures, but soon the other women join her. The servant tries to get away but the young women pin him down to the floor and rape him, an action that is indicated by the flickering of the chandelier. In the next shot the servant is lying on the floor in his vest and jeans, his shirt is gone, and there are bite and lipstick marks all over his body. He gets up, walks towards the group that is still partying, and accuses the women of taking advantage of a helpless poor man.

This scene is from the movie *Shaitani Badla* (The Devil’s Revenge) directed by Harinam Singh, who also plays the servant. And this is the exact reversal of what happens in mainstream Bollywood.

Bollywood has almost always exploited female sexuality and used rape as a tool of titillation, and sanitized the violence and horror of rape. But Harinam Singh challenges this existing code of sexuality and treats male rape in the traditional Bollywood style.

The treatment of the scene is very much like a mainstream film where flickering lights, the breaking of a pot, or the extinguishing a candle flame are all used to symbolize forced penetration. Here, as the chandelier flickers, we know Harinam Singh is being violated. He gets up and walks slowly; hair disheveled, and there are marks of lipstick on his body and his upper torso is bare. He accuses the women of the heinous crime and threatens to take them to the authorities. He is then killed by one of his rapists, and no one has any remorse for the act. His body and sexuality is used in the exact same way as women's bodies are used in most Bollywood films.

Now the question becomes—where to put *Shaitaani Badla*? Undoubtedly, it comes under the umbrella of Bollywood, but movies like *Shaitaani Badla* negotiate and redefine the boundaries of Bollywood.¹ The movie is a low-budget horror flick especially made for small towns. When I started this research, I categorized them under 'horror' and 'B' movies, but later realized that B movie aficionados² further categorized them under B, C, and D, depending primarily on the production. So, the ones that were really low-budget flicks were grouped under D. But my paper is not about these nuanced categories of B films; instead, I focus on how these low-budget horror films subvert the existing notions of sexuality and open up space for incest, transgender sexuality, and the female gaze to enter and renegotiate the discourse on the prevailing sexual morality of mainstream Bollywood.

It is extremely difficult to describe the horror genre in India. Unlike in Hollywood, horror took a long time to penetrate the Indian scene. Traditionally, Indian horror films are synonymous with the Ramsay Brothers; a group of seven brothers whose monster flicks were hugely successful in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, the Ramsay Brothers are a household name, and it was primarily their influence that led others to join the horror bandwagon.

The Ramsay Brothers undoubtedly introduced the horror genre in India. Although their first movie, *Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche* (Two Yards Under the Ground), was neither the first monster flick nor the first movie dealing with the supernatural, the success of this film, and later the unprecedented success of *Purana Mandir* (The Old Temple), created a niche for monster flicks and the horror genre. The films that were not consciously made as horror, but still had elements of the supernatural, and films such as Rajkumar Kohli's *Jaani Dushman* (Sworn Enemy) or Raveekant Nagaich's

¹ I am aware that the term Bollywood is controversial, but I am using Tejaswini Ganti's definition of Bollywood where she calls it a recognizable international brand name (Ganti 2012).

² During my fieldwork in Mumbai in 2012, I interviewed several B movie fans who are very active on social media and the Internet. Most of them are professionally connected to Bollywood and have a huge collection of these films. One of them told me, 'Mohan Bhakri's *Roohani Taqat* is somewhere between B- and C+, but Harinam Singh is C to D. Almost all of Ramsay Brothers are of course A- to B+'.

Jadu Tona (Hocus Pocus),³ also belonged in this category. Similarly, early Bollywood blockbuster films including Raj Khosla's *Woh Kaun Thi* (Who Was She?), Kamal Amrohi's *Mahal* (The Mansion), Biren Nag's *Bees Saal Baad* (Twenty Years Later), and Mehmood's *Bhoot Bungla* (The Haunted Bungalow) can all be categorized as horror even though their creators were not conscious of the genre. The films were just referred to as suspense thrillers with spooky elements and none of these old films had anything to do with the supernatural. The inexplicable spooky events always had a 'scientific' explanation. But the 1980s and 1990s saw a major boom in thrillers and horror. The success of the Ramsay Brothers played a major role in that. This period also saw the rise of the horror genre, chiefly in the form of monster flicks, and many filmmakers besides the Ramsays dabbled in horror. Most important among them were Mohan Bhakri and Vinod Talwar (Tombs 2003).

Even though Bollywood horror was clearly influenced by Hammer Studio Gothic themes and some American horror films, there was always a signature style in filmmaking that made the difference. While the themes were often about the clash between tradition and modernity, the Ramsay Brothers did not consciously subvert mainstream values. Their films were 'safe' as order was always restored in the end, and good succeeded over evil. Ramsay's most important achievement was to create a genre of self-conscious horror films. They gave Bollywood memorable monsters like Saamri (*Purana Mandir*, *3D Saamri*), Nevla (*Bandh Darwaza*), and Nikita (*Veerana*), who later became the prototype for future Bollywood ghouls. Bollywood always had a market for low-budget suspense films with a spooky content, but the Ramsays created something unique; they brought out the latent horror that was continuously sidelined by mainstream cinema (ibid., 252–3). Mainstream cinema was afraid to acknowledge superstition and folk traditions or to give credit to anything that could not be 'scientifically' proven. The Ramsays simply called a ghoul a ghoul and embraced the supernatural; their spooks existed beyond the realm of scientific explanation.

By the mid 1990s the Ramsay Brothers' films had run their course. The critics had never been kind to them, and after a few failures at the box office the Ramsay Brothers concentrated less on the big screen. Their lost prestige was restored in the late 1990s on TV, as the *Zee Horror Show* (later called *Anhonee*) became a huge success. The Ramsays again became pioneers, this time with horror shows on Indian TV, and the later horror shows like *Aahat* (Knock), *Shhhhh ... Koi Hai* (Hush, Someone's There),

³ I have taken some liberties with this translation. Jaadu Tona's literal translation would be 'Magic Spells', but in the context of the film I felt 'Hocus Pocus' made more sense because the protagonist sees black magic and spirit possession as psychological disorders and sees science and not magic as the solution. Both Jaani Dushman and Jaadu Tona were made after *Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche* but whether they identified themselves consciously with the horror genre is not known.

Mano ya Na Mano (Believe It or Not), and *Kaala Saaya* (Black Shadow), all of which followed the Ramsay Brothers format.⁴

By the mid 1990s there were plenty of low-budget horror filmmakers making films mostly to cater to small towns, rural areas, and small, single-screen local theatres in the big cities.⁵ This was the time when horror films consciously started fulfilling their basic role—subverting the mainstream moral order. What made subversion possible was the Censor Board’s attitude towards these films. The Censor Board’s idea of ‘adult content’ was limited to topless shots and butt cleavage, so if they did not find any of these things, the films passed the test.⁶ It was this myopic vision of the Censor Board that finally allowed the filmmakers to create actual ‘shocking content’ that was not limited to topless shots and indecent exposures.

I admit that when I started watching these films my sole purpose was humor. Poor production, bad acting, lack of continuity, inconsistencies in the script, and bad editing undoubtedly make these films hilarious.⁷ All the B movie fans I have interviewed watch them simply for laughs and to be amused, and they typically watch these films after getting drunk on a Saturday night. To quote Aseem Chandaver,⁸ a B movie fan I interviewed, ‘[T]his stuff is just so cool. It’s never about the cleavage or the thighs, but the monster who runs to attack you, his mask falls, he picks it up, and runs again, and the victim waits for the monster to resume his monster identity and again starts yelling “Bahchaa, Bachaa, Bhoot, Bhoot” (Save me, there is a ghost behind me)’.

But once one looks past the obvious humor, what emerges from these films is the content. These films are what David Cronenberg says is the purpose of *his* films: ‘to show the unshowable, to speak the unspeakable’ (quoted in Lowenstein 2005, 144). Perhaps my comparison with Cronenberg is not fair since he is very conscious of his art, but I want to use his vision to explain and emphasize how low-budget horror consciously violates all the social norms and manages to get away with extreme content. My definition of shocking content, unlike the Indian Censor Board’s idea,

⁴ These are the horror shows I am aware of; there may be more that might follow a different style. By ‘Ramsay Brothers format’ I mean their production values, plots, and narrative styles that are very similar to the Ramsay Brothers shows.

⁵ I interviewed actor Amrit Pal last year who had worked with Harinam Singh and even produced his own low-budget horror flick, called *Woh Kaun Thi*. My information about these films also comes from Bollywood screenplay writer Kiran Kotrial, who is not only a connoisseur of low-budget flicks and also has a website about these films. His website is www.fulpopat.com.

⁶ I interviewed five low-budget filmmakers and a distributor who talked about the censorship process.

⁷ Bloggers like Beth Watkins watches them for the same reason: <http://blogs.wsj.com/indiareal-time/2012/01/24/bollywood-journal-harinam-singhs-hair-raising-horrors/>.

⁸ Aseem Chandaver is known for sharing his passion for films on YouTube and in the social media. He talks about D grade films more in this article: <http://ibnlive.in.com/news/decoding-10-b-grade-films-bwood-should-revive/230543-8-66.html>.

revolves around themes that are considered disturbing by the mainstream cinema such as female lust, homoeroticism, incest, and transgender identities.

The *Shaitaan* and incest

Joginder's *Pyasa Shaitaan* (The Thirsty/ Lusty Satan) violates every possible code of sexual morality and does it in a surprisingly matter-of-fact way. The narrator of the story is Shaitaan himself, played by Joginder, and the famous filmmaker/ star Kamalhasan plays his minion. The main plot revolves around Shaitaan asking his minion to seduce virgins and sacrifice them so that his powers become endless, and in return the minion is promised immortality. But the story soon becomes surprisingly complex. The two initially have success. You can see the demon dancing as his minion has sex with a girl, and the demon continuously updates the audience about his plans and even reminds them how this sacrifice will make him powerful. Just as the audience begins to enjoy this face-to-face conversation with Shaitaan and gets drawn into his narrative, he jolts the audience. He adds a disconnected scene, where the minion is not involved, but Shaitaan himself makes a brother witness his elder sister's rape and tells the audience 'Main Shaitaan hoon main aisa hi karoonga' (I am *Shaitaan*; this is what I do).

The rape of a sister is not at all uncommon in Bollywood. But the treatment of the rape scene in *Pyasa Shaitaan* is unique. The elder sister is raped on the day of *Raksha Bandhan*, the auspicious day that symbolizes the love of a brother and sister. The Shaitaan rapes the sister but the brother can't see her rapist. All he sees in a dream-like haze is his elder sister stripped to her underclothes, sprawled on the bed, and moaning. The audience can see the Shaitaan, who keeps them informed about how much fun he is having, but he remains invisible to the brother, who looks utterly disturbed by this image of his elder sister. But Joginder does not stop here. After the brother witnesses the rape, the sister disappears from the bed and her photograph on the wall becomes alive. She is back, fully clad in her *sari*, and calls out to him holding a *rakhee*.⁹ As he goes near the photograph the sister starts laughing, and the *rakhee* turns into a poisonous snake and kills him.

It's not the first time that these unusual brother-sister relationships have been depicted in Bollywood. *Bahen* (Sister) revolves around an extraordinarily possessive elder brother who manipulates situations to keep his younger sister under his control. Raj Khosla's *Bambai ka Babu* (Bombay's *Babu*) also borders on the idea of incest though it has nothing to do with actual incest. But in *Pyasaa Shaitaan* Joginder eliminates

⁹ A decorative piece of thread that the sister ties to the brother on the day of *Raksha Bandhan*. This thread symbolizes the purity of sibling love and the idea that the brother must protect his sister from evil.

all the subtleties. He openly mocks the tradition of *Raksha Bandhan*, demeans the hyped chastity of Bollywood sisters who are usually portrayed as the epitome of good virtue, and even though rapes of sisters are not uncommon in mainstream cinema, he makes the brother witness the rape in the form of a dream. He does something that is unthinkable for the mainstream cinema—he takes away the purity from the sister's body and sexualizes her. He forces a brother to see his sister as a woman and as an object of sexual desire. Furthermore, the role of the elder sister is played by actress Bina Banerjee who is typecast in Bollywood as the kind elder sister, the gentle and loving sister-in-law, and later in her career, played the part of the doting mother. Joginder violently shatters her stereotypical image, having her murder the younger brother she loves. The idea of casting Bina Banerjee in that minor role is significant. Until recently Bollywood seldom took the risk of breaking the screen image of an actress. For example, actresses like Nirupa Roy and Sulochana Latkar frequently played the widowed mother who toiled to raise their children. This image became permanent; they blended with their screen personas. They were not viewed as actresses who could play a variety of roles but they were offered the same type of roles repeatedly, and this has happened to many stars in Bollywood. It was also this screen persona that Joginder challenged; a risk that mainstream cinema rarely dared to take.

And Joginder does not stop here. After twisting the core value of *Raksha Bandhan*, Joginder deals with the actual act of incest. The minion has one failure in which the girl escapes after sex as she realizes that the minion is about to sacrifice her. This lapse happens because the minion falls in love with the girl and their sex results in her pregnancy. She then bears a daughter but never reveals to her, her father's identity. The Shaitaan knows about this and thus makes his minion have sex with his daughter. The film ends after this act of incest as the Shaitaan dies because of an error he has made, and not because the forces of good kill him. He is dead merely because of an accident, a slip on his part; the idea of good or conformity is nonexistent. This is the Shaitaan's story. He does not appear in the othered (Wood 2002, 13) ambivalent space like the Ramsay monsters; instead he assumes the role of the storyteller and involves the audience in his acts. I call Joginder the Antichrist Superstar because, like Marilyn Manson, he too has made the audience a part of a blatant defiance of predictabilities and conformities.

I am not claiming that Joginder's film is totally original. He has clearly copied scenes from *Evil Dead* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. It is well known that Hollywood films have always played a major role in Bollywood, but Bollywood has always modified the content to 'protect' the Indian viewers. Joginder refuses such protection. The incest element is important; however, it is significant to bear in mind that Bollywood films with a mild hint of incest have always failed at the box office. Thus,

the failure of star-studded films such as *Bambai ka Babu* (Bombay's *Babu*) and *Lamhe* (Moments) have been blamed on the questionably incestuous theme, even though there is no direct incest in these films at all (Ganti 2012, 300).

What is important here is that Joginder has successfully altered the existing taboo on incest with apparent ease, and the Censor Board that was busy looking for something else totally missed this scandalous disobedience of social values. Joginder makes a very important statement, not just on the act of incest, but also on the festival of *Raksha Bandhan*. Through his attack on the festival he exposes the deepest fears of a family. But there is more to his attack on *Raksha Bandhan*.

The festival of *rakhee* or *Raksha Bandhan* itself has been used as an object to control sexuality. On the one hand it symbolizes pure sibling love that is tied together by a decorative thread; on the other hand this thread is also used by society as a weapon to control sexual behavior. There is also the concept of the 'rakhee brother' that implies that a boy and girl have no real relation but they have become siblings simply because the girl has tied a *rakhee* to the boy. The idea of the *rakhee* has been abused blatantly by society. Frequently young women in India are forced to tie a *rakhee* to someone they have been seen getting friendly with. Tying a *rakhee* supposedly washes away sexual feelings and replaces them with love and affection. Women also use a *rakhee* to protect themselves from men who are perhaps attempting to transgress the limits of a platonic friendship, hoping this thread will act as a deterrent. The *rakhee* is a thread of abuse, a thread that induces shame about sexuality,¹⁰ a thread that forces people to give up their normal instincts and submit to suppression.¹¹ Even more than shocking people with incest, it is this symbol that Joginder confronts; a decorative thread that stood for love but that society twisted and turned into a poisonous snake. *Raksha Bandhan* has a very ugly side and Joginder forces the audience to face it.

Female lust and the 'othered' male body

I started this paper with a scene from *Shaitani Badla* where the rape victim is male and the rapists are female. Unlike traditional Bollywood or even Hollywood, the female gaze occupies the central space here. The rest of the movie is a revenge story in which the ghost of the murdered servant kills his rapists. Their night of debauchery is punished by death, but one of them escapes. Even though she is guilty of rape and

¹⁰ If a girl had an affair before marriage, they forced her to tie him a *rakhee* so that her husband did not see that affair as impure. The movie *Zehreela Insaan* (Poisonous Man) shows how the heroine is forced to tie a *rakhee* to her lover before being married off to someone else.

¹¹ In the movie *Ghazab Tamasha* (Amazing Show), the villain continually tries to rape the heroine, who finally tricks him by tying him a *rakhee*, upon which his sexual feelings immediately disappear and he accepts her as his sister. This movie is an exaggeration but shows how Bollywood and mainstream culture has treated *rakhee*.

being an accessory to murder, the ghost does not kill her because he is in love with her. He is her servant who has been in love with her but she was always unaware of his affections. Yet, the object of his adoration later gang rapes her and is a party to his murder.

Before I discuss further the significance of the female gaze, it is important to see how Bollywood has viewed it. The female gaze always comes from the 'bad/loose' woman or the vamp who is usually pitched against the heroine. The vamp normally appears in western clothes and represents the westernized woman stripped of all her Indian values. She makes no qualms about her lust for the hero, and her sexuality almost always causes him discomfort.¹² Her sexuality is beyond his control and the only way he can deal with it is to end it, to run away from it, or in some rare cases to successfully mold her into a good woman. The female gaze also appears sometimes as comic subplots where overweight women lust for the hero.¹³ Unlike the gaze of the vamp her gaze is not seen as a threat; instead, her sexuality is seen as something comical. Her sexual desires are ridiculed, humiliated, and used as a source of laughter simply because she transgresses the acceptable codes of beauty and is unaware of her limitations. Her body is denied any sexuality, and she becomes a pathetic figure who deserves to be mocked and burlesqued in order to reiterate the societal norms of beauty and sexual desirability. The female gaze is therefore either hilarious or dangerous; they never come from the 'good' women, the leading lady and hero's sister.

In 2012, the movie *Aiyya*, a comedy that focused on the female gaze and satirized arranged marriages, failed badly at the box office.¹⁴ There were many reasons behind the failure of *Aiyya* but in the big picture, Bollywood found it very hard to digest a leading lady who displayed shameless lust, rejected the 'good' boy, and ran after the handsome man to whom she was sexually attracted. Two other Bollywood films that dealt with female choices, *Paheli* (Riddle) and *Mirch* (Hot Pepper), both flopped at the box office. A star cast like Shah Rukh Khan, Rani Mukherjee, and Amitabh Bachchan could not save *Paheli*, although the movie was critically acclaimed.

The female gaze appears in low-budget horror flicks, not just in *Shaitani Badla*. In Kanti Shah's *Virana* (Barren Land), a girl introduces her younger sister to the world of pornography. As a young girl reads a horror book, her elder sister enters the room

¹² Almost every Bollywood film had a vamp. But *Imtihan* (The Test) is one of the few films in which the vamp is redeemed at the end.

¹³ A common theme in Bollywood. For example, in *Khel Khel Mein* (Take It Lightly), Priti Ganguly's attraction for Rishi Kapoor is seen as something so ridiculous that she is repeatedly humiliated for it. In fact, actresses like Tuntun, Priti Ganguly, and Guddu Maruti often played these roles.

¹⁴ The movie had very bad reviews, but blogger Beth Watkins had a very different take on it: <http://bethlovesbollywood.blogspot.ca/2012/12/mini-review-marathon-new-ish-hindi-films.html>.

and startles the girl. The elder sister scolds her for reading horror and offers her another book. The younger sister reads a few lines of the book and closes it. When her elder sister asks what is wrong, she says she can not read these books, since after reading them 'pyar karne ko jee chahta hai' (I feel like making love). The elder sister laughs and says it is normal for her to have these feelings, and then switches on a porn film. This kind of sisterhood is unthinkable in the mainstream cinema simply because of the stigma attached to porn, which is meant solely for male consumption.

In films like *Haveli ke Peeche* (Behind the Mansion) and *Khooni Raat* (Bloody Night), we see men bathing. It is not uncommon in the conventional cinema to show a man bathing, but the scene in *Haveli ke Peeche* is very similar to the bathing scenes from blockbuster hits like *Abhinetri* (Actress) and *Padosan* (Girl Next Door), that show the leading lady bathing. In both cases the actresses are covered in soap bubbles and are joyfully playing with them. In *Haveli ke Peeche* a man is doing the exact same thing. The man here is shown in the same way as women are presented in these two films, and it is not part of a comic subplot.

The male representation is either a suggestion of homoeroticism or female scopophilia. It is not a subject of humor but rather an unpretentious acknowledgement of the multiplicity of sexual desires. Sexual arousal is not limited to male or female bodies but is much more nuanced than that. In *Khooni Raat* we see a woman peeking through the peephole of the bathroom door at her boyfriend bathing. The object of her gaze is not a six-pack body builder but a nondescript balding man, someone mainstream cinema has completely dismissed. Here, sexual arousal is not limited to conventional definitions of 'beautiful', 'hot', and 'sexy'; instead it is about the rest of humanity, the vast majority who did not make it to the desirable body club. These horror films attack fixed notions of beauty, make sexual arousal a totally porous category, and dissolve the boundaries between the grotesque and the erogenous.

Transgressing gender barriers and bodily inhibitions

Male and Female are not the only two natural choices. As Vinay Lal puts it, 'Though most men will be socialized into behaving like men and exhibiting manly characteristics, and just as most women will learn to conduct themselves as women and display those characteristics said to be common to their sex, that can furnish no warrant for supposing that persons of one sex biologically speaking, always construe themselves as having a gender identity commensurate with their sex. Logically, womanhood and manhood need not have any relation to genitalia' (Lal 1999, 123). Mainstream Bollywood has completely ignored the *hijras* (the third sex), who are

usually present in Bollywood films as added vaudeville¹⁵ or seen as dangerous threats.¹⁶ Even a biopic based on the life of Shabnam Mausi called *Shabnam Mausi*¹⁷ turned out to be a disappointment despite a very strong cast. Very rarely do we see a compassionate depiction of the third sex,¹⁸ and the roles of *hijras* are always played by male actors in Bollywood films. Bollywood's uneasiness is not just limited to the third sex—even cross-dressing is seen as evil and harmful.¹⁹

But all these stigmas totally disappear in low-budget horror films, and what happens is a complete deconstruction of sexual identities. The best example of this is Kanti Shah's *Maut* (Death). *Maut* has an incredibly complex storyline. An evil female spirit called Kamini has an insatiable lust for men. Her biggest enemy is a woman who, with the help of a magician, traps Kamini in a bottle. But Kamini manages to escape and then finds a body in a morgue and enters it. Once Kamini has found the body (belonging to the protagonist of the movie, played by Sapna), she immediately sets out to satisfy her lust but makes a startling discovery. The upper part of her body is female (she has breasts), and her sex organ is male. The moment she makes this startling discovery she realizes that now, with the new body, she is attracted to women, and this creates the main twist in the movie: she is now sexually attracted to her enemy. In the most matter-of-fact way, Kanti Shah transgresses the set notions of gender and even casts a very attractive woman to play this role.²⁰ What really stands out about *Maut* is the straightforward handling of a multifaceted narrative. The evil spirit likes men, but when she enters the body of an intersexed person, she internalizes the body's sexual preferences, clearly demonstrating that sexual attraction is a very volatile concept. While mainstream cinema has totally failed to deal with anything besides heterosexual relations, low-budget horror films have repeatedly confronted heteronormativity. In another of Kanti Shah's movies, *Darwaza* (The Door), a male spirit enters a female body in a morgue because of a mistake, but decides to stay in

¹⁵ Mehmood's *Kunwara Baap* (Unwedded Father) has a childbirth ceremony song. Another famous song featuring *hijras* is from the film *Amar Akbar Anthony*, where the hero uses the *hijras* to harass his girlfriend's father who would not consent to their relationship.

¹⁶ The character of Maharani played by Sadhashiv Amrapurkar in *Sadak* (Street). Maharani is a powerful pimp who runs several brothels in a red light district.

¹⁷ Shabnam (Mausi/ Aunty) Bano is the first *hijra* to be elected to the public office. She served the Madhya Pradesh State Legislative Assembly from 1998–2003. She did not get reelected to her seat but still continues to be an activist working actively for HIV/ AIDS awareness.

¹⁸ *Welcome to Sajjanpur* has a major character who is a *hijra* who enters politics and wins from the village. It is clearly a tribute to Shabnam Mausi.

¹⁹ The evil *aghor*/*kapalik* is dressed in sari in *Sungarsh* (The Struggle). In *Milan* (The Meeting) the villain is a closet cross-dresser with a penchant for lipsticks.

²⁰ In the comedy film *Masti* (Fun), Rakhee Sawant plays a transgendered person who seduces the hero, played by Riteish Deshmukh. But when he discovers that he has kissed a transgendered person, he is horrified and cleans his mouth with a plunger.

her body and avenge the wrongdoers. The idea of a male spirit in a female body again challenges the notion of masculinity and femininity, reiterating the idea that the sex organ does not determine one's gender.

Ghosts in Ramsay films have clearly displayed heterosexual behavior: Saamri has always preferred women; in *Bandh Darwaza* (The Closed Door) the monster Nevla has sex with the *thakurahin* (the feudal lord's wife) and impregnates her. In *Veerana* (Barren Land) the witch Nikita also has sex only with men. Bollywood has been clearly afraid of challenging gender boundaries. But before Kanti Shah made the radical statement on gender identity, a few horror films tried to break down the conventional notions of gender and sexual behavior. In their hit film *Hotel*, the Ramsays explored the theme of gay relations in a comic subplot. In the film *Hathyarin* (Murderess), the statue of a Laughing Buddha sexually violates a shaman in order to prevent him from performing his magic. *Hathyarin* has several scenes where men are sexually violated by inanimate objects. Closely connected to the idea of gender identity is Bollywood's discomfort with the human body itself. Very rarely does Bollywood deal with bodily discharges (unless it's a comic subplot) or even sexual fluids. Once again, horror films manage to easily contravene all these stigmas.

Khatra (Danger), a film clearly inspired by many Hollywood films including Ridley Scott's *Alien*, also borrows several scenes from *Omen* and the usual favorites of Indian horror filmmakers like *Evil Dead* and *Nightmare of Elm Street*. *Khatra* is a zombie movie, but I use the term zombie rather loosely here. It is not Hollywood's idea of the brain-eating monster²¹—the monster here copies the gait and look of a zombie, but the resemblance is purely superficial. The story revolves around a scientist who brings a dead man back to life; this dead man was a rich businessman, who was very kind when he was alive. After he dies in an accident, the scientist steals his body from his grave and brings him back to life. However, he has no memory and has lost the power of speech. The scientist decides to train him and tells him to imitate him all the time. One day, he watches the scientist having sex with his fiancée and tries to copy that. The scientist attacks him; the monster kills the scientist, rapes his fiancée, burns down his house, and runs away from the place. He then continues to rape women, and all his victims die because his semen contains uric acid—it is the concentrated uric acid in the vagina that causes their deaths. It is important to note that the hero does not kill the zombie, but just as in *Pyasa Shaitaan* he dies because of an accident. The hero only comes to know of his identity because he bleeds uric acid instead of blood, thereby confirming his identity. But there is compassion for the zombie in *Khatra*. In one scene where the cops are discussing these rapes, there is an unusual dialogue

²¹ I am talking of the modern Zombie films. Old Hollywood films like *White Zombie* and *Voodoo Man* have zombies that are very similar to *Khatra*

where the chief of police says, 'Iske paas sperm nahi hai, acid hai toh yeh sex ka mazaa kaise leta hai?' (If he does not have sperm and has acid, how is he enjoying the sex?). This kind of natural curiosity is totally absent from mainstream cinema.

Acts like urination and defecation are also seen with complete revulsion in mainstream Bollywood. But here they form an important part of the narrative. In *Sar Kati Laash* (The Headless Corpse), a woman badly needs to urinate during a long drive through the woods, and she keeps telling her husband how bad her situation is. He tries to dissuade her, saying, 'Let the rest house come'. He then scolds her for drinking a lot of water, and there is a long discussion on the subject. She finally manages to persuade him to stop the car, and as she goes to urinate, the headless corpse possesses her. In other films, such as *Maut ka Badla* (Revenge for Death) and *Adamkhor Hasina* (Man-Eating Beauty), people are possessed during the discharge of bodily wastes. The act is not seen with abhorrence, but these acts open people to susceptibility and spirits take advantage of that. These acts form a major part of the narrative, not something gross, laughable, or unnatural. The vulnerability of a person in their bath is a common occurrence in horror films. Similarly, these acts make people susceptible, exposed, and helpless, providing a perfect opportunity for evil spirits to strike.

Conclusion

Sudhir Kakkar describes Hindi films as 'a regressive haven for a vast number of people' (quoted in Gehlawat 2010, 28–9). This view of the Indian viewer and Hindi cinema is not uncommon. As Ajay Gehlawat points out, Indian viewers are like children that 'the national cinema panders [to]' (ibid., 3). They are considered incapable of watching anything that is slightly different and beyond their realm of morality. Bollywood filmmakers also share this view and see the Bollywood audience as simple, naïve, unintelligent, and incapable of understanding anything complicated.²² Yet these films that are especially made for the small town/ rural audience seem to have themes that totally shatter the idea of the conservative audience. Clearly, horror films are a world where incest is digestible, women's sexual desires are acknowledged, and gender categories are transgressed. The moral universe of these films is almost like a bizarre²³ world to mainstream cinema. They subvert everything that mainstream cinema stands for. However, as I mentioned earlier, the very nature of horror films is

²² My interview with Kiran Kotrial also reiterated this idea. The idea is dealt in detail in Ganti 2012, 281–358.

²³ Bizarro World of Htrae (Earth spelt backwards) appears in Superman's comics. It's a cube-shaped world where they do exactly the opposite of what earthlings do. This concept has also been explored in popular TV shows such as *Seinfeld* and *Saturday Night Live*.

to challenge existing morality. Should these horror films with their limited appeal be viewed as something akin to underground metal bands with a limited cult following?²⁴

I will answer this by first looking at Valentina Vitali's appraisal on the necessity of Ramsay Brothers horror films (Vitali 2011). She argues that horror films in India are a product of the political turmoil and that the Ramsay Brothers monster flicks were essential in those turbulent times since they represented the clash between modernity and religion. The 1980s saw Indira Gandhi's attacks on the Golden Temple followed by her assassination and the Sikh riots, and also saw the rise of communal parties and Hindu extremism. The Ramsay Brothers' films were about the loss of this known world and the coming of modernity. Vitali also adds that horror films ended in the 1990s since their whole purpose was to satisfy the subconscious conflict in the people's mind. India needed horror films to deal with the radical changes in the socio-political scenario. In fact, scholars like Brigid Cherry (2009, 53–65) maintain that horror films are a way to express anxiety towards changing times and to preserve horrifying memories; Vitali seems to be on the same plane with her.

While Vitali raises some excellent points, the horror films did not end with the 1990s. True, the Ramsay Brothers started failing in the early 1990s, but the genre had taken a very different form. The 1990s saw the peak of these low-budget flicks and the start of the 21st century saw horror films becoming mainstream again with the success of Vikram Bhatt's *Raaz* (The Secret) and Ram Gopal Verma's *Bhoot* (Ghost).²⁵ Horror films have enjoyed huge success recently. Vikram Bhatt's *1920*, *Haunted 3D*, and *Raaz 3: The Third Dimension* have become major box office successes.

Vikram Bhatt is the most successful horror filmmaker, and Tulsi Ramsay claimed to be a big admirer of his work.²⁶ My reason for mentioning Bhatt is that while he chose a conventional plot with *Raaz*,²⁷ where he reiterated the Bollywood values of the devoted wife protecting her husband while the themes of his later films became more and more consciously subversive. In *Haunted 3D* he covered serious sexual perversions, and *Raaz 3* touched on necrophilia. Bhatt has begun to do what directors like Joginder and Harinam Singh did in the past; challenge mainstream sexual morality. Bhatt is not as radical but, again, none of these directors were as mainstream as Bhatt.

²⁴ When I say limited appeal, I compare it with major Bollywood releases such as those from the Ramsay Brothers, Mohan Bhakri, and Vikram Bhatt. Films like *Pyasa Shaitaan* and *Maut* made a huge profit, so it is not their money-making potential that I am referring to.

²⁵ Ram Gopal Verma had earlier directed a critically acclaimed horror film called *Raat* in 1992, but *Bhoot* opened up a new style in horror films. It brought the Asian style of horror filmmaking to Bollywood.

²⁶ Tulsi Ramsay, personal communication, 2011.

²⁷ *Raaz* is a remake of the Hollywood film *What Lies Beneath*, but the story was reworked to fit the Savitri/Satyavan mode where the devoted wife (*pativrata*) was much more powerful than all the forces of evil.

Even though Bhatt is still far from conscious subversion, he is gradually becoming aware of the full potential of horror cinema, and the process is gradually entering mainstream cinema. This porosity between conventional cinema and what I referred earlier as the bizarro world is very similar to the world of canonical literature and folklore. Indian folklore is filled with innumerable stories that challenge the existing myths and moral order (Raheja, Gold 1994, 30–73). They are unpolished, sometimes rather raunchy tales that twist canonical stories, and the identities that are lost in the sieve of Brahmanic Hinduism find their voices here. For example, the theme of *triya charitra* (the character of a woman) plays a very important role in folklore.²⁸ In these stories the woman always emerges as a winner. Even though the patriarchy used these stories to show how immoral women were,²⁹ they could not change the fact that women emerged as the winners. These were tales of resistance (Raheja, Gold 1994, 168–9).

Similarly, mainstream Bollywood is a construct of this patriarchal set-up, and is concerned about preserving order by selecting certain values over others, by oppressing the less powerful and sanitizing everything that does not fit their moral frame. Stripped of all glamour, completely marginalized by the mainstream, horror films document the voice of the repressed who have been humiliated, disgraced, and ignored by tradition. Even though horror films have seen successful recently, Bhatt continues to be ridiculed by the critics, and Bollywood still has an ambivalent relation with the horror genre. These low-budget horror films are exactly like those ignored folktales but they keep doing their job. Resist.

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²⁸ The tales have been explored in the Bollywood film *Mirch* (Hot Pepper).

²⁹ Many canonical texts depict women that way but the most important among them is the *Manusmriti*.

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