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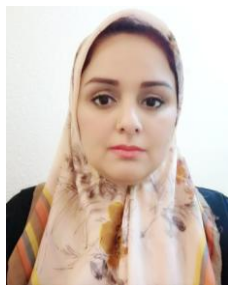
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**EXPLORING THE UNKNOWN OF INDIAN ENGLISH HORROR NOVELS:
A STUDY EXAMINING THE UNTAPPED GENRE OF INDIAN ENGLISH HORROR FICTION
OUTLINING THE INDISPENSABLE CULTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS TO THE
GOTHIC THEMES**

Dr. AFREEN FAIYAZ

Assistant Professor, College of Science and Arts, Al Badaya, Al Qassim
Qassim University, Saudi Arabia
afreen.faiyaz@gmail.com



Dr. AFREEN FAIYAZ

ABSTRACT

Indian English horror novel is still at its nascent stage even though Indian culture is replete with dynamic customs, rituals, regional and religious beliefs. A short study of Gothic novels reveal the fact that such novels have a deep-seated connection to the beliefs imbibed within us from the beginning and through the very society we live in and often have direct connections to some of our experiences. Fear has several names be it a ghoul or a psychic and is discussed by Sigmund Freud in his essays. Everyone faces their own share of fear and that is the very reason upon which world Gothic literature feeds and survives. Creating a frightful experience for any writer is as daunting as amusing them by the virtue of words alone unlike the more vibrant world of digital imagery. It either succeeds or fails miserably reducing the text to flat descriptions devoid of life. Tradition, customs, and folk-tales form subconscious beliefs which reflect in the imaginative process and manifests in the fictional world. An eminent feature of Gothic novels, throughout centuries, has been to reflect our internal fears that take shape of a ghoul or a psychic. Ever growing interest among readers and writers in this genre is evidence of the fact that people like to recount or build stories that bears witness to the unknown phenomena affecting us directly or indirectly. Indian novels in English has seen a meagre yet promising output and this article discusses some rare and fine attempts by Indian writers in English in the above mentioned genre.

Keywords: Indian Horror, Gothic, Fear, mystery, ghosts, traditions, beliefs

Introduction

When it comes to horror fiction, readers are often skeptical about choosing Indian English novels or short stories. Indian culture, an ever synthesizing process of art, philosophy and religion, is a unique combination of myths, legends, and folk stories replete with hoary sadhus, mystic fakirs and uncanny oracular happenings sometimes diabolical in nature. What makes this culture even more

dynamic is the uninterrupted sequence of civilizations that inhabited the past, and many external influences that continue to get imbibed seamlessly. It is then a natural and fertile breeding ground for the blossoming of several dark and terrifying tales of witches, djinns, necromancy, abandoned villages, haunted forts, and disconsolate spirits inextricably convoluted in Indian folklore that has already seen considerable output in Hindi and regional languages. Indian English fiction, fortified

by the overwhelming output by novelists has distinguished itself as a remarkable force in world fiction. It beautifully blends multifarious range of issues like nationalism, freedom struggle, stark social realism, individual consciousness, diaspora, feminism, and romance. However, horror in Indian English novels is a genre that is still far from exploring its true potential as compared to the western counterpart. However, the picture is not gloomy as it may seem as many Indian writers of English horror fiction have kept the ball rolling. Some of the fairly new horror collections that can be found on the bookshelves across Indian book stores are Arnab Ray's *The Mine*, K. Hari Kumar's *That Frequent Visitor*, Jessica Faleiro's *After Life*, KiranManral's *The Face at the Window*, Neil D'Silva's *Maya's New Husband*, Athul Demarco's *AN. AL The Origins*, and SriramanaMuliya's collection of short stories *Frankly Spooking*. SankalpKhandelwal, Associate Commissioning Editor, Fingerprint, says: "Horror has never been big in Indian publishing and most attempts in this genre have been made in the form of short-story collections" (Sarkar, *The Hindu* 17 Nov. 2013). "However," he adds: "The future of horror storytelling seems to be hopeful in India, as in recent years, the market has become receptive to fresh voices in unusual genres." (Sarkar) This article hypothesizes that there are cultural and religious underpinnings working as a unifying force in horror fiction and uses some established masterpieces that conform to the statement. It also seeks to discuss some brilliant attempts by Indian authors in the sub-genre that deserve attention of the readers as well as critics.

Literature Review:

In several of his books, the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud, speculated about the role that ghosts played in the human psyche, as well as in our development as a species. And while we now know that much of what Freud said about human sexuality was probably wrong, many of the things he wrote about the ghostly still seem accurate. (Editor) In *The Uncanny* (1919) (Freud), for instance, he remarked on the powerful grip in which the ghostly continues to hold us in spite of all our technological advancements: "To many people, the acme of the uncanny is

represented by anything having to do with death, bodies, spirits, revenants, and ghosts. . . . in hardly any other sphere has our thinking and feeling changed so little since primitive times or the old been so well preserved, under a thin veneer, as in our relation to death." (EC, "The Uncanny – Ernst Jentsch & Sigmund Freud")

And in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, he wrote that it was our imaginative speculations about the afterlife that started us on the road to all thought that was not directly related to our daily physical needs—to intellectual quests and conversations concerning the nature of the world in which we found ourselves: "Philosophers have claimed that it was the intellectual mystery presented to primeval man by the image of death that forced him to reflect, and that became the source of all speculation. . . . It was by the corpse of the beloved that he invented spirits, and it was his sense of guilt over the satisfaction that was mixed with his grief that meant that the first spirits he created were fearful, evil demons. The physical changes of death suggested to him the division of the individual into a body and a soul—originally several souls; in this way his train of thought ran parallel with the process of decomposition brought about by death. The constant memory of the dead person became the foundation of the hypothesis of other forms of life, and first gave him the idea of continuing after apparent death."

In his article *Indian Horror: The Western monstrosity and the fears of the nation in the Ramsay Brothers' Bandh Darwaza*, Deimantas Valančiūnas studied the specific references to the European gothic tradition and employment of imagery and interpretation of a western monstrosity (Dracula) in the Indian film that are not merely the exploitation of the exotic discourse, but an unconscious articulation of fears and anxieties summoned by the specific socio-economic conditions of India. The political turmoil and the economic changes at the end of the 1980s created a specific platform for fears and anxieties that were articulated through the deformed monsters of the western gothic tradition. He wrote in his article:

"Dracula is one of the most popular

characters of gothic fiction, which in the course of more than a hundred years has become integrated into the popular imagination and appears in many film adaptations, cartoons and commercials (Bolton 2010, 55). The character of Dracula is embedded with deep cultural codes and if appropriately read from a certain historical perspective, becomes a 'modern myth still relevant to our lives' (Hutchings 2003, 9). It also has to be noted that Dracula is always related to different ideological dispositions..."

In the above article, Valančiūnas explored how the attempts of Indian cinema failed to create a worthwhile scary experience and significant attempts were continuously made to depart from the old tradition and embarked into something significant and blood-curdling Indian tale with specific reference to the specific movie he discussed in detail.

The above attempt successfully captured the fact that cultural differences and theological underpinnings forms the basis upon which the familiarity of themes and beliefs are erected as well as the actions evolve. The similar trend can be detected in the genre of fiction of Indian English novels where culture, theology, and imitation to western Gothic examples can be encountered. As Valančiūnas puts it:

"There is definitely an East-West divide as well. In the West, talk of ghost stories will almost certainly be couched in rational and intellectual terms, wrapping the ghost in cotton wool and stripping it of any life in one's imagination. In India, one can still find a healthy belief and enthusiasm for a supernatural being or event. At the very least, one questions further to gain more intimate details of the 'ghost' instead of dissecting it to death."

Background to Gothic Fiction in the History of English Literature

Horace Walpole *The Castle of Otranto* instigated a trend in 1764 that was followed by Ann Radcliffe

who wrote half a dozen of such novels the best among them being *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Jane Austen parodied it in *Northanger Abbey* (1817). By 1840, this type of writing well established itself as a new sub-genre of Gothic novels coadjuncting fear, mystery, decay doom, madness, ancient curse and old haunted buildings as prerequisites. It left a lasting legacy; however, in works such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and the works of Edgar Allan Poe, the Gothic genre strictly considered gave way to modern horror fiction. The authors of such fiction have experimented these components by varying degrees to give a different flavor maintaining the essence.

The Christian Theology

A hovering character of such novels, whether explicit or implicit, has been Satan – the sworn enemy of mankind. Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* is the best example depicting outraged archangel Lucifer exasperated and furious upon being cast out of heaven. He along with his comrades fell to disgrace by the manifestation of pride in refusal to bow before Adam; thus swearing to be a perpetual enemy of mankind. The doctrine of hell described in Milton's epic, as terrifying as it is, points to the fact that evil has an end, that is has limited temporal power and influences God's creation. The article *The problem of evil in world religions* by Ernest Valea clearly mentions the presence of evil in various Christian doctrines thus:

"The Apostle Peter warned his fellow Christians that Satan is a real and dangerous presence: "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5,8). Likewise, the Apostle Paul emphasizes that "Satan himself is masquerading as an angel of light" in order to deceive humans (2 Corinthians 11,14). These beings have minds (Acts 12,7-10; 1 Peter 1,12), feelings (Luke 15,10), and wills (Jude 6) and are not limited by a physical body. Their number was very large and there was a hierarchy among them (Hebrews 12,22). Although belief in the existence of demons is old-fashioned, to say the least, such verses cannot be ignored as the horror fictions do reflect evil as an external force pre-determined to ruin human

life."(Valea)

Name the prince of darkness as you please: Satan, Lucifer, Beelzebub, or Mephistopheles, it is an intriguing force of evil that innumerable authors across different centuries have interwoven his or her demonic themes into their work. Satanic horror is a reflection of haunting, supernatural, or creature horror in a supernatural monster that is plaguing human protagonists. From Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, Dante's *Inferno* to C.S. Lewis, Washington Irving, and the king of the occultists, Aleister Crowley, have all ventured into this dark territory. Joe Hill, the son of Stephen King, also journeys through hell with his new supernatural thriller *Horns*. Devilish writing veers from straight horror to anarchic humor to the completely unexpected.

Discussions

In the twentieth century, a novel that has been the bestseller among the readers of horror fiction is Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson, Amazon 09 Oct. 2018). She has been brilliant at creating a dark, gloomy, oppressive and tense atmosphere by writing a psychological study of a young woman's mental breakdown. Eleanor is an insecure but normal lady at the beginning of the story who deteriorates into a mentally unstable and paranoid woman gradually descending into madness. Her neurosis gives a claustrophobic discomfort resulting in an eerie and ghastly experience. Hill House is an ancient house built in the 1800s and has ugly tragedies attached to it. A team of investigators with Dr. Montague, Theodore, and Eleanor visit the house in response to several reports of paranormal activities. Upon their arrival, it is soon realized that the house has a life of its own and which is not a happy one. The dark, damp, and gloomy description of the house infested with a menacing presence has chilled readers into feeling of fear and malaise since it was first published. There are "cold spots" in the library, and during the night banging on Eleanor's bedroom door. Theodore moves in with Eleanor, but the noise doesn't stop. Then there is a message on the wall "Help Eleanor Come Home" Is this a trick played by one of the guests? Or is there a force in the house that is

compelling Eleanor to be a part of it? The other guests are sympathetic to Eleanor, but she becomes more and more delusional and hysterical which culminates in her being asked to leave.

There is mystery, drama, and suspense around every corner. Shirley Jackson shows a lot of creativity and imagination in her writing of this book. Her descriptions of the house and grounds are so realistic that you almost picture yourself in the midst of the scenery. She brings out the cruelty of humanity in her descriptions of the characters, especially Luke and Theodora who play on the fears and weaknesses of Eleanor. And in the end, maybe the lesson to be learned is this: there are inherently evil aspects of nature that should just be left alone and Hill House is one of them! The existence of evil of Christian theology as distinct, dangerous and debilitating force is clearly proved in this novel.

The Indian Hindu Belief

Indian concept of evil is rooted in Upanishads and Veda. The Upanishads ground a pantheistic perspective on Ultimate Reality and introduce karma as the explanation of evil in the world. Ignorance incites karma into action and karma results in sufferings. As the manifestations and dissolutions of the world have no beginning and no end, so is karma, meaning that suffering is a part of the eternal cosmic cycle. Suffering in the present life is the natural consequence of past lives' ignorance and it has to be endured without questioning. To quote Ernest Valea in *The problem of evil in world religions*:

"In Vedas, the hymns addressed to Varuna evil is a matter of humans not fulfilling his laws or not performing the ritual properly. Often it has a moral significance, in that people are evil-minded or commit adultery (*Rig Veda* 4,5; 10,10). Those who commit evil deeds must repent before Varuna (*Rig Veda* 5,85) and try to repair their evil deeds through ritual sacrifices. In other hymns, as those addressed to Indra, evil is personified by demons. Thus the fight against evil is a perpetual combat between personalized good and evil forces."

The Indian Horror Fiction

The concept of karma and rituals find reiteration in Indian horror tales. Arnab Ray's *The Mine* is a psychological horror novel that builds upon the Karmic theme that all the horror thirsty fans of India! *The Mine* is a supernatural tale of evil that reveals itself upon unearthing of a strange and inexplicable ancient shrine inside a secret and mysterious mine. The story is a pertinacious mix of Karma and modern Science that thrills its readers with a unique experience. The authorities send five expert miners to assess the safety conditions of mine as several accidents took place onsite and to explain those "accidents" that is affecting the miners on regular basis. As the experts start investigation, things start going wrong and each one of them faces hell of their own. The story gets dark and disturbingly evil. The characters are subject to a deep abyss that is a living inferno of their past misdeeds inflicted by them on themselves or others. It serves as a carefully planned purgatory to them. Sequentially we meet different characters from greedy scientists madly driven by ambition, rapists, pedophiles, sado-masochist doctor to schizophrenic patient.

Kiran Manral's new novel, *The Face at the Window* is yet another Indian novel close to the theme of Karma which is a ghost story set in a hill station, that has some unnerving moments. The protagonist Mrs. McNally, a retired Anglo-Indian school teacher, shifts to a small cottage adjoining a tea estate on a picturesque hill station. She is looked after by an old couple and is visited by her granddaughter during vacation. The story is narrated from the perspective of idle Mrs. McNally, who is preoccupied with past and often we have flashbacks amidst her present. Her life seems to be going at a steady and expected pace with solitary treads up and down the hill. However, like most of the appearances, this one too is deceptive. Mrs McNally bosoms some dark secrets gripping her conscience like her tragic parentage and a reckless youth. Events take a sharp chilling turn for the worse when she spots an unhappy, murderous specter on the premises. This specter is a real ghost of her sins and, it becomes crucial for Mrs. McNally to discover how to do it.

Creating a frightful experience for any writer is as daunting as amusing them by the virtue of words alone unlike the more vibrant world of digital imagery. It either succeeds or fails miserably reducing the text to flat descriptions devoid of life. In *The Face At The Window*, the author is triumphant in creating some real disturbing moments by mere use of words through the book. The leisure of a calm and beautiful life in a small hill town is intruded by the apparition that ruptures the tranquility abruptly and is reminiscent of Ruskin Bond's ghost stories. Manral's descriptions renders a new life to her fictional world and those within it. This is true of the naive goatherd child Mrs. McNally teaches in her free time and who greets her in the middle of the night, sitting and smiling eerily in her rocking chair.

The novel starts at a great note but is unable to sustain the momentum. The serious flaw of this narrative is its hurried and abrupt end that mars the otherwise effortless weaving of the subplots. Apart from some editing issues one has to plod through a lot of unnecessary details that do not help the smooth flow of the events. "This is not the book for you if taut thrillers and airport or metro reads are your staples. It demands a little time and patience as the rambling narrator slowly takes you into her quaint world and readies you for a good scare."

Yet another gripping work of Indian English horror fiction is *Maya's New Husband*. This story revolves around the life of a young school teacher, probably in her thirties. Amidst the normalcy of her life and daily routine, lurks a man like a shadow, intent on attracting her to which he succeeds and both of them end up marrying despite family odds. However, Maya is oblivious of her husband's fatal and dangerous flaw. He is a psychopath who enjoys a feast of flesh and blood to demonic dimensions. "This book is a strange yet engaging combination of horror and myth with highly gory background." The plot of the story is aptly divided into four parts and each part is a prelude to another. The story arouses confusion only to create fear; for instance, Maya's intense love for her husband despite his ugly looks and beastly behavior is questionable. The story outlines the mythical world of black magic involving

cannibalistic practices. The book cover itself depicts the Indian tradition of a lady with vermilion suggesting the theme. The narration is full of gory details like flesh cut open, dissecting of hearts, and description of rats feeding on dead bodies. The prelude to the story sets the stage to something dark and satanic is to follow.

"The menacing voice grew louder.

Wake up!

There will be no fun if you are passed out like that."

"And there was another slap.

Even in her half-conscious state, she felt the full impact of the slap. ... People are usually relieved when they wake up from nightmares and realize their agonies were merely bad dreams. But for Maya, the nightmare of being dead was nothing compared to the reality of being alive...and finally being captured by the most dangerous man."(Manral)

The plot and story line doesn't follow the vague ideas of invisible ghosts or shadows hidden behind the walls but gives an insight into the devilry of humans itself in correspondence to Indian culture.

Conclusion

Tradition, customs, and folk-tales form subconscious beliefs which reflect in the imaginative process and manifests in the fictional world. An eminent feature of Gothic novels, throughout centuries, has been to reflect our internal fears that take shape of a ghoul or a psychic. Ever growing interest among readers and writers in this genre is evidence of the fact that people like to recount or build stories that bears witness to the unknown phenomena affecting us directly or indirectly. If there is faith, there is also sin. If there is good, there is evil, and if there is God, there is his also his antagonist Satan. The Indian English novels are still in the nascent stage of producing admirably scary experience compared to its Western counterpart. There are astounding number of outputs of such stories in oral folklore regional literary outputs. However, the novels discussed in this study are a

proof of the fact that Indian horror English novels are gearing up to explore the unknown and swipe us by feet.

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A brief auto-biography of the corresponding author: **Dr. Afreen Faiyaz** specializes in the genre of Indian Sub continental fiction and is currently posted as an Assistant professor in Qassim University of Saudi Arabia with an IELTS band 7 (April 2017). Apart from teaching language and literature, her favorite hobby is to read and explore various sub-genres within the genre of novels and study the cultural nuisances that reflect in themes of the novels of Indian Sub continental writers. She has published a book and several articles in various journal of international repute.