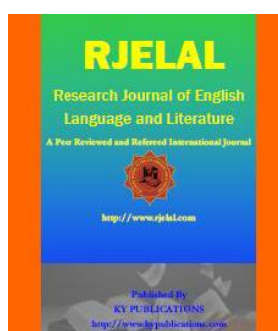




A STUDY OF POPULAR HORROR FILMS THROUGH FEMINIST LENSES

SANANDA ROY

PhD Scholar, Department of English, JamiaMilliaIslamia, New Delhi



Article Info:

Article Received:13/04/2015

Revised on: 19/04/2015

Accepted on: 24/04/2015

ABSTRACT

There has been some feminist work on horror films and most contemporary feminist studies of horror films are psychodynamic. Horror as a genre has been popular and it is precisely what the psychodynamic feminist theories speculate about why we are interested in horror and more basically about why certain things are horrifying. Typically, these feminist film theories rely on the psychoanalytic framework. The purpose of this paper would be to locate women within the genre of horror, where they are described as representing threats evoking the male castration anxiety. Horror is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat the trauma of castration as if to “explain” by repetitious mastery the originary problem of sexual difference. These theories as a standard presume some connection between gazing, violent aggression and masculinity and they suggest that there are particularly “male” motives for making, watching, and enjoying horror films. This is corroborated by Linda Williams in her scholarly work too where she isolates three distinct genres and labels them as body genres, those being pornography, horror and melodrama. In each of these genres the bodies of women figured on screen have functioned traditionally as the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear and pain. In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” on psychodynamic approaches to film in general, Laura Mulvey argues that narrative forms characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema differentially use women and serve men. Typically, in horror, the woman or visual object is also the chief victim sacrificed to the narrative desire to know about the monster.

©KY Publications

There has been some feminist work on horror films and most contemporary feminist studies of horror films are psychodynamic. Within the psychodynamic theory the films may be considered as artifacts where such aspects as plot, narrative or point of view may be recognised, however the chief interest lies in the viewer’s motives and interests in watching horror films and on the psychological effects such films have. Horror as a genre has been popular and it is precisely what the psychodynamic feminist theories speculate about why we are interested in horror and more basically about why certain things are horrifying. Typically, these

feminist film theories rely on the psychoanalytic framework.

Therefore the purpose of this paper would be to locate women within the genre of horror, where they are described as representing threats evoking the male castration anxiety. Also to point out the fact that their bodies are used by this genre to serve certain purposes like the depiction of violence or terror and the furthering of the narrative, including the revelation of the monster.

Horror is the genre that seems to endlessly repeat the trauma of castration as if to “explain” by repetitious mastery the originary problem of sexual

difference. These theories as a standard presume some connection between gazing, violent aggression and masculinity and they suggest that there are particularly “male” motives for making, watching, and enjoying horror films.

It is here that one would like to make the connection with what Linda Williams in her essay “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre And Excess” proposes. Williams isolates three distinct genres and labels them as body genres, those being pornography, horror and melodrama. The body spectacle is featured more sensationally in pornography’s portrayal of orgasm, in horror’s portrayal of violence and terror, and in melodrama’s portrayal of weeping. Williams states in her essay,

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. Aurally excess is marked by recourse not to the coded articulation of language but to the inarticulate cries of pleasure in porn, screams of fear in horror, sobs of anguish in melodrama. (“Film Bodies: Gender, Genre And Excess”, pg 729)

In each of these genres the bodies of women figured on screen have functioned traditionally as the primary embodiments of pleasure, fear and pain. So the bodies of women have tended to function as both the *moved* and the *moving* ever since the eighteenth century origins of these genres in the Marquis de Sade, Gothic fiction, and the novels of Richardson. In other words, even when the pleasure of viewing has traditionally been constructed for masculine spectators it is the female body in the grips of an out-of-control ecstasy that has offered the most sensational sight.

In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” on psychodynamic approaches to film in general, Laura Mulvey argues that narrative forms characteristic of mainstream Hollywood cinema differentially use women and serve men. There is a dual analogy between the woman and the screen (the object of the look) and between the man and the viewer (the possessor of the look). A tension surfaces in the viewer between the libido and ego

needs, and this tension is resolved by a process of identification whereby the (male) viewer identifies with the (male) protagonist in the film. Thus possessing the film character of the woman by proxy, the viewer can proceed to focus energy on achieving a satisfactory narrative resolution. Mulvey’s model draws from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective and centres on key Freudian conceptions of castration anxiety and visual fetishism, and the association of patriarchy with such traditional film features as narrative order. Her view has called for a number of persuasive criticisms by other feminists and she herself has revised it. However it would be beneficial to begin by extrapolating from her basic model a simple feminist psychoanalytic account of horror. The tension between the viewer’s desire to look and the ongoing narrative of a film is especially acute in the horror film. Typically, in horror, the woman or visual object is also the chief victim sacrificed to the narrative desire to know about the monster.

A parallel can be drawn with the pornographic representations of women as the objectified victims. When describing how this genre operates, feminist critics of pornography often call to mind the female figures of sexual/textual violence. Robin Morgan’s catch-phrase “pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” is well known. The implication suggests that the image of the sexually ecstatic woman is so integral to the genre that it is the celebration of female victimization and a prelude to female victimization in real life. Although not that widely known but related to this is the horror film critic James Twitchell’s observation that the Latin *horrere* means to bristle. Therefore in moments of shivering excitement the nape hair stands on end. While male victims in horror films may shudder and scream as well, it has been a long standing dictum of the genre that women make the best victims. Thus the famous advice given by Alfred Hitchcock, “Torture the women!”

In the classic horror film the terror of the female victim shares the spectacle along with the monster. Fay Wray and the mechanized monster that made her scream in *King Kong* is a familiar example of the classic form. Jamie Lee Curtis in *Halloween* can serve as the more contemporary version of the terrorized

woman. Janet Leigh in the shower scene in *Psycho* is a familiar example of a transition to a more sexually explicit form of the tortured and terrorized woman. Be it *Psycho*'s infamous shower scene or Freddie's long nails emerging between Nancy's legs in the bathtub (*Nightmare on Elm Street I*), De Palma's exhibitionist heroine being power drilled into the floor (*Body Double*), and Leatherface hanging women from meat hooks (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*), the big screen has proffered the image of the woman's flesh, the reality behind the surface, which is made visible, and the horror shows the "wound" that we are revolted to look upon. Also a transition that can be noticed from *King Kong* to the later films is that the spectacle of the monster seems to take a second billing to the increasingly numerous victims slashed by the sexually disturbed but entirely human monsters.

Linda Williams notices that contrary to mainstream cinema, women possess "the gaze" in horror. They are always the first ones to encounter and inquire about the monster. Similarly, although monsters may threaten the bodies of women in horror, even so, the fates of women and monsters are often linked together. Both seem to stand outside the patriarchal order. For instance in the vampire stories, a fascinating foreign Dracula seduces women away from their husbands and fathers, undermining the patriarchal institutions of law, marriage, motherhood, medicine, and religion. Therefore she offers a modified view of the Mulveyan schema where she inspects the straitjacketed associations between males and the pleasure of looking and spectatorship. However she offers only a modified Mulveyan view because despite such observations her views are in tune with what Mulvey articulates. Williams also argues that the women who possess the gaze in horror and who become aligned with monsters are shown to represent threats to patriarchy and hence require punishment. Therefore horror films reinforce conceptions of the active (sadistic) male viewer and the passive (suffering) female object. In horror films feminists have pointed to the women victims who suffer simulated torture and mutilations as victims of sadism. But more recent feminist work has suggested that the horror film may present an

interesting and perhaps instructive, case of oscillation between the masochistic and sadistic poles. In sadomasochistic teen horror films the sexually active "bad" girls are killed and only the sexually passive "good" girls are allowed to survive. Therefore women are punished for their appropriation of "the gaze" and a sort of masculine narrative order is restored.

More recently film critics have turned to the work of Julia Kristeva. Barbara Creed has adapted Kristeva's work on literature to study visual horror which she talks about in her book *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. Here there is a shift from the woman as a victim to the notion of motherhood as "abject" in horror films. In contradiction to what has been discussed so far, Kristeva locates the origin of horror not in the castration anxiety but in the preoedipal stage of the infant's ambivalence toward the mother as it struggles to create boundaries and forge its own identity. The mother is "horrific" in the sense of being all-engulfing, primitive or impure or defiled by bodily fluids--- particularly breast milk and flowing menstrual blood. Kristeva uses the term "abjection" to designate the psychic condition inspired by this image of the horrific mother. For Kristeva, horror is fundamentally about boundaries, about the threat of transgressing them and about the need to do so. Hence she emphasizes the duality of our attraction/repulsion to the horrific. Barbara Creed applies this notion of horrific motherhood to the horror film *Alien*, where she stresses the films repeated birth scenarios and numerous versions of the engulfing, threatening, voracious, horrific Alien mother, "a toothed vagina, the monstrous-feminine as the cannibalistic mother." Here Creed emphasizes contra the Mulveyan-Freudian position that horror importantly concerns not just women as victims but women who are attacked because they present a horrific vision of a castrated body and also monstrous women who threaten to castrate men. Creed is of the opinion that all horror texts serve to illustrate "the work of abjection." Three basic ways are employed to do so: first horror depicts images of abjection, such as corpses and bodily wastes, second horror is concerned with borders, with things that threaten the stability of the symbolic order and

third, horror constructs the maternal figure as abject.

However this may not always be the case because as opposed to this is the notion of mothering the “terrible child” or being in the grips of a diabolic possession with themes of Satanism and the Antichrist that run throughout many movies as in *Rosemary’s Baby*. Popular cinema of the past decade has proffered alternate views of maternity. *It’s Alive* opens with a woman in labour, trying to quell a premonition that something is dreadfully wrong. The sequence ends with bloodied doctors evacuating a delivery room where they have inadvertently birthed her murderous monster. This eerie scenario is extended in the film’s two sequels: *It Lives Again* and *It’s Alive III*. In *The Brood*, a female mental patient incubates horrible fetuses in external belly sacs, similarly in *Embryo* and *Eraserhead* the theme of malignant extrauterine conception is explored. Hence these serve as examples of misappropriation of the female body again to turn pregnancy into a Gothic spectacle. The film *Rosemary’s Baby* elicits horror from its audience through Rosemary’s violation and the spectacle of her pregnant body, which nourishes a monster. Although it exploits pregnancy as abject embodiment, *Rosemary’s Baby* turns horror to feminist ends rather than seeing it as misogynist refutation of the maternal body or the “monstrous feminine” which Creed has identified as cinematic horror. In her study of the horror genre, Judith Halberstam states that the Gothic is “a narrative technique, a generic spin that transforms the lovely and the beautiful into the abhorrent,” and when this transformation of the sentimental into the grotesque “disrupts dominant culture’s representations of family, heterosexuality, ethnicity and class politics,” it can be particularly suited to feminist and queer readings.

In relation to the notion of the Gothic it would be interesting to note that the origin of horror has a much longer and complex history and has its roots in the gothic novel as already mentioned earlier, a fact in itself important for feminists to note because of the unusual prevalence of women as both writers and readers in this genre. Much recent work has been done by feminists, concerning the gothic

romance and the origins of horror in works like those of Mary Shelley.

However it would be valid to note here that the feminist psychodynamic accounts do not seem equipped enough to address the dazzling diversity of the subgenres of horror: gothic, mad scientist, alien invader, slasher-psycho, rape revenge, B-movie, cult film, science fiction, monster, possession film, zombie, Japanese horror (Godzilla), and so on---even music video horror (Michael Jackson’s *Thriller*!)

Reflecting on the stupendous variety of styles, nuances, and tones within this genre and in the light of this genre diversity, it is difficult to state whether there can be any one “feminist theory of horror.” It would also lead one to doubt any particular theory can associate gender with the kind of looking, or monstrosity, or victimization that is typical of horror or with some work of abjection that horror films necessarily “illustrate.” Films within a single subgenre like the vampire film may present male monsters as distinctive as the emaciated Kinski Nosferatu, the campy Bela Lugosi, the languid Frank Langella, the sinister Christopher Lee, and the macabre ball-goers of Polanski. A quite horrific and gory movie can be wildly funny too (*Texas Chain Saw Massacre II*, *An American Werewolf in London*). Horror films can be very eerie and subtly creepy (*The Dead Zone*), or they can revel in over-the-top, hair raising, outrageous effects (*Evil Dead II*). They can be depth-psychological “family romances” (*Repulsion*) or virtual cartoons (*Predator 2*). They can be historical costume dramas (Herzog’s *Nosferatu*, Coppola’s *Bram Stoker’s Dracula*) or technophilic futuristic visions (*Alien*). They can be vividly realistic (*Jurassic Park*) or ridiculously fake (*Godzilla*). They can be incredibly original (*Scanners*, *Brain Dead*) or mindlessly imitative (*Silent Madness*, *Orca*), or a little of both (*Body Double*).

Therefore a promising feminist approach to cinematic horror perhaps should be historically aware and also broad and open enough to work for all these numerous varieties. The production of feminist readings thus should also be able to focus on their representational practices so as to scrutinize how the films represent gender, sexuality, and power relations between the sexes. The film elements that feminist readings need to look into

should concern the representation of women and monsters within the films. Another valid study of these films can be as artifacts where both their construction and role in culture can be examined.

The popularity of these movies can also be attributed to the rapid changing relations between the sexes and by rapidly changing notions of gender-- and of what it means to be a man or a woman. To dismiss them as bad excesses whether of explicit sex, violence, or emotion, or as bad perversions, whether of masochism or sadism, is not to address their function as culture problem-solving. Genres thrive, after all, on the persistence of the problems they address but they also survive in their ability to recast the nature of these problems, hence their popularity.

WORKS CITED

- Creed, Barbara. *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Fischer, Lucy. *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 31. No.3 "Birth Traumas: Parturition and Horror in *Rosemary's Baby*". University of Texas Press, 1992
- Freeland, Cynthia A. *Post- Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*. "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films" USA: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996.
- Halberstam, Judith. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Mulvey, Laura. *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." London: University of California Press, 1985.
- Valerius, Karyn. *College Literature*, Vol. 32. No.3 "'Rosemary's Baby', Gothic Pregnancy, and Fetal Subjects". *College Literature*, 2005.
- Williams, Linda. *Film Genre Reader*, Vol.2 "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre And Excess" USA: University of Texas Press, 1995.
- Wood, Robin. *Movies and Methods*, Vol. 2. "An Introduction to the American Horror film." London: University of California Press, 1985.