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Shakuntala Banaji

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Bollywood Horror as an Uncanny Public Sphere: Genre Theories,

Postcolonial Concepts and the Insightful Audience

Shakuntala Banaji

London School of Economics and Political Science

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Author note

Department of Media and Communications, London School of Economics and

Political Science

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Shakuntala

Banaji at s.banaji@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This article critically interrogates the many ways in which contemporary urban

life in India is imagined and theorised by Hindi horror films, their critics and

audiences. It suggests that 'horrific' representations of motifs such as living space,

family life, labour, gender relations and childhood are repositioned by the

meanings attributed in critical and audience discussions across time and national

boundaries. Drawing on original interviews with diverse film viewers to question

a conceptual mélange from 'abjection' and 'subalterneity' to 'voice' and

'carnival', this article complicates homogenising accounts of Bollywood's

ideological allegiance to authoritarian master-narratives. While Hindi horror films

invite spectators to engage with political debates about economic success,

exclusion, justice and patriarchy, the outcomes of such engagement are inflected

by individual viewers' cultural, political and generic experiences.

Keywords: Genre, Horror, Hindi film, *Bhoot*, Subalterns, Postcolonial theory, Audience

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This article engages critically with the cinematic genre of Hindi horror films by

reading them as cultural representations whose contradictions can only be understood

through the critical deployment of postcolonial analytical concepts and audience

interpretations. Postcolonial theory's much debated concern with subalterns, those who

belong to despised or underprivileged groups, will be used to answer a challenge posed

by Andrew Tudor who suggests that '[i]f we really are to understand horror's appeal,

and hence its social and cultural significance . . . the question should not be "why

horror?" at all. It should be, rather, why do *these* people like *this* horror in *this* place at

this particular time?' (1997, p. 461). Two further questions nuance a tendency to

describe audience responses as if reception exists separately from film texts and social

contexts: Do audiences *uncritically* watch Hindi films (Barnouw & Krishnaswami,

1980, p. 281; Valicha, 1988, pp. 48-60) that seem at best to ignore and at worst to

encourage authoritarian beliefs and non-egalitarian circumstances? Are Hindi horror

films 'closed' texts eliciting identical responses from elite and subaltern, national and

transnational audiences?

There is a broader background to this study, suggested by the title's use of the much

debated concept of the 'public sphere' indicating the on-going political, cultural and

economic discussions surrounding the production and the reception of Hindi horror

films. This background encompasses the deregulation and [neo]-liberalisation of the

Indian economy from the 1990s onwards, accelerated urbanisation, and the impact this

has had on the psychosocial, economic and cultural lives of different audiences

(Fernandez, 2000; Saldanha, 2002). It also points to tensions – discussed recently by

Basu (2010), Rao (2007), and Vasudevan (2011) – between critiques of retrograde

representations of religion, gender, sexuality or class and celebrations of Hindi cinema, now commonly Bollywood, as a hybrid cultural field. Equally pertinently, journalistic and scholarly anxiety about extreme media 'effects' has resulted in a general neglect of spectatorship falling outside overt allegiance to or critique of retrograde ethno-religious, nationalist and patriarchal discourses. In contrast, some postcolonial theorists have called attention to the subversive or suppressed gestures, silences and voices of subaltern characters and audiences. Encompassing both textual and audience accounts, this article compels film theories emphasising socioeconomic structuration and ideological closure into dialogue with accounts of viewers' agency and meaning-making.

Hindi Horror in Scholarly Context

Horror produced in India has occupied a resilient niche in the past 40 years. From the prolific ouvre of the Ramsay Brothers to recent derivative efforts like *Raaz*/S*ecret* (Vikram Bhatt, 2002), this genre has been a consistent undertow to mainstream family romances and action dramas. The box office hit *Jaani Dushman*/*Implacable Enemy* (Rajkumar Kohli, 1979) featuring a bride-killing male spirit who enters the body of challengers and continues its vendetta is only one of the films directed by a mainstream director which signalled a more than passing generic attentiveness to representations of gender, sexuality and male violence. Less well known, *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche*/*Under Two Feet of Earth* (1972) and *Guest House* (1980)*,* with its macabre chopped hand, are two of the Ramsays' first hits. During the 1980s their contributions to India's B-movie circuit multiplied with *Sannata*/*Silence* (1981), *Purani Haveli*/*The Old Mansion* (1989) and *Shaitani Ilaaka* /*A Devilish Place* (1990). Trying to account for the lack of attention paid to the genre in India, Kartik Nair (2009) sees Hindi horror as 'a beloved and campy underground', arguing that 'the Ramsays were seen as

unwelcome intruders, botching the movie industry's onward march to bourgeois respectability' (p.71). It is against this backdrop of general critical neglect that recent engagements with Hindi horror emerge.

While the Ramsays' themes and motifs involve abandoned houses, malevolent spirits, malformed creatures pursuing pubescent maidens, impalements and petrified peasants, Valentina Vitali (2011, pp. 96-7) argues that an interrogation of links between modernist subjectivity, rightwing Hindutva ideology and economic polarisation in India animates the apparent superficiality of these films. Likewise, Mrinalini Sen (2011) sees in these films 'excellent barometers for India's post-economic liberalization anxieties' (p.198), suggesting that they articulate 'the undertow of the large transformative processes brought about by globalization via the depiction of fear, resentment, vulnerability, and disempowerment' (p.199). The interface between critical and audience commentaries on contemporary films such as *Bhoot*/*Ghost* (Ram Gopal Varma, 2003) illustrates the usefulness of both structural and postcolonial delineations of meaning.

Parallel Trajectories: Bollywood and Horror Theory

Concern with the impact of hegemonic discourses was prevalent in media and communication studies long before the new visibility of postcolonial discussions. Indeed, anxiety about the 'effects' of Hindi films remains a central theme of much writing on the subject (Bharucha, 1995; Mathur, 2002). Fareed Kazmi (1999) suggests that '[c]onventional films do not simply reflect the social world, but actually construct a coherent version of social reality within which ideological tensions can be contained and resolved … [i]n other words, through highly complex and devious means, it privileges "preferred" meanings over "excluded" meanings, thereby reinforcing the "given" of the system, and absorbing or referencing out all potentially oppositional

connotations' (pp. 215-216). Unease about xenophobic nationalism in India and the diaspora (Bhatt, 2001; Mankekar, 2000) and the erasure of Indian working-class experience (Bharucha, 1995; Kazmi, 1999) from blockbusters may explain why textual theorisations of Hindi cinema as a closed ideological systems remain prevalent. For the purposes of the current paper, however, these features only emphasise the need for postcolonial understandings of links between social behaviour, context and spectatorship.

Studies of Hollywood horror that engage with these questions draw startlingly similar inferences. As Buckingham (1996) and Clover (1996) have noted, here too there is a hierarchy of taste, with 'psychological suspense' valued over 'body horror' or the supernatural, and representation of women analysed as apparent evidence of the patriarchal worldviews of producers and audiences. Linda Williams (1991) argues that the genre systematically victimises women. Building on feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's (1982, p4) discussion of *abjection*, Barbara Creed (1993) elaborates, 'the horror film attempts to bring about a confrontation with the abject (the corpse, bodily wastes, the monstrous feminine) in order to eject the abject and redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human...' (p. 14). Usha Iyer's (2013) discussion of the 'tantric' or shaman in Hindi horror sees this character's articulation of ambiguity with power as a key source of dread. Robin Wood (1979) and Franco Moretti (2000) have argued that the monstrous in horror arises from an audience's will to identify either with capitalism or with its 'others'. For Moretti, of course, the monster *is* capitalism and its creations, while for Wood, capitalist society normalises itself by identifying all things counter-hegemonic as monstrous. According to such arguments, capitalist society uses cultural representation and mediated violence in reactionary horror films to seduce compliant audiences. Sen's reading of *Vaastu Shastra* (2011) suggests precisely such a

retrograde investment in pre-modern and anti-feminist stances on the part of 'the

audience':

> Viraag's attack on Jhil [at first a confident working mother] is immediate,
>
> horrific, and inexplicable. He throttles her repeatedly and flings her across the
>
> room in a show of immense strength and profound rage. The audience does not
>
> echo Jhil's astonishment at this instance because we realize that the film has
>
> come full circle— the dénouement is a decisive blow to the discourses of
>
> modernity that Jhil has so confidently inhabited so far. (p. 206)

Sen's assumption of the audiences' pleasure-in-punishment appears to rest on the

presumption of their consistent 'de-coding' of the monster. It leaves little room for

elusive, carnivalesque or contradictory readings. In this view, authoritarian social

ideologies structure the directors' intentions; directors structure the films and their form,

which in turn shapes audience interpretations. Postcolonial theory's questioning of

universalising theories about the relationship between groups of people in the global

south and the significance of their symbolic meaning-making or cultural consumption

challenges these assumptions.

One of the key successes of postcolonial theory has been its critique of orientalist

and Eurocentric narratives about (de)colonised 'others' in western literature, media and

academia. Specifically, in light of anthropological accounts that construct 'the other' as

victim or perpetrator of unknowably *different* social practices, some postcolonial

scholars examine possibilities for authentic subaltern 'voices' to be 'heard' (Bhabha,

1996; Mbembe, 2001; Spivak, 1988). At its best, postcolonial theory intersects with

understandings of economics and social relations to produce contextualised and

historicised accounts of culture: Mbembe's work on the neither-acquiescent-nor-

resistant ways in which global south populations deal with bureaucratic control or state

violence does precisely this. At its worst, postcolonial theories fix and essentialize 'authentic', 'traditional' 'voices' of supposed 'subaltern' others, valorizing contingent hybridity and abandoning the potential of this theoretical perspective to cast light on social struggles around inequality and oppression in the global south Arif Dirlik (1994) puts it bluntly:

> in their simultaneous repudiation of structure and affirmation of the local in problems of oppression and liberation, [some postcolonial theorists] … have rendered into problems of subjectivity and epistemology concrete and material problems of the everyday world. (p. 356)

In the light of such critiques, it is tempting to abandon attempts to postcolonial theory to strengthen structural analyses of horror film culture. However, attending to issues of authenticity, representation and local context is precisely what many audience members appear to do while discussing the films, suggesting that open, attentive discussion of voice and supposedly subaltern cultural space remains a valuable interpretive strategy. Following a discussion of methodology, the insights and interpretations of diverse cohorts of viewers will be used in conjunction with just such an attention to textual voice in order to draw attention to the conflicting discursive invitations and pleasures of contemporary Hindi horror.

Research Traditions and Methodologies

This article puts generic and postcolonial concepts to use in two ways. It does so first by asking how viewers from different cultural contexts and time periods might interpret and react to particular horror films in similar or divergent ways. Second, it discusses what their responses can tell us about their contexts and experiences, as well as about the films' underlying political and philosophical frameworks. The expansion of media ethnography and Cultural Studies in recent years provides tools for recording and

understanding audience responses in relation to both Hindi films (Banaji, 2006; Derné, 2000; Rao, 2007) and horror films (Cherry, 1999; Clover, 1993). Several such studies reach beyond the realm of Cultural Studies to offer scholarly discussion of film meanings by juxtaposing textual analyses based on systematic semiotic and ideological readings with a contextual analysis of the reflections and interpretations of audiences (Barker & Brooks, 1998; Buckingham, 1996; Stacey, 1994). This combination of close attention to textual detail and audience interpretation can decentre particular critical fetishes such as narrative closure, the male gaze, or (a lack of) overt political critique. Sometimes, however, such analysis stops short of reflecting back on the ways in which the sets of meanings established via the articulation of textual and audience evidence themselves form interventions in theoretical, discursive or material contexts.

Textual Analysis

The method of textual analysis followed here eschews the assumption that 'the audience's subjectivity' is coterminous with the content and structure of the films. It moves from basic semiotic descriptions of plot and iconography, through questioning and discussion of the films' discursive field, to a series of plausible suggestions about one of the films' meanings for specific audiences in particular contexts. Thus audience interpretations can and do become more than the production of cultural talk. For scholars of film meaning, they can act as a sounding board for and contributor to systematic, contextually and theoretically informed, textual analysis. In this tradition the second part of this article draws on a series of semi-structured interviews conducted intermittently between 2004 and 2009 in two global cities: London and Bombay.

Interviewing

Forty-two interviews were conducted, equally divided between London and Bombay, cities with significant numbers of theatres screening Hindi films. Twenty-nine

(approximately 70%) of the respondents were women, despite efforts to balance gender

evenly. Interviewees were recruited from cinema venues, through local libraries, film

classes and via notices posted on internet fan forums. In an attempt to explore the

meanings and cultural stigma attached to Horror films and to Hindi cinema from

different perspectives, the occupations and class contexts of interviewees were fairly

diverse, ranging from foreign students and teachers in the UK to domestic servants,

transport workers, working and middle class housewives and students in India. Most

student participants were working alongside part-time courses. All but 4 of the

interviewees described themselves as regular movie viewers, though only 10 said they

were horror fans. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. Transcripts were

analysed thematically using forms of discourse analysis stemming from social

psychology (Hollway, 1989; Potter & Wetherell, 1988) and in a tradition of audience

research that foregrounds individual viewers as members of knowing, experienced

interpretive communities (Barker & Brooks, 1998). Trust and confidentiality were

maintained throughout (names and details have been altered to maintain anonymity).

Despite efforts to reduce power differentials between myself and interviewees by

spending extended periods of time with some of them viewing films or chatting about

media, interview questions and interventions were, nevertheless, occasionally

interpreted as inviting very particular responses. It was important to some of the student

interviewees to 'please' their interviewer by displaying a critical faculty in relation to

the films. This has implications for all analysis. Following Miller & Glassner (1997, p.

101), the language of interviewing has not been taken for a straightforward reflection of

some unproblematic reality. Many of the excerpts quoted are part of more extended

discussions.

The segments of transcripts of relevance to this discussion were first coded in relation to topics of central significance in textual studies of horror using both Marxist and psychoanalytic concepts: monsters, the 'other', sexuality, class, gender, religion and violence, with further attention paid to ideas about tradition and modernity, science and superstition, and the use of urban settings for allegorical social critique.

Lay discussions of horror films, and indeed, of Bollywood, are frequently caught up first in rhetorical justification, or attempted recuperation (Banaji, 2006; Buckingham, 1996; Modleski, 1986). This happens almost as if viewers speaking about them are trying to answer criticisms of their taste or their politics. Some adopt what Martin Barker and Kate Brooks (1998) have called a 'knowing' position in relation to genre and cultural content. Nina, a 30-year-old media teacher from London constructs herself as a discerning film consumer: 'I was expecting everything, the *Exorcist* style possession scene . . . *Tchaa* … the acting is okay – but I didn't watch *Bhoot* to be surprised. I went to be entertained, and I was.' Kannagi, an 18-year-old student in Bombay that an informed choice of genre can enhance audience pleasure: 'When I want something *dishoom-dham* or something light, I look at the casting list – Sunny [Deol] is surely there or Jennifer [Anniston]. When I want to see something new, stretch my mind, I choose horror. *Vaastu Shastra* and *Bhoot* made me look at the surroundings in a *different* way.' The following sections explore the evidence offered by interviewees of their experiences, feelings and interpretive activity to support these claims. Alongside this evidence, the author's own assessment of more and less plausible readings of *Bhoot* will be offered.

The Plot

Bhoot, directed by Ram Gopal Verma, dispenses with joint families and songs. To those familiar with Hollywood suspense and J-Horror, the narrative is replete with

immediately recognisable motifs. A young couple (Swati, actress Urmila Matondkar; and Vishal, actor Ajay Devgan) settle into a luxury duplex in a suburban tower-block, surrounded by claustrophobic Bombay high-rises and rain. Vishal knows that the previous tenant fell from the balcony and died, but he does not tell Swati as he thinks it would bias her against the flat. Their intimate routine is punctuated by interactions with media – television programmes, a film, a child's doll – and with people who provide services: an estate agent, a maid, a neighbour glimpsed through a door, a watchman, a doctor, a policeman. These interactions connote their vulnerability and detachment from 'traditional' community. Most central elements of the plot – their haunting by a child and its mother, the gradual succumbing of Swati to the vengeful spirit's violent 'possession', her husband's spiralling horror and the *Exorcist*-style 'creature' to which she is reduced are reminiscent of 1970s Hollywood. The film's final dilemma – faith in science which diagnoses 'multiple personality disorder' and suggests internment and drugs or faith in religious practice which diagnoses 'possession-by-spirit' and suggests communication with the spirit – invites a straightforward ideological reading. Theoretical frameworks implicit in audience readings, however, reject such straightforward structural analysis, and offer the possibility that Hindi horror films are archetypal postcolonial texts – hybrid, crude, giving voice to a local elite imagining of the South Asian subaltern.

Audience Readings: Analysing *Bhoot* in Context

In general, viewers with little experience of Indian society appeared more willing to use aspects of the film and other Hindi films as 'evidence' of some sociological truth about Indian society (for instance in relation to gender biases), while viewers born and raised in Bombay were both more sceptical of the film's claims to realism as well as more vocal about aspects that they recognised from their daily lives. While comments

about femininity, masculinity, class and representation were ubiquitous across the sample, sharp differences in evaluation the role of the maid emerged, with those from securely middleclass backgrounds insisting that she was a source of creepiness, monstrosity and disgust, and working-class viewers from all national backgrounds annoyed by this fixation and 'use' of her figure as a device for false climaxes in the plot. Interviewees were evenly divided between those who felt that the ghost remained the unhinged monster, even when events had been explained, and those who felt that the male perpetrator of sexual violence emerged as the 'real' monster.

Horror and Social Structures

Fredric Jameson (1975) has suggested that '[e]vil…. continues to characterize whatever is radically different from me … the stranger from another tribe, the 'barbarian' who speaks another language and follows outlandish traditions, but also the woman … the alien being, the Jew or Communist, behind whose apparently human features a malignant and preternatural intelligence is thought to lurk…' (p. 140). For Hindi horror audiences, it appears to be a combination of banality and otherness which characterizes the monstrous. In *Bhoot*, the *otherness* of particular characters such as the maid, the doorman, the shaman competes with everyday routines to create a frisson of horror.

Middleclass femininity. The central character Swati, marked out as the 'other' via her sexualised femininity – through her star persona as the 'item girl' from raunchy song and dance numbers[1] and by the initial camera work which shows her descending the staircase in a flimsy gown, glistening, stretching and inviting her husband to bed: both vulnerable prey and sexual seductress. A film-buff from a lower-middle-class family commented on this.

Vivek, 19, Bombay: Urmila [Matondkar] plays this girl, Swati, who isn't like a total rich bitch – she's cute, and sweet, and loves her husband and cooks... but the way she dresses, trousers, sleeveless, and has a bai [house-maid] and relates to chowkidaar [watchman]... she has like *shanapan* [arrogance] or confidence that comes with money. Maybe lowerclass males watch her like because she's sexy. But some of my friends wanted to see her [pause] taken down a bit...

This interpretation was echoed by several interviewees from different cultural and educational backgrounds. A teacher from Scotland commented.

Mandy, 34, London: I suppose the central characters' speaking in English and not so much in Indian (sic) is kind of a posh thing to do? It certainly made me think they were rich, cosmopolitan, whatever. But how do normal Bollywood viewers relate to that?

Clearly, just because something is billed as horror or a supernatural film does not mean viewers cease looking for clues about social relations within the text. Remaining within this structuralist framework, but wrenching more familiar construals from their moorings, some interviewees read 'horror' in the everyday routines depicted by extended sequences of the film:

Avni, 23, Bombay: What is the real horror in this film? For me it was Swati's life before she became infested with the dead female's ghost. So lonely – up in that designer flat; so boring – no purpose, no children ... no job. No interests – not even favourite Tv shows. Even the cleaning, she gives it to someone else! This female's life is dressing, cooking, waiting for her husband. I'd jump off the building. Isn't that what we are waiting for? [laughs]. The ghosts give her life purpose, meaning. They make her interesting.

Avni, an educated, urban working-woman, newly married to an older man, should theoretically be one of the interviewees most 'identified' with Swati's character. However, reminiscent of critical work on the necessary boredom-as-equilibrium opening sequences in Hollywood family melodramas but also in films from Mexico and Spain (cf. Schaefer, 2003), she was one of the viewers who most vehemently rejected pleasure in the sequences where narrative equilibrium supposedly reigned. As far as she was concerned, being infested by a vengeful ghost was an adventure, it gave character to an otherwise formless female and rescued her character from narrative and social oblivion. Instructively, Avni's visceral reaction to the normality at the beginning of the film is not, as might at first be thought, at odds with the film's conceptualisation of horror. Throughout the narrative, the questions being posed are about weighing the horror and violence of the outwardly natural and normal against the horror of the supernatural and evidently abnormal. Tania Modleski draws attention to a double-edged potential in horror's choice of monster and victim: 'the female is attacked not only because… she embodies sexual pleasure, but also because she represents a great many aspects of the specious good' (1986, p.163). This critical recognition of women as despised markers both of social values and of the 'specious good' emerges surprisingly clearly in the following viewer commentary on Swati's routine:

> **Rob, 40, Birmingham**: As if all Indian city women just do nothing all day long – but her life is like a trap, the stairs can show us how futile it is – up the stairs, down in the lift, up the stairs [...] like a metaphor for that whole generation, or that class or something.

This formulation indicates the ways in which audience meaning-making actively theorises films through processes of analysis not dissimilar to those adopted by critics like Modleski. Looking back at the film, the sequences to which Rob refers – down in

the lift, up the stairs – do not recur so frequently. However, when they do, their extended use might equally easily be read as a mechanism to create suspense, like the shots of the lift-shaft, rather than as a metaphor for a dreadful and crushing futility. Yet it is this sense of futility, brought on, it is suggested, by a mixture of capitalist success (Swati's husband is a stock-broker and can look after her in style), tradition (in India, even in cities, if you are a middleclass married woman from a traditional family then a career is not considered respectable) and cosmopolitan modernity (Vishal and Swati have clearly left his family and live as a nuclear unit), on which viewers in my sample chose to dwell. In *Bhoot*, with a director ambivalent in terms of his interest in gender politics and not averse to objectifying women characters voyeuristically, socially critical questions about class and gender might plausibly be seen as elicited as much by the contingencies of the genre as by directorial design. It is not, however, the only interpretation and therefore does not have to be read as reducing the *meaning* of the horror in the film to a morality tale about class and gender.

Vulnerable masculinities. While *Bhoot*'s main plot tells the 'typical' story of a woman and child molested and murdered by men, the sub-plots appear to tell a different story, one of bewildered and vulnerable men. A male 'doctor' who cannot cure or comfort his dying daughter; a thuggish proletarian strangled with phenomenal violence; a husband who, beneath his rigid rationality, is susceptible and tender. Despite critical comments (Creed, Sen), emphasising the hegemony of sexist discourses in horror, these juxtapositions underline the contestatory threads in *Bhoot* and possibly in the genre as a whole in relation to masculinity. The issue of male vulnerability was noted repeatedly by interviewees. A viewer of Italian and Indian descent dwelt at length on his interest in this aspect of the film:

> **Dino, 21, London**: What's his name? Ajay/Vishal – yeah, he's like [pause] this affectionate bloke, not macho but still a *man* – like he earns; he smokes; he cares for Swati... Yeah, he tickles her. But. [...] at the end he puts aside his 'modern' prejudices, yeah, to get her cured. [finger quotes around modern].

To Dino, Vishal is willing to risk death like other Hindi film heroes – but he is also willing to countenance the destruction of his long-held epistemological framework, rather than give up on his beloved. Such male capitulation, which is interpreted by some viewers as tenderness and gender equality, is framed by textual critics as retrograde ideological closure. Writing of *Phoonk* (*The Exhalation*, Ram Gopal Varma, 2008), Sen (2011) notes, 'Rajiv's final capitulation [to superstition] is the film's endorsement of these universes — of faith, spiritualism, child-like belief, and magic — that have fallen by the wayside in recent decades' (p. 210). Distinctions between the male characters in *Bhoot* which provoke such competing readings are resolutely present. Jia, a housewife from the majority Hindu community in Bombay, clearly found the police inspector's repetitions of his name 'Qureshi, Liaqat Qureshi' in *Bhoot* and his holding up of his badge curious:

> **Jia, 25, Bombay:** Why does the police inspector say his name again and again? Is it because he is *Muslim*, he is showing "see we can be police inspector also, not just criminal"? Or the director is making points about the Mumbai police like "they're not all useless as usually shown? Or...?"

This aspect of the film mystified several viewers but passed others by. The fact that the film was made in 2003, following closely on the heels of the most televised pogrom against Muslims in recent Indian history (Ohm, 2010) and one in which many police were complicit, might suggest that the director intended the repetition of a Muslim name as some form of social comment on vulnerable masculinity. Whatever explanation

they chose to give, the rare Bollywood juxtaposition of a (Hindu) housewife-turned-murderer with a (Muslim) policeman who is both sophisticated and non-violent was noteworthy for some viewers.

Hearing the Subaltern?

Sen (2011) argues that films like *Phoonk* allow for 'the voices of the marginalized to be heard above the din of a ruthlessly commonsensical technocratic rationality that has accompanied India's love-story with globalization ...' (p. 210). This should alert us to a fact about popular culture: it may be *critical* in ways that do not chime with either elite or subaltern political interests. In order to evaluate the critique, we need to understand its premises. In this spirit, if we follow the logic of *Bhoot*'s critique of rationality and modernity, law and medicine in an upper-middle-class male-dominated metropolis, then perhaps we may *hear the imagined voices* of India's subalterns – poor, marginalised, rural, women as suggested by Sen's analysis above.

This last point returns us squarely to a postcolonial framework in which voice and silence are demonstrations of oppression or resistance. In a fascinating exploration of the power of silence as a rhetorical gesture, Kris Acheson argues that paying attention to the ways in which silence is used – by ethnic minorities, subaltern communities or in institutional educational contexts and power struggles – can point to a form of communicative action that has always been considered subsidiary and inferior to speech. In this sense, to remain silent on or off screen is to draw attention to the meaning and/or the tone of speech. It may signal neither compliance nor resistance. The quality of the maid's silence in *Bhoot*, during the first half of the film, is an unsettling reminder of myriad watching 'others' whose thoughts we do not know. Carmela, a language student found the maid's silences discomfiting.

> **Carmela, 22, London:** The way she is shown make me unhappy – she is like mentally disabled or something? But she is looking sinister, yes, and stupid . . . It is like an insult to people with mental problems? Or an insult to women from villages?

Unlike the happy servants of the family melodramas in the 1990s and via her inscrutable silence, this maid (Seema Biswas) resists neoliberal interpellation (Bharucha, 1995) into the middle-class Indian family: she is amused when she hears her mistress having sex, but shows no indication that the success and wealth of her employers in her life's main focus. When she speaks, she does not waste her words. Rather, having been silent previously, what she says has the ring of truth and wisdom. This sense of subaltern or indigenous knowledge is expressed by viewers with experience of the global south, as the following comment from a Chinese student illustrates:

> **Lin, 23, London:** The cleaning woman, she's like migrant workers. We have this in China. [pause].
>
>   S: How?
>
> **Lin:** She's superstitious. She looks dumb. But she helps when the psychiatrist is useless. She has knowledge – *folk* knowledge.

Lin draws attention to the maid's quazi-universal subaltern voice as that of a wise woman; her wisdom is 'folk' wisdom (like Chinese migrant workers, in an urban environment but connected to 'traditional' beliefs, to an 'other' time and place).

   Imagined subaltern voice. Lin reads the ending of the film in a postcolonial manner as a critique of the knowledge-production and enforcement of Western enlightenment values. But is Lin pointing us to real power *enjoyed* by subalterns or to the *construction* of subalterns as powerful when in reality they are not? Perhaps Lin's comments and, of

course, the film's characterisations of the maid merely underline ways in which global

south elites orientalise (their own) subalterns and 'enjoy' both the fruits of exploitation

and the illusion of cosmopolitan reconciliation between classes. Another viewer from

the global south takes up this possibility in her response:

> **Ayse, 29**, **London**: Actually, it was cliché. Totally. I jump, of course, with loud
>
> noise[s]. [laughs, self-deprecating]. But we have this hysteria in Turkey also.
>
> Old traditions being worn out by new, making people uncomfort[able], tensed.
>
> People from countryside pulling in different direction. People from Istanbul,
>
> Ankara making money, making progress. At the end, where is the dead little
>
> boy who had a such horrible tragedy in his life? What happens to the cleaner?
>
> Are their story for themself or for those rich couple or for audience to add
>
> spice?

Ayse's position is cynical and empathetic. It approaches the film first as a sociological

document of global south life, with features she recognises from Turkey: a hysteria

about change; tensions between perceived tradition and assumed modernity;

disjunctures between rural and urban needs; the pursuit of individualistic rather than

collective economic progress. Then, counter-intuitively, she reads it as a failed morality

tale, which foregrounds the 'suffering' of two middle-class women (one living, one

dead) at the expense of the 'others' who do not have as much consumer power or

identificatory appeal to cosmopolitan publics: the working-class woman and the (dead)

child. These characters are simply not 'sexy' enough to exist for themselves; but then,

perhaps the genre makes no claims to realism.

Realism versus Monstrous Agency

In one sense *Bhoot* is typical 'Bollywood' – kitschness and social commentary

cheek-by-jowl – as viewers' accounts in the previous section testify. It is possible to

build a plausible reading of *Bhoot* as a film which plays with the boundaries – between realism and melodrama in terms of its style, between superstition and scientific medicine in terms of its plot; but, in the final sequences, quasi-religious sentiments appear to hold sway. The ending sidesteps logic as the bhoot avenges herself on her murderer by strangling him even after he has been legally 'punished' for his crime. This conclusion elicited several rather critical comments from interviewees. Nitish, a chauffeur, averred:

> **Nitish, 26, Bombay:** [Thaliyan] Claps, so the villain is dead. And? Is the child back to life? Is the streets more safe from such chaloo people [sexual harassers]? The child even falls again for us to get our money's worth of death.

Nitish's sarcasm at the dénouement – during which a child's dead body falls thump onto a concrete pathway to chill the audience anew and the ostensible culprit is murdered by the ghost – echoes other viewers' unease with the neatness of the ending. A part-time student and part-time restaurant worker was interested in a general pattern solidified by the film's concluding sequence.

> **Gina, 24, London:** So, the ghost gave out her own punishment to the dodgy bloke. Yay! But it symbolised something to me. Everything in the film was about individuals in isolation solving things alone, not about *a* system or *the* system or about trust in society, yeah. The characters' live alone or in pairs. ... There is no society. So, of course, we suffer alone and we have to take revenge alone.

So, although the ghost appears to reclaim agency in *Bhoot*, viewers are uncertain who the ghost represents apart from herself, as an individual. In order to engage with this question, we need to take a step back.

Nair (2009) suggests that '[i]n the dialogic encounter, the languages of horror and those of Bombay cinema - already hybrid to the point of being over-determined - speak to one another in a process of exchange and mutual modification' (p. 76). In this vein, *Bhoot*'s impact could be attributed to its successful melding of generic conventions and 'eastern' and 'western' cultural narratives or its *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1996; Young, 2005). However, some of the most thought-provoking moments arise, equally, from the disconcerting juxtaposition of disparate generic, cultural and narrative elements. This is where the movements between realism and melodrama inside Hindi horror texts are particularly interesting.

As a mode of film-making little-used in the Hindi commercial industry, 'realism' is generally associated with arthouse or third cinema. The lingering of the camera on aspects of everyday life, on the textures of objects, the slowing of pace and editing to mimic time-flows in the real world seem incongruous in an industry associated with excess, bathos and spectacle. The moments in *Bhoot* when the couple are merely settling into their new apartment, going to work or participating in leisure are thus stylistically referencing arthouse cinema. Meanwhile, moments of disjuncture when ghosts or evil beings appear (on the beach, in the cinema, at home) wrench the film dramatically away from that (arguably western neo-Realist/Social Realist) aesthetic towards something that has its roots in folk narrative and theatre in the global south. As foregrounded by Pedram Partovi (2009), and by Rachel Dwyer (2011), traditions, both religious and secular, across Asia are replete with myths and folktales of demons and djinns, of transgression, possession and redemption.

But do *Bhoot*'s subalterns belong only to a realist realm which we must reject because both the genre of horror and the newly recuperated (ethnic) cinema of Bollywood demand this of us as discerning academics? In my view, a generic reading

does not make sociopolitical questions about (the film's depiction of) exclusion and exploitation reductive and irrelevant. In order to explain why, it is important to focus first on a notion of culture as not just geographically/nationally bounded but also as developing differently amongst elites and their 'others'; and second on the notion of 'faith' as both a religious and secular concept that is often an overt force in horror films.

The Cultural Specificity of Horror Subalterns

Partovi's superlative (2009) examination of the Iranian horror film *Girl's Dormitory*/*Khvabgah-i dukhtaran* (in which a young woman becomes the target of a crazed killer claiming to be under the command of a jinn) leads us away from an essentialist view of culture and cultural interpretation. It points towards the potentially creative and subversive role to be played by horror. Saliently, this discussion centres on horror as an avenue for the raising of metaphysical questions excluded and belittled both by urban (Western) modernity and by the pressured requirements of everyday life, rather than the more common 'explanation' of horror as an expression of subconscious and primal fears:

> We can thus consider the "horror" in some horror films produced in the West as an epistemological and phenomenological threat to the machine-based view of the world. Although they are a standard element of the genre, the appearance of "ghosts in the machine" extra-human agents at odds with humans and thus a divine or transcendent will often goes unexplained in the Western horror film precisely because there is no possible explanation for them except as delusions. (Partovi, 2009, pp. 198-199)

In *Girl's Dormitory*, Partovi points out, the character of Sakineh, an uneducated, superstitious, rural 'matron', could be read as a plot device to inspire fear. It is only when she is no longer part of the narrative – when death has silenced her – that

audiences are able to grasp her role as guardian. Her refusal to close off the supernatural apparently allows her to reason in ways which the educated, superficially modern characters cannot. Likewise, Swati and Vishal's stooped, cringing maid is the one who recognises the voice of her previous mistress (when it possesses Swati) and guides Vishal towards a cure. So, perhaps this acknowledgment of the supernatural is a space for the subaltern – a murdered single-mother, a despised cleaning woman – to *voice* rage and pain or wisdom. Or, alternatively, the supernatural theme may be a retrograde retreat from the challenging issues posed by mental health in the global south. Indeed, as viewer Carmela suggested in her comments, this may quite plausibly be a problematic representation of the maid and the two mistresses – dual subalterns by virtue of gender and (suggested) mental illness. In light of the recurrent discourses of aggression towards women which circulate and are played out in physical subjugation and sexual violence across Asia on a regular basis[2], the narrative undermining and punishment of female characters in Hindi horror films whether followed by the eventual punishment of a male character or not, remains open to regressive and authoritarian interpretations.

Conclusion

When Gayatri Spivak asked 'Can the subaltern speak?' she most likely never intended this question to be raised in relation to minor characters in little-studied genre films of Hindi popular cinema. Yet when the popular filmic subaltern speaks – albeit via the loudhailer provided by wealthy male film-makers – what is said may not be what critical intellectuals from the global south want to hear. Particularly when these films are removed from their primary contexts of consumption, and circulated more widely through geography and time, disjunctures arise between readings built around either culture-specific or genre-specific frameworks. If we consider contemporary Hindi

horror films as themselves embodying an attempt at cultural representation in a world marked by colonialist and postcolonial practices and beliefs, and if we do this through the lens of cross-cultural viewers' interpretations, we are led, perforce, back to a textual examination of the films' political and philosophical imaginaries. Alongside numerous insights provoked by assessing films and audience claims via dual methodologies, both potential drawbacks in postcolonial conceptual frameworks (which eschew structural analysis) *and* weaknesses in economic-centred structural theories have emerged from this audience-driven textual analysis.

Having situated itself in relation to debates about the immanence of meaning in film texts, and the dangers of patriarchal, misogynist and nationalist meanings in Hindi films and horror films as well as discussions of the fissures in film narratives which might allow postcolonial voices to be heard, this article asked the following questions: What analytical frameworks and interpretive resources do diverse viewers in different geographical and time contexts use in their discussions of Hindi horror films? And how, if at all, can scholarly textual analysis, particularly that which pays attention to the subaltern cultural politics of Hindi films, benefit from a consideration of audience interpretations?

Given a chance, audiences make their own critical claims about the meanings aspects of Hindi horror hold for them. Indeed, the sets of meanings emerging from the previous section, while not infinite or even in the hundreds, are pertinent, contingent, inconsistent and insightful. In generating these meanings, viewers call on knowledge of film genre, personal experience and group ideologies as well as on explicit or incipient theoretical frameworks. This in turn suggests not that media and film scholars should eschew their own textual analyses, but that they should be more cautious about assuming and asserting what entirely text-based analyses entail in relation to audience subjectivity.

Further, the insights arising from audience interpretation and discussion of horror films strengthen and complicate textual analyses which see in these films endorsements of misogyny or anti-modern subjectivity. Film-related talk can be discussed both autonomously as a cultural phenomenon in itself and used, where relevant, to develop a wider range of plausible readings of specific films, and to nuance existing structural or postcolonial readings of particular genres and subgenres. More specifically in relation to the Hindi horror films, discussions of the pleasure, questions and fear arising during and after film viewing emphasises that the 'horror' in this genre arises from contrasting tropes and imaginaries for different groups within every audience.

Postcolonial theory and (horror) genre theory might seem like eccentric bedfellows. In practice, however, like audience interpretation and textual analysis, they work usefully together. These juxtapositions signal that texts framed with implicit postcolonial epistemologies – in this case Hindi horror films – can and do act to *alienate* or *misrepresent* and to *represent* subaltern viewers. In tandem, these contrasting theories suggest that this genre also *critiques* and *sustains* contemporary India's contradictory neoliberal imaginaries: successful businessmen in tower blocks exist cheek-by-jowl with psychics and illiterate women as carriers of traditional wisdom. Husbands may die or be punished at the end of the film, but their gentleness or atheism at the beginning of the film remains as an overt imaginary, an invitation. Hindi horror films' refusal to 'redraw the boundaries between the human and the non-human' (Creed 1993, p. 14), one of the cathartic staples of classic Western horror, reflects, in Dirlik's third formulation of the term 'postcolonial' (1994, p. 332), their *epistemological and psychic* orientation towards society. In *Bhoot*, the ghost's motivation to punish those who killed her and her son is explained. Visceral realities rise insistently to the surface allowing horror to mean a range of different things to audiences in different cultural

circumstances and questioning culture and society in ways which are neither homogenously authoritarian nor consistently democratic. In Bollywood, horror is professional women who undermine men, families who abandon their elderly, those who disrespect the gods; but it is also the rape and murder of vulnerable persons; the absence of regulation in mental healthcare in the global south; the desolate silence in the abandoned courtyard; the bloodthirsty rage of the unavenged; the inexplicable 'other' who refuses to die, to change or to submit. Unlike their romantic counterparts, Hindi horror films do not excise any of these issues: they wallow in them. They probe the effects both of apparently indigenous traditions and of unevenly experienced modernity. They do so in ways that are ideologically structured and ribald, open to carnivalesque enjoyment and disgust. And as this paper has demonstrated, in doing so these films allow different groups within audiences space for authoritarian or anti-authoritarian identification, feminist or misogynist social critique, and debate, thus acting as the most uncanny of public spheres.

Notes

[1] In particular, her dancing in the film Rangeela, 1995, has led to her being called 'steamy' in reviews.

[2] See for, instance, responses to the Delhi rape case by politicians and locals in the Indian press or circulating on message boards, attitudes towards sexual harassment expressed in interviews with journalists (http://tehelka.com/cover-story-rape-and-how-men-see-it/) and dozens of South Asian feminist texts on these subjects.

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