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Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in India

Abstract

This is a book review of Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins, eds., *Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in India* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

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Author Notes

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Goldberg, Ellen, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins, eds., *Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in India* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

Although horror has been imbricated with the cinema from its earliest decades, scholarly attention has only recently turned towards filmic iterations of horror in South Asia. The reasons for this oversight are considerably complex, ranging from the generic *mélange* of the masala form to the genre's low-brow status in mainstream Indian culture, however understood. *Bollywood Horrors: Religion, Violence and Cinematic Fears in India*, edited by Ellen Goldberg, Aditi Sen, and Brian Collins is, therefore, a welcome addition to the emerging body of work that engages with this form with seriousness and without the derision and value judgement that had colored earlier criticism.

Ambitious in scope and cogently organized into three separate sections, this anthology brings together a wide-ranging selection of essays ranging from a consideration of film ephemera and generic prototypes like *tantriks* to an expansive redefinition of the genre via texts that the editors argue are “horror adjacent,” in recent Bollywood cinema. Since religious motifs, symbologies, and discourses often remain key narrative elements in Indian horror, the editors make a compelling case that a religious studies perspective can be of particular value, promising that “throughout these essays, we will draw attention to Indian myths, rituals, iconographic elements, and religious attitudes, when they are relevant to our analysis” (9). They additionally suggest that “the Sanskrit aesthetic philosophy of *rasa*” can “illuminate the sources of indigenous South Asian horror traditions and give readers a new perspective on horror in general” (10).

The first section of the collection titled, “Material Cultures and Prehistories of Horror in South Asia” remains its most exciting, in terms of the inclusion of previously overlooked materials as well as the insightful analyses that Brian Collins undertakes. Interestingly, both essays in this section are authored by Collins, firmly setting the anthology on a fresh and intriguing trajectory.

In the first of his essays, Collins takes the reader through an exhilarating exploration of Horror film posters, song booklets, and other ephemera, suggesting that these material objects have lives and conduits of circulation that remain tangentially connected to, but never fully subsumed by, the narratives they purport to advertise or represent. In doing so, he also uncovers sediments of cinephilia and fandom that gather around the circulation of a specific type of lurid *masala* aesthetic. This essay and the next are also buttressed by a marvelous series of color and black-and-white plates that would delight any fan of horror cinema. Collins' second essay introduces the readers to the fascinating life and career of one Devendra Varma, and the complex nodes of appropriation, inspiration, and translation through which the Gothic found its early foothold in the subcontinent. This essay is startling in its deft collation of extremely diverse source materials, from correspondence and biography to travelogues and an analysis of the Ramsay horror classic, *Bandh Darwaza*. In bringing all these disparate elements to speak to each other, Collins successfully introduces an entirely original cartography for the Gothic in the subcontinent.

The second section of the anthology, titled “Cinematic Horror, Iconography, and Aesthetics” is the only one that substantially delves into Bollywood horror as a generic formation. The decision to include Katherine M. Erndl's unfinished essay (she passed away before the book took its final shape) remains a deeply moving tribute from her fellow scholars, and one is always gratified to note these rare instances of respect and affection in academic contexts. Although incomplete, this essay on the avenging goddess in horror cinema offers a tantalizing glimpse into an interesting argument—one that would have used the tools of religious studies and perhaps *rasa* theory to illuminate not only film texts but also the ways in which these remain tethered to older textual traditions like the Sanskrit *Devi-Mahatmya*.

Older religious texts and rituals are key vectors of Hugh B. Urban's essay on the familiar figure of the *tantrik* in horror cinema. Tracing the figure through its earliest incarnations in Sanskrit drama and narrative, the modern Indian novel, and finally films like *Gehrayee* and *Jadugar*, Urban convincingly argues that while this "ambivalent" entity must be vanquished and the primacy of mainstream Hinduism asserted, "the perpetual recurrence of the sinister *tantrik* in Indian cinema suggests that he remains a haunting presence, a troubling form of abjection that can never fully be cast away." (93) The insistent return of the repressed is symptomatic of the fissures that characterizes religion in India.

In her essay on the hit film, *Raaz*, Aditi Sen provides a compelling reading of the film as a repurposing of the Savitri-Satyavan myth, where the *pativrata* wife wrests her husband from the jaws of death, in this case, a lustful female spirit. While Sen's reading of the sex-infidelity-troubled-marriage formula of the Bhatt film remains insightful, her oppositional reading of the genre is considerably less persuasive. In a risky analytical move, she positions Vikram Bhatt as a proto-feminist filmmaker, "who wants to question the Hindu sanctity of marriage and monogamous relationships," and "wants the audience to think about the oppressiveness of Hindu marriages and the pressure it puts on the woman" (111). Unfortunately, none of Bhatt's work so far—in terms of narrative techniques, but especially via stylistic features like *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, and sound—does anything to dismantle the solid foundations of matrimony and patriarchy, sex, or man-woman relations. The absolute insistence on the potency of the *mangalsutra* in recent films like *Raaz Reboot* (2016) despite an early affirmation of female desire, demonstrates that the heterosexual Hindu marriage remains sanctified and utterly inviolable in Bhatt's universe. Any disruptions to the institution remain temporary and cosmetic at best.

The last section, titled “Cultural Horror” is the most expansive, and takes the reader farthest from the horror film in a generic sense. In her piece Goldberg puts forth a capacious reworking of the formation by suggesting that “cultural horror... depicts, translates, and represents acts of cultural violence through an artistic medium such as film,” and that “a work of art’s ability to intentionally provoke the negative affect (feeling, emotion) of horror (or disgust) and terror (also referred to in Indian aesthetic theory as *bibhatsa* and *bhayanaka rasa*)” should enable it to be read as horror proper (122). Within this schema, her reading of the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in a film like *Dev* makes sense, based as it was on the real-life conflicts that continue to routinely erupt in India. Similarly, the final two essays on *Bandit Queen* and *Mardaani*, written by Morgan Oddie and Beth Watkins respectively, feature nuanced and detailed readings of gendered violence, rape-revenge, and child trafficking as well as how these themes concatenate with “real world” violence, beyond film. However, genre remains a specific set of determinants in the industrial sense, a contract between filmmakers and audiences, a marketing tool, a sphere of stardom, and so on. Not everything that is “horrifying” can be considered horror simply because the category would then cease to be meaningful in a critical sense. This is why the concept of *rasa* and *bhava* have only limited purchase in contemporary Indian cinema studies, precisely because they tend to obfuscate questions of political economy and other industrial factors. Furthermore, the horror film has only recently been accepted as a worthwhile object of academic inquiry; diluting it to a point of unrecognizability does it considerable epistemic disservice at this stage. Having noted this, however, one recognizes that this anthology’s breadth is also its strength: *Bollywood Horrors* is not principally a book for horror film scholars, but its wide range of texts and approaches opens it up to a much broader audience and readership.