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Indian Cinema as A Medium to Redefine Narratives About Witches Built by Religion and Culture

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Abstract:

This paper tries to examine what makes Witches an interesting topic in the contemporary arts, especially in visual medium. What personality attributes of them are making them relatable for today's modern, educated, emancipated women and why they are emerging as global icons for women. Contemporary Indian cinema is successfully building a counter narrative to break the popular narrative established by Culture and Religion. How cinema narrative has shifted from being the victim or villain as witches. Indian cinema is a powerful tool for social reflection. It has witnessed significant transformations over the years, particularly in its portrayal of women characters. Within this paradigm shift, the portrayal of witches has evolved from stereotypical, malevolent figures to empowering feminist icons. This research paper explores the journey of witches as feminist symbols in contemporary Indian cinema, examining how these characters have come to represent strength, independence, and resistance against patriarchal norms. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of selected films, this paper delves into the nuances of these portrayals and their impact on Indian society's perception of women.

Keywords: Religion, Culture, Women, Patriarchy, Counter Narratives, Gender Representation.

Introduction

For centuries witches have been depicted as sinister, malevolent beings, serving as cautionary tales or symbols of societal fears and anxieties. However, in recent years, Indian cinema has taken a remarkable turn, transforming these mythical beings into symbols of empowerment and resistance against oppressive gender norms. To comprehend the significance of this cinematic shift, a brief historical context is necessary. Traditionally, women in Indian cinema were typecast into limited roles, confined to portrayals of submissive wives, dutiful daughters, or tragic heroines. These representations perpetuated regressive gender norms, reinforcing the patriarchal order prevalent in society. In Religion and Culture, Witches were depicted as vile antagonists, embodying the male-dominated notion of women as evil and conniving beings. The Culture and Religion always painted witches as villains, later literature made them victims and now cinema is emancipating them and making them a feminist icon. In Every Religion and culture, they are depicted as malicious, evil and ugly looking creatures out there to disrupt humanity and God. The mention of Witches is there in Christianity, their counterparts in Hinduism as dayaan , Churail or Dakkani and Ifrat , a female jinn in Islam . In words of writer Moni Mohsin “Most cultures have their own version of these bad girls. The witch of Endor appears in the Bible; sorceresses in the Torah; Circe in Greek mythology; Baba Yaga in Russian folklore. Aside from not providing a son for her fat, petulant husband, among Anne Boleyn’s many listed crimes that justified her beheading, was also that she was a witch.” Such depiction and notions gender typed gave rise to crime against women under witch craft hunting or trials in society.

In the early modern period, from about 1400 to 1775, about 100,000 people were prosecuted for witchcraft in Europe and British America. Between 40,000 and 60,000 were executed. The witch-hunts were particularly severe in parts of the Holy Roman Empire. Prosecutions for witchcraft reached a high point from 1560 to 1630, during the Counter-Reformation and the European wars of religion. In 2011, a woman was beheaded in Saudi Arabia for allegedly practicing witchcraft and sorcery, an event human rights organizations described as "extremely shocking. When we talk about our own country India, practice of witch-hunting has long existed and yet it can be said with some certainty that it features little in academic debates. Though modern thought tends to relegate the practice of witch-hunting to the dark corners of the past, data from the National Crime Records Bureau suggests that it is still widespread. The NCRB states that around 2500 people have been

hunted and killed between 2000-2016 (most of them women), though the number maybe higher as some states do not register witch-hunting as a descriptive category for murder. In India many tribal areas or Adivasi communities still practice such cruelty and still believes in strict against women tagged as witches by ostracizing them or even burning them alive.

Witches from being Villains to Victim

The gender-biased portrayal of witches has been memorialized by classical and popular literature. The archetype of the witches in literature has generally been of a woman with wild eyes, hair streaming loose, dancing around some cauldron and evoking the evil spirits. The witch archetype is often drawn from the image of the Medusa, the sorceress with snakes for hair who can turn people to stone. Suck archetypes appear in Macbeth, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Christabel”, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, The Scarlet Letter, The Crucible, The Blithe dale Romance, The Witches of Eastwick, Songs of Solomon, and Beloved. To pinpoint one specific area from where witches or witch-like characters started appearing in literature is difficult. The OED, however, notes that the term wicca was being deployed in literature from as early as 890 AD. The present study refrains from any claims of unearthing the genesis of the occurrence of witch-like figures in literature, and following Diana Perkiss’ claim that “When we say Witch...we can hardly help thinking of Macbeth’s witches” (p. 180) we’ll begin locating witches in literature from Macbeth on. The “weird” sisters of Macbeth are portrayed as the three powerful and dangerous women, who through their prophecies and hidden evil intent set off a course of events that leads to a fight for the crown, the death of Macbeth and of a host of other characters. These weird witches of Macbeth have had an important influence over the representation of witches in English Literature. Anna Taylor, in her highly influential study *Magic in English Romanticism* (1979), brings to the fore textual influences like Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, and in the case of second-generation Romantic writers the influence is found in poems like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Christabel” or “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. In most of these poems women characters are represented possessing magical powers through which they charm and elude people. Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, besides being a historical novel, has elements of the preternatural and is also inspired by the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693) of the colonial United States.

The literary representations of the witches change significantly in the twentieth century, with the age-old representation of the witches undergoing a herculean change, from the vassal of evil forces to healers and often portrayed as the victims of an orthodox society's fear and stigma of the liberated woman. The *Witches of Eastwick* by John Updike is one such novel that pitches the idea of sexuality as a hallmark of witches in an ironic assertion and mockery of the patriarchal society's fear of the liberated woman, single or divorced. The three characters, Alexandra, Sukie and Jane have hilariously derived their witch power of sexuality from their divorces, which came through in their sexual prime, and these powers scare the conservative society in which they live. *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* too are rife with supernatural elements. In the latter, Morrison uses Circe, a witch of Greek mythology, who has the ability to turn people into wolves, lions and swine. However, Morrison subverts the image of Circe, and shows her as somebody who uses her powers to help Milkman. These witches solve the problems of identities and spiritual crises faced by Milkman. Morrison upends the entire image of the witches, who instead of being the fearsome embodiments of evil are full of compassion and possess a desire to help out human beings.

Cinema as medium to break established narratives

Indian cinema, a powerful tool for social reflection, has witnessed significant transformations over the years, particularly in its portrayal of women characters. Within this paradigm shift, the portrayal of witches has evolved from stereotypical, malevolent figures to empowering feminist icons. This paper tries to explore the journey of witches as feminist symbols in contemporary Indian cinema, examining how these characters have come to represent strength, independence, and resistance against patriarchal norms. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of selected films, this study delves into the nuances of these portrayals and their impact on Indian society's perception of women. For centuries, witches have been depicted as sinister, malevolent beings, serving as cautionary tales or symbols of societal fears and anxieties. However, in recent years, Indian cinema has taken a remarkable turn, transforming these mythical beings into symbols of empowerment and resistance against oppressive gender norms. The feminist turn in Indian cinema emerged as a response to growing demands for gender equality and women's rights. As feminism gained momentum, filmmakers began exploring alternative narratives, and the portrayal of witches became an avenue for subverting the established norms.

Reclaiming Power: Contemporary Indian cinema began to reclaim the image of the witch, presenting her as a figure of immense power. No longer a victim of circumstances, the modern witch is a master of her own destiny, utilizing her supernatural abilities to challenge oppressors and patriarchal authority.

Breaking Stereotypes: Female characters in Indian cinema were historically boxed into specific stereotypes, but witches offered an opportunity to break free from these molds. The witch's portrayal as a multifaceted character with depth and complexity helped challenge societal perceptions and norms regarding women.

Embracing Sexuality: Witches in contemporary cinema often embrace their sexuality, challenging the taboo surrounding female desire and autonomy. By doing so, these characters challenge conservative attitudes towards women's sexuality and provide a platform for discussions on sexual agency.

Defying Beauty Standards: Unlike conventional female leads, witches are portrayed as defying conventional beauty standards. They often possess unconventional appearances, subverting the societal pressure for women to conform to narrow notions of beauty.

Battling Patriarchy: Witches in contemporary Indian cinema are often depicted as warriors against patriarchal oppression. They fight for justice and equality, inspiring audiences to question existing power structures and advocate for gender parity.

The transformation of witches into feminist icons in Indian cinema has far-reaching sociocultural implications. These portrayals have the potential to **Shape Attitudes:** The positive representation of witches can shape public attitudes towards women, promoting gender equality and empowering women to challenge traditional roles.

Influence Empowerment: The portrayal of empowered witches serves as an inspiration for real-life women, encouraging them to assert their agency and resist oppression.

Open Dialogues: By depicting witches as multifaceted characters, Indian cinema fosters discussions around complex issues such as gender identity, sexuality, and societal expectations.

Witches in contemporary arts are compelling because they embody a potent mix of historical significance, symbolism, empowerment, magic, and the opportunity for social commentary. Their

enduring appeal lies in their ability to be both familiar and mysterious, making them an intriguing subject for artists and audiences alike. The analysis through this research is to understand how these malevolent female characters of vernacular folklores which were symbol of darkness, demonic and destruction in past became an ultimate feminist icon through contemporary Indian cinema with films like *Bulbul*, *Stree* and *Pari*.

Feminism through witches in Indian films

“In older mainstream Hindi movies like *Ragini MMS*, *Haunted*, *Raaz* and *Alone*, female ghosts are just seductresses and a damsel in distress. They need to be ‘saved’ from something and only a strong and masculine character could save them. They don’t have a voice of their own. They don’t seem to be capable of fighting their own battles and always need a man to be the saviour.”.

The set formulas began to witness a change with the motion picture *Makdee* (2002), Starring Shabana Azmi as a chudail (witch), the movie depicts how the superstitious beliefs of sorcery and witchcraft can be employed by rogues to carry out criminal acts with ease. Though the movie begins on a note of horror witnessed through the eyes of children, yet towards the end it bursts the horror balloon by uncovering the heinous criminal activities being carried out by outlaws exploiting people’s belief in witchcraft practices. It will be another twelve years before another movie comes on the scene that challenges the tropes and popular perception of ghosts and witches. *Stree* (2018) takes a fresh approach to the horror movies and tries to restore some dignity to the ever-vilified witches by portraying two important changes. The first change that it brings is that the witch was not always some crazy spurned lover looking for love, and second, that a man was not required to salvage the situation. A humorous and well-made film, *Stree*, appears almost like a parody of horror movies, critiquing the role of the patriarchal society as self-appointed saviours, while spinning webs of lies and illusion around witches/witchcraft. It also subverts the traditional formula where women would be kept safe inside the homes, and men would fight the ghost, by depicting how men were locked up inside the homes and were dependent on their wives and mothers for safety. The movie, however, ends on an ambivalent note by revealing at the end that the woman who salvaged the situation was herself a witch/sorceress, stopping short of really liberating the witch narrative from the grasp of patriarchy.

A stark change was brought in the year 2020 with *Bulbul*, a Netflix original movie, which challenged the formulaic depiction of witches in Hindi movies. Set in pre-Renaissance Bengal, *Bulbul* has references to social practices like child marriage, and brings out the second-class citizenship status of women in nineteenth century Bengali society. Above all, the story is a haunting reminder of how patriarchal powers punish a young girl, whose zeal to right the wrongs meted out to women in an unjust society earns her the title of Witch.

The Movie, “*Pari*” starring Anoushka Sharma could also be a very good example in this line. Filmmaker, Roy uses the protagonist, Rukshana as a convenient symbol of female iniquity. She is the witch that is being hunted. A herd of sanctimonious men, led by a radicalized Dhaka professor (Rajat Kapoor), has been baying for Rukshana’s blood from the day she was born. Men in *Pari* are perpetually repulsed and antagonized by the feminine. This could be a scene from Salem witch trials, where fourteen women accused of witchcraft were executed in the USA in 1693.

The witches in the movies are the revolutionary forces that set right the wrongs of society and establish the equality of women in it; in doing so they upset the traditional understanding of witches and their activities. Witches have historically been portrayed as villainous characters, whose motive is to destroy the existing order and harmony of (patriarchal) society. Their existence was seen as a threat to the heteronormative patriarchal families. And their chosen vessel for wreaking this havoc had largely been women, timid and fragile. Men, the saviours of society, were the force that could defeat or get rid of these witches and restore the balance in the patriarchal system. Movies like *Bulbul*, *Pari* and *Stree* give women a voice and a story where they are in control of what happens to them,” Verma adds. At the end of the movies like *Pari* and *Bulbul*, the audience is often left with the question of what is more terrifying -the supernatural female ghost or the subjugation and inhumane experiences of these women. The strong storytelling makes the central characters of these films haunt people not just inside but even outside the theatre due to widespread and cruel exploitation of women in the country. “Most often, such movies make us scared of the human society we live in and we end up rooting for and empathizing for the ghosts and witches instead! And that is the power of honest and empathetic storytelling,” says Verma.

Conclusion

Through this discussion we can conclude that how these malevolent female characters which were symbol of darkness, demonic and destruction in past became an ultimate feminist icon through

contemporary Indian cinema with films like *Makdee* , *Bulbul*, *Ek thi Daayan* , *Stree* and *Pari* . In these films how there are elements of feminist folklores and protagonists were eventually portrayed as Witches. Pakistani writer Moni Mohsin says that, “it’s time to reclaim Daayan /churail as they are free, fierce and feminist. Churails don’t live in tidy towns. Barefoot, bareheaded, half naked, they haunt desolate places because they are not subject to the stifling strictures of a society that decrees that women must be decent, submissive, domestic. Like wild animals, churails are children of nature, they are free spirits who go where they wish, do as they will. They are a law unto themselves. Men can’t kill them, because they’re already dead. They can’t threaten them because they have nothing to lose. Dangerous, powerful, uncontrollable, a churail is the patriarchy’s worst nightmare. As a young girl, I thought that being called a churail was an insult. But now I welcome it for, churails are symbols of feminine power, of freedom, of fierceness. A churail is in fact, the ultimate feminist icon.” How today’s modern women living in metropolitan cities of India do not relate with sacrificing mythological images of women. They identify more with being a witch. They want to be unapologetic and unabashed in their views and actions and how contemporary cinema is strengthening this narrative by films with witches as their central characters, with a new modern feminist voice.

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