

Sex, Sleaze and the Sinister-What the viewer wants out of Hindi horror films

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Abstract- The history of Hindi films is more than a hundred years old. In the hundred odd years Hindi films have seen myriad changes. The changes have happened in terms of genres, themes, story lines, budgets and even promotion strategies. The one genre that has frequently raised quite a few eyebrows is Horror. As with its western counterpart where the original horror gave way to several sub genres like Gothic horror, Slasher horror, Teen horror, and Vampire horror and so on and so forth, Hindi horror films have sprouted many versions of their own. From the initial horror endeavour **Mahal** by acclaimed director Kamal Amrohi in the year 1949 to the latest **Khamoshiyaan** in 2015 from the stable of Mahesh Bhat, Hindi horror films have reinvented themselves from being just garden variety to becoming game changers for their makers by ringing the cash registers. Often ridiculed in the past for their excesses and tacky treatment, Hindi horror films in recent years have metamorphosed into products that are classy and sophisticated to say the least. The elements of horror vis-à-vis creaking doors, darkly lit corridors, and scary background score now have the new add on elements of sex and skin show, which have become the USP (unique selling points) of such films. The present paper attempts to explore the different facets that are a common fixture in Hindi horror films today and reasons for their popularity among viewers.

Index Terms- Hindi Horror, Media Text, Gratification, Film Audience

I. INTRODUCTION

“**T**error is the finest emotion, and so I will try to terrorize the reader”- Stephen King

There is a familiar phrase in English ‘All the world loves a lover’, close on the heels of this phrase is another phrase not as familiar maybe but definitely noteworthy ‘All the world loves to be scared’. The Uses and Gratification theory is highly relevant at this point (applicable to a variety of media texts) in order to understand why an audience consumes a certain text. This theory states that all media is constructed in order to fulfil the audience’s needs. It is possible to apply this theory to those who enjoy the horror genre in particular and show why it is a preferred genre. Why is it that people enjoy being scared? This is the premise that has influenced scores of film makers to try their hand at attempting to do just that-scary, frighten and shock the living daylights out of the viewer. We have had umpteen number of horror classics from Alfred Hitchcock who prided himself in being the best of his tribe. Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, *Birds*, *39 steps*, *Vertigo*, *Notorious* are just a few of the films that are part of the

many, made by the director and still considered the best of horror films to this day.

Horror films have a long history that is as old as human communication. For centuries humans have been scaring each other, the proof of which can be seen in our oral traditions that have woven stories of werewolves, goblins, devils, monsters and witches as in the west and *Daayan* (home grown witches) *Bhoot* (ghost) and *Shaitan* (Devil) in the Indian context, that were passed on to us as part of tribal culture. With the invention of printing, many tales of fright and terror emerged in the shape of supernatural literature, passing on the legacy of scary stories through the power of paper/print. With theatre, horror got further entrenched in our lives, with the likes of Guignol Theatre of Paris staging plays that were liberally laced with blood and gore. With the motion pictures or movies as they were referred to years ago, horror grew in stature and prominence. Some memorable films of early twentieth century used fantastic techniques to explore the theme of horror- *The Golem* (1915), *Nosteratu* (1922), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1929).

II. WHAT MAKES A FILM SCARY OR HORRIFYING?

According to experts people love to be scared, which accounts for the many horror films being made in Hollywood and Bollywood. In the US of A, a survey conducted on one thousand movie goers revealed that more than 70 percent of respondents said that they would definitely watch a scary movie on Halloween night (Nate Hensely, 2008), proving the original premise that people enjoy being scared. Horror films prey on people’s fears as is obvious from the themes that have emerged in all these years. The launching of satellites (Russian Sputnik) led to fears of alien invasion that still continues to enthrall us. Nuclear power gone awry gave way to dozens of films on mutant animals/humans on rampage, insects taking over America and the like. The emergence of psychological deviance as a theme led to films like *Psycho* (1960) and *The Haunting* (1963). According to American psychologist Dr. Glen D. Walters, horror films have three primary factors that act as allure. The first being tension, that can be created through mystery, suspense and the un-known. The second is relevance, where the potential viewer should be able to connect with the story line at some point or the other. Grievous bodily harm, imminent death and danger make this connection possible. The third factor is that of unrealism. The graphic nature of some of the horror films rather than driving us off attract us towards the screen because of the sheer improbability of such an event happening in reality, which is in contrast to a documentary that is based in reality and therefore

more unsettling. This is referred to as fabricated reality and finds many aficionados among film viewers.

III. HORROR FILMS IN HINDI

There have been many successful horror films made in Hindi over the years, beginning with *Mahal* in 1949. Later *Bees Saal Baad* (1962) *Gumnam* (1965) and *Bhoot Bangla* (1965) carried the genre forward. One of the major reasons for Hindi horror films to succeed was the music. Apart from a strong story line, there was excellent music and singing that helped in presenting some of the most chilling scenes seen in Hindi cinema. These early films were story driven and were backed by great actors of the time. The seventies saw the tenor of Hindi horror films changing. There was a strong influence of the west seen in the treatment. Stories took a backseat with the sensational given precedence. The entry of Ramsay Brothers in the year 1972 saw a 180 degree turn in the Hindi horror genre. The gradual creeping of sex and skin show became apparent. The duo of Ramsays made several horror films in Hindi that had a liberal dose of sex and exposure. *Veerana* (the isolated) had the story line of a young girl possessed by a vengeful spirit who was appeased only after seducing a hapless male and then killing him. The story thus lent itself to a number of sexually laden scenes. Another film from the Ramsay stock was *Khoon Ki Pyasi* (The thirsty witch) which had a seductress baying for the blood of young men because of an evil power that had taken possession of her. This film has often been labelled C-grade, semi-porn, for its sleazy sexual scenes. The Ramsay brothers made many such films that were so similar to one another that in the early 1990s it became difficult for the viewer to differentiate them. The sameness in story lines, casting and treatment led to the horror genre losing a sense of purpose or proportion.

It is often said by most film experts that the horror genre is a difficult one to work with especially in the context of Indian cinema. Initially in the early years of Hindi cinema horror films were not that popular with the film viewing crowd, it was much later that Hindi horror movies got a wide cult following among Bollywood lovers. Early forays into the horror genre was limited only to stereotypical movies that had an excess of blood, gore, bodies. The Ramsay brothers were famous for making such films, considered by most as B/C-grade due to the lack of big names, a proper story/plot line. Ironically it was the Ramsey brothers who single handed kept the genre alive right through the 70s, 80s and 90s. The psychological horror movies, layered with possibilities made an entry at the turn of the new millennium. These were riddled with paranormal activities and suggestive eeriness similar to their western counterpart.

By the 2000s, several directors had begun to work and receive critical acclaim for their work in the horror genre. Ram Gopal Verma, Vikram Bhatt, Priyadarshan and Sangeeth Sivan are few of the notable names. The sub-genre of Hindi Horror Films has had a revival since with Vikram Bhatt's *Raaz* (2002) which was largely inspired by a Hollywood hit (the Harrison Ford starrer *'What Lies Beneath'*) which became an instant box office hit. Other horror films that achieved repute were- Ram Gopal Verma's *Bhoot*, *Krishna Cottage*, *Darna Mana Hai*, *Darna Zaroori Hai* and *Phoonk*. Director Priyadarshan's 2007 smash hit *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* is a unique film of the horror genre

that has made proper use of comic elements blended well with a thrilling plot.

Hindi Horror Films have attained a new dimension due to the efforts of two film production houses-Vishesh Films and Balaji Motion Pictures, headed by Mahesh-Mukesh Bhat and Ekta Kapoor respectively. The horror films that come out of these two production centres are high on production value, big names, arresting story-lines, engaging music and most of all sexual content. So heavy is the sexual content in the films made by the two production houses that the term Horrex- a portmanteau of horror and sex- is used to indicate such films. From Vishesh Films there were *Raaz 1,2* and *3*, *Dangerous Ishq*, *1920*, *1920 evil returns* and *Khamoshian*. From Balaji Motion Pictures we have had *Kucch To Hai*, *Krishna Cottage*, *Ek Thi Daayan*, *Ragini MMS 1* and *2*. The common thread weaving these films from two diverse source is sex. The producers take great pride in the successes of these films that lure a comparatively young audience between the age group of 18- 25 who are attracted by the titillation on display in generous proportion. The success of these films have influenced others to try similar ventures leading to almost a formulaic horror genre laden with meaningless sex and sleaze, that have no relevance to plot or story, except for the fact that they bring in money.

IV. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Need to Redefine Bollywood Horror Genre- The Viewpaper: According to a contributor of *The Viewpaper*, an on-line youth newspaper, the horror genre has nothing much to offer the Indian audience, the comments are anything but flattering....'Let me start with the re-definition of "spookism" by the Ramsay Brothers who actually defined the B-grade film genre with some pathetic movies, some of which were actually runaway successes. I still wonder why! Okay, well these movies' titles speak volumes for them. Let me share some with you – *Do Gaz Zameen ke Neeche*, *Purana Mandir*, *Shaitani Ilaaka*, *Khooni Saya!* With names as grotesque as possible, the movie plot revolved around evil spirits and deformed creatures terrorizing villages. The most popular targets were thinly clad women. In between the horror (if there was any) there was a liberal sprinkling of sex and as much nudity that could pass uncensored! It was their "success formula" which they rarely deviated from'. Opinions such as these are common enough regarding Hindi horror films, given the fact that it is largely true. The films mentioned ran true to form, with nubile heroines clad next to nothing, heroes with excessive libidinal energy and contrived scenes to milk the situation to maximum.

Bollywood and its Other(s): Towards new configurations-Edited by Vikrant Kishore, Amit Sarwal and Parichay Patra : In this collection of essays writer Mithuraaj Dhusia in his article *The Ramsay Chronicles* sites Peter Hutchings who is of the opinion that the Ramsays were greatly influenced by western horror films hence similar treatment seen in the Hindi versions and an obvious fact that emerges is that the Ramsays generously borrowed from many American horror films, often giving way to irrelevant story plots and meaningless sequences. The Ramsays consciously used elements of sex in great doses to provide a diversion from the scary elements that

incidentally also provided the much needed titillation. So sex here was a contrived feature not a natural flow of the story.

Horrex Returns: Top 10 Bollywood films where horror meets sex: The genre of 'Horrex' films has been around for quite some time in Bollywood, but not as much as it has suddenly gained steam. With film after film bringing together horror and adequate doses of sex, this genre is steadily on the rise these days. The Ramsay Brothers were the ones who immortalised this genre of films, as far as Bollywood is concerned; and despite most of their films having been passed off as B-Grade ones, Horrex is now back in fashion.

Horror Movies: Why People Love Them: In an article in the on-line magazine *Livescience*, author Leslie Fink questions the motives behind people wanting to watch horror films....“The question is: Why? If our best selves find the horrific so repulsive, why do we pay good money to watch it again and again?” She cites Jeffrey Goldstein, a professor of social and organizational psychology at the University of Utrecht in the Netherlands. Goldstein edited a book on the subject titled “Why We Watch: The Attractions of Violent Entertainment” (Oxford University Press)”. He and other social scientists suggest we watch for different reasons, which include enjoying the adrenaline rush, being distracted from mundane life, vicariously thumbing our noses at social norms, and enjoying a voyeuristic glimpse of the horrific from a safe distance.

V. METHODOLOGY

A focus group discussion (FGD) is a good way to gather together people from similar backgrounds or experiences to discuss a specific topic of interest. The participants are guided by a moderator (or group facilitator) who introduces topics for discussion and helps the group to participate in a lively and natural discussion amongst themselves. The present research has utilised the focus group discussion since the researcher at this point seeks open-ended thoughts and feelings from viewers on the issue of what makes viewers watch contemporary Hindi horror films. Further, Focus groups discussions allow for broader and deeper insights into the topic as opposed to quantitative research that involves numerical-based data collection. According to an article from the Iowa State University Extension Programme (2004), focus group discussions being a qualitative technique, are rich in detail and often provide surprises on what people may think of a product/issue. This is quite different from quantitative surveys or studies which limit respondents to single-word or short phrase multiple choice responses.

The present study is grounded on the Uses and Gratification Theory which is a popular approach to understanding mass communication. The theory gives emphasis to the consumer, or audience/viewer instead of the actual message itself by asking “What do people do with media?” instead of “What does media do to people?” This was said by Katz, in 1959. It assumes that members of the audience are not passive but take an active/dominant role in interpreting media into their own lives.

The theory also holds the idea that audiences are responsible for choosing media to meet their needs. The approach secondly suggests that people use the media to fulfil specific gratifications. This theory would therefore suggest that the media competes

against other information sources for viewers' gratification (Katz, E., Blumler, J.G and Gurevitch 1974)

VI. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Speaking to Sharon Begley feature writer *The Daily Beast* (an on-line magazine), “If we have a relatively calm, uneventful lifestyle, we seek out something that’s going to be exciting for us, because our nervous system requires periodic revving, just like a good muscular engine,” says Stuart Fischhoff, professor emeritus of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles, and senior editor of the online magazine *Journal of Media Psychology*. A 1995 study found that the higher people score on a scale that measures sensation-seeking, the more they like horror films. “There are people who have a tremendous need for stimulation and excitement,” says Fischhoff. “Horror movies are one of the better ways to get really excited.” This explains why [horror movies](#) are more popular with younger audiences. Teenagers and twenty-plus adults “are more likely to look for intense experiences,” says John Edward Campbell, an expert in media studies at Temple University. This fades with age, as people become more sensitive to their own physiology: middle-aged and older adults do not tend to seek out experiences that make their hearts race, since they feel real life is scary enough. They don’t need to get their scares from movies. As Fischhoff puts it, “Older people have stimulation fatigue. Life’s [real] horrors scare them, or they don’t find them entertaining any more—or interesting.”(*Why Our Brains Love Horror Movies, The Daily Beast*)

VII. FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

The group was a disparate one consisting of twelve people of which half the members were between the age group of 18-25, the remaining varied between 40-65. This was done to provide a contrast between the comparatively young audience and the more seasoned/senior audience. According to the Uses and Gratification theory, audience choose any form of media that fulfil their select needs which include the need to identify role models that reflect similar values to theirs and be someone else, if only temporarily; the need to educate, being able to acquire information, knowledge and understanding; the need to entertain, to derive enjoyment by of “escapism” enabling the audience to forget their worries; the need for social interaction, a reference to media content that creates an opportunity for conversation between people leading to debate and discussion among people.

To the question, what may be the reasons for watching a Hindi horror film, the answers were varied as expected. The younger viewers in the group were vociferous in their agreement that they watched a Hindi horror film for its sheer entertainment. Since most of the Hindi horror films follow the commercial cinema pattern by way of presentation, in that they have all the ingredients of commercial films vis-à-vis good banner, music, lavish settings, technology, promotion- it is quite acceptable to have the young audience seek such escapist fare to spend their time. The older viewers on the other hand said they watched Hindi horror films expecting a good story that would have something new to tell. The second question posed was what

made a Hindi horror film entertaining/interesting enough to watch? This was asked to find out more details on the viewer's taste. Almost all the youngsters stated that the elements of danger, suspense, shock in itself was extremely thrilling. Some added that the nail baiting situations were what was most anticipated. Not knowing what would happen next, the unpredictability was something that most youngsters looked forward to. The older audience on the other hand said that they were familiar with most horror patterns and rarely if at all were they very taken in by the thrills, since they had been indoctrinated as it were to such situations. According to Professor Stuart Fischhoff, "experiments have shown that Young people often need intense stimulation: sounds, tastes, touch. They're sensory risk-takers, thrill-seekers. They like horror films far more than older people." The third question was rooted on the issue of various elements that made the Hindi horror film appealing. To this the young audience were unabashedly bold to state that they looked forward to the male/female protagonists. The young males in the group were strong in their avowal of the heroine and the females were ardent in their appreciation of the hero. Both genders favoured a romantic thread in the story, the females more strongly than the male. The male were more appreciative of the sexual elements that have become a liberal feature of Hindi horror films in recent years. They seemed to welcome the skin show, the presence of the vamp or other girl in the story which enhanced the entertainment value for them. For a few of the young male in the group the sex scenes were the biggest draw since Hindi horror films were generally bolder in exploring and representing sex scenes in comparison to other genres. This sub-group (young males in the group) cited films such as '*Alone*' and '*Raagini MMS*' as films watched with great expectation and eagerness for the sex scenes. This behaviour is reminiscent of the forbidden fruit syndrome, where youngsters in conservative culture/society like India have little or no sexual freedom and are forced to depend on outlets such as these films for their sexual fulfilment/exploration. The older viewers were rather disapproving of these elements. The real attraction for them was the final resolution, to see good win over evil. This seemed to provide a closure to ambivalent feelings of insecurity in them. The fourth question was related to the creative and qualitative value of Hindi horror films. The young and the senior members of the group were in agreement that contemporary Hindi horror films were mere replicas of the western counterparts. There was rampant replication of the western ideas, story-line, treatment and presentation. The group summarily agreed that there was very little original work being done in this field. The group cited exceptions like '*Daayan*' and '*Bhoot*', but accepted that they were only exceptions and not the rule. The fifth poser was what the group expected of Hindi horror films in the future? The young wanted films that were better by way of technical sophistication in the presentation, they were otherwise happy with the status quo. The seniors differed in this regard, wanting more complexity in story-line, had little concern over technical sophistication and hoped for an end to meaningless sex, violence, gore and blood, knowing it was an impossible expectation. The eclectic responses were a refreshing change to predictable ones and quite in contrast to a [Google study](#), conducted in conjunction with Millward Brown Digital, which revealed the fact that people who saw horror movies cared more

about convenient show-times when making up their minds about what they wanted to go and see in the theatres. It was evident through this study that as long as a horror film was being shown in multiplexes viewers would flock to see it because they were in the mood to be scared. This essentially meant that the audience weren't concerned about the film's reviews, its cast, director or plot, rather something as simple as the theatre timings could swing things in favour of a horror film. Unlike the quoted study, the members of the focus group expressed opinions that were unambiguous and clear.

VIII. CONCLUSION

According to movie analyst Phil Contrino quoted in the *Washington Post*, "As a genre, it's(horror) never completely dead, because people always want to be scared." This essentially captures the basic premise and understanding of the present paper- the motivating factors behind viewer's watching horror films, in this case, factors influencing viewers watching Hindi horror films. Whether it's about suppression, catharsis, or simply enjoying the thrill of it all, experiencing horror within safe confines is an important part of every culture. Horror films help us understand what it is that terrifies us and make bold statements about the world we live in.

From the varied secondary sources it is clear that viewers attribute different reasons for wanting to watch horror films. Both in the west and India, research and study makes it clear that reasons can range from the very esoteric-in order to relate and bond with like-minded people-to the very banal-show timings of theatres. Pre-existing research also reveals that Hindi horror films are here to stay and have a good fan following, with many film makers of Hindi horror reaping financial benefits. It is also clear, that in recent times the Hindi horror film has evolved a great deal since the early years. Existing material also reveals viewer's penchant for sexually laden scenes that have become a trend setter of sorts in Hindi horror films.

The Focus Group Discussion has revealed a clear difference in stands between the group members. The young audience thinks very differently from the older audience. Their respective motivating factors for wanting to watch Hindi horror films are very different. So age does play a significant role in influencing people's media needs and perception. Applying the Uses and Gratification theory in this context helped unravel the audiences' motivation in accessing a particular media content, in this context Hindi horror films. This theory is relevant and valid for understanding the core question "What do people do with media?" With Hindi horror films the audience gets entertained, thrilled, titillated and most of all frightened and scared to the core. It is apparent that when it comes to Hindi horror films '*Sex, Sleaze and the Sinister*' seems to gratify the viewer.

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