

DYSTOPIAN FUTURES ON NETFLIX CONVERGING GENRES, ETHICS AND NARRATIVE IN *GHOUL*

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It is well-known that the horror genre is highly responsive to the fears and desires that nourish historical moments. So does the melodramatic mode of Hindi cinema when it represents national crises through tropes of the family. First conceptualized as a feature, the two genres converge in the Netflix mini-series *Ghoul* which seems very much like a film cut into three pieces reflecting and refracting the historical moment of Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government, the future of the state and its relation to the Muslim minority community. Many generic elements of this globally disseminated series are taken from a transcultural repertoire of special effect driven slasher brutality we have grown accustomed to. Thus, it may seem to connect to global expectations of those enjoyments that can be derived from horror as, borrowing Linda Williams' term, a "body genre" (representing damage done to human bodies while creating affects of fear, horror and terror within us that can be experienced as positive, transgressive thrill¹). However, I will argue that another understanding of 'body' is possible here, which focuses on the narrative's allegorical dimension.

While evocative of a global rise of right-wing authoritarianism, the series specifically addresses the Indian body politic as a secular Indian family, albeit brutalized in the flesh of minorities. It also does so through kin relationships, primarily that of Nida Rahim (Radhika Apte), a young Muslim woman in the intelligence service and her father Shahnawaz, an intellectual taken prisoner by the regime. In this respect, questions of memory and forgetting are crucial to the moral force of the narrative as they bring the past of minority discrimination into dialogue with the present moment. The narrative circles around the interrogation of Ali Saeed, a terrorist, in a secret government camp that leads to a number of mysterious events. The three-episode series portrays a dystopian scenario, a blend of law and order state, book burning, vigilante persecution of minorities and anti-intellectualism. Nida is a young recruit in the intelligence who belongs to the Muslim minority community. Out of conviction that the political system is legitimate,



Ghoul (Patrick Graham, Jason Blum et al.), Netflix, 2018

she denounced her father – an outspoken critic of the state – who was in consequence incarcerated. Nida is assigned to an Abu Ghraib-like prison, called *Meghdoot 31* (a cynic name that combines - in typical fascist manner - the rational banality of a number with the high cultural appeal of a famous Sanskrit poem by Kalidasa that translates into "messenger of the clouds"), in which mostly Muslim prisoners are tortured. The prison is led by the sympathetic, but slightly goofy, Colonel Sunil Dacunha (a Goan Christian surname with a rather unmarked 'Hindu' first name) who seems supportive of Nida at first but later turns out to have been playing her all along. In the prison, she is forced to interrogate the renowned terrorist Ali Saeed. The interrogation – to which she does not take lightly – turns into nightmares that blur the boundary between waking and dreaming. Ali Saeed transforms into the ghoul in front of Nida informing her that her father was imprisoned in the very same camp. In the last episode, another prisoner, an old Maulvi, explains the nature of the creature to her: in Arabic tales, a ghoul is an evil spirit that confronts us with our guilt

and then turns it against us. Eventually, he takes over people by eating them. Fauhan Singh, a tall handsome Sikh known as a fierce interrogator, is the ghoul's next victim. At some point, Nida realizes that the camp is used to torture political prisoners – not terrorists – and that her father was stationed there. He summoned the creature with his own blood before his execution to make her realize what the "madness of patriotism" she swore allegiance to is really like. In the grand finale, the creature assumes the shape of Nida herself before – after shifting form again to embody another prisoner – it is blown up with a hand grenade by Colonel Dacunha. The colonel magically survives the blast just to be shot by Nida in front of a whole army battalion. Getting arrested for Dacunha's murder she is told in the interrogation room that "the daughter of a terrorist will be a terrorist". The very last scene ends with her summoning the ghoul with her own blood after having smuggled a razor blade into the prison cell in her mouth.

¹ WILLIAMS, L. (1991). FILM BODIES: GENDER, GENRE, AND EXCESS. *FILM QUARTERLY* 44 (4), 2–13.

What can we take away from *Ghoul* concerning the above-raised questions of form, memory and forgetting in relation to the struggles of minorities under an increasingly threatening majoritarian climate in India? Surely, there is some moral advice: don't be a Muslim *dhimmi*! Don't expect justice by trusting the state and ratting on your family. Also: Muslim terrorism may be the flipside of this discriminatory regime, both eat their way into the dreams of people, destroying their most intimate relationships. The easiest reading would go in the direction of a defense of secular nationalism in the wake of what could be considered majoritarianism as a "sectarian" or "communal problem". Why? Because the ghoul moves through the body politic, the flesh-made crisis of intercommunal harmony transfigured in both the Muslim family and the other minority characters. He doesn't care for wealth, class, and popular frustrations beyond personal biography and religious group identity.

The naive attachment of Nida to the nation that has given her family so little in return and likely played a role in the demise of her father, can be explained by the often-noted flatness of individual psychology within the melodramatic mode, that has been shown to foreground the national family as a moral order in crisis. In many Hindi films, narrative resolution is gained by transcendence: who can overcome their respective position and negative emotions to portray a bigger humanity (often of the nation)? This clearly does not happen in *Ghoul* where the resentment of Nida is legitimized. It is there to stay due to the structural conditions of her existence.

Thus, the form negotiates ethical dilemmas of how to memorize inter-religious tensions which are sketched on the canvas of family relations and socio-religious stereotypes like Fauhan Singh and Colonel Sunil Dacunha. In the Hindu authoritarian state, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims turn on each other. The guilt is nationalized and corporeal: they eat each other up. Since they can't confront their own deeds and their own implication in the violence, the secular body politic cannibalizes itself. This non-confrontation involves a complex mechanism of forgetting that keeps the nostalgic memory of better secular order intact.



Ghoul (Patrick Graham, Jason Blum et al.), Netflix, 2018

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