

The Power and Tragedy of Vengeful Female Ghosts in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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by

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Certificate

This is to certify that this dissertation entitled “**The Power and Tragedy of Vengeful Female Ghosts in Contemporary Indian Cinema**” towards the partial fulfilment of the BS-MS dual degree programme at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune represents study/work carried out by Pallav Khandekar at Indian Institute of Science Education and Research under the supervision of Dr Nikhila H, English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad; and Dr Pooja Sancheti, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research, Pune during the academic year 2023-24

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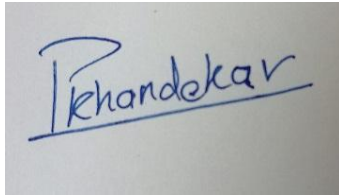
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Declaration

I hereby declare that the matter embodied in the report entitled “The Power and Tragedy of Vengeful Female Ghosts in Contemporary Indian Cinema” are the results of the work carried out by me at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) Pune, under the supervision of Dr. Nikhila H (The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad) and Dr. Pooja Sancheti (IISER Pune), and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for any other degree. Wherever others contribute, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

A photograph of a handwritten signature in blue ink on a light-colored surface. The signature reads 'P Khandekar' with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Pallav Khandekar

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This thesis is dedicated to all those who keep me alive every day.

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Introduction

The figure of the monster has been contrasted against the human ever since the early days of narrative cinema. Films like *Nosferatu* (1922), *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), and *King Kong* (1933) portrayed fearsome creatures that pose a threat to human life. These monsters can be read as metaphors for a group of people or a historical phenomenon. James Snead points to parallels between the story of Carl Denham's travels into Skull Island and the colonial projects into the African continent, "As an allegory of the slave trade, then, and of various other forms of exploitation and despoilment, Denham's journey might be expected to resemble what we already know about Europe's encounters with traditional (and in this case, African) peoples" (Snead 59).

Policante, for instance, uses a Marxist framework to read the figure of a vampire as the all-consuming yet perennially hungry power of capitalism. It can survive only by sucking the blood of labour (Policante 11). The monster is created and read through the filter of an ever-changing culture. So, it is important to pay attention to the monsters that are being written about, as they reflect the culture they were made in and affect the people who view them.

The monsters also occupy a space in cultures of conflict. "In its function as dialectical Other or third-term supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond—of all those loci that are rhetorically placed as distant and distinct but originate Within" (Cohen 7). The relationship between monsters and the non-monstrous is one of threat and threatened. However, not all threats can be classified as monstrous. Threats are too broad of a category, which will include everything from an avalanche to werewolves to humans wielding a weapon. "The monsters of horror, however, breach the norms of ontological propriety presumed by the positive

human characters in the story” (Carroll 16). The monster is something that exists on the ontological border. The colloquial term supernatural can be defined as that which rests on an ontological border.

As an example, a man with a knife does not cross any ontological borders, but an equivalently dangerous werewolf with sharp claws lies on the border between a man and a wolf. Once it is situated on this border and acts as a threat to social order, i.e. (natural) law, it fully becomes a monster. In Foucault’s lectures on the abnormal, he situates the monster in the “juridico-biological” domain. Someone who breaks the law in a legal notion, as well as the laws of nature, would be considered a monster. (Foucault 56)

Foucault, in *Discipline and Punish*, talks about how certain societally contingent laws come to be seen as natural or normal through the power of normalization (Foucault 179). Through these processes, the norms of a natural human, natural man, natural woman, natural sexuality, etc, are formed. The breaking of these norms is seen as the breaking of natural law. “At the level of the rules governing natural species and distinctions between natural species, the monstrous individual was always associated, if not systematically, at least virtually, with a possible criminality” (Foucault 81). This correlation allows people to ascribe criminality to those who break the “natural law”. However, in the film genre of the monster, the criminality of those breaking the natural law is also normalized. This can be used to empower a being above the judicial law by making them monstrous.

For e.g., vampires are also portrayed as expressing sexuality. The pose during a vampire bite is often intimate, with the human being embraced in the arms of the vampire. There is an exchange of body fluids between the human and the vampire, resulting from the penetration of the human's body by the vampiric fangs. The visual of a vampire turning a human being hence invokes the act of sex. "Luring at first with an inviting orifice, a promise of red softness, but delivering instead a piercing bone, the vampire mouth fuses and confuses ... the gender-based categories of the penetrating and the receptive" (Craft 109). The intimate act of a vampire turning a human is painted ambiguous in the roles of the male and female. When this is paired with the fact that the vampire is ambivalent in the choice of the gender of the one being turned, it serves as a metaphor for queer sexuality.

Just like this, women who refuse to follow the norms of femininity in their appearance, emotions, or actions become monstrous. In cinema, monstrous women have appeared in varied forms, like witches (*Carrie*), vampires (*The Vampire Lovers*), and possessed monsters (*The Exorcist*).

Indian cinema colours the female monster with the unique mythology and cultural history of the subcontinent. Female monsters like *churels*, *dayans*, *joginis* and *yakshis* exist in the folklore and have been adapted to the screen in films like *Yakshi* (1968), *Ek Thi Daayan* (2013), and *Akam* (2011). Repeated appearances in multiple films have given rise to a modern mythology of archetypes in which feminine monsters exist. The archetype I will be focusing on in this thesis is the figure of the vengeful spirit.

I will be using the words ghost and spirit interchangeably throughout the rest of the thesis. There are two requirements for a monster to be considered a ghost. It should be returned from the dead,

i.e. the monster used to be a living person who then died to subsequently become a ghost and it should have goals to fulfil that require it to either observe or interact with living beings.

This will disqualify all monsters that have had a monstrous transformation without going through the process of death. In Indian cinema, the Ghost is a common way of displaying a monstrous feminine. Especially the spirit of a woman with unfulfilled aims of revenge against those who caused her death. I am interested in this ghostly form of femininity as it is a recurring motif in cinema not only from contemporary times but also from many decades ago, e.g. *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964).

History of female ghosts in Indian folklore

There is sparse information about the categorisation of female ghosts in academic writing in India. A number of female ghosts, such as *churel*, *yakshi*, *acheri*, *pari*, *banasat*, *jogini*, and *dakini* have been commented on (Mcclintok 41). The critical texts that elaborate on these beings always present them as a malicious force. Across all the films under scrutiny in this study, only *churel* is mentioned by name.

List of films and selection rationale

1. *Stree* (2018) [Hindi]
2. *Talaash* (2012) [Hindi]
3. *Neelavelicham* (2023) [Malayalam]
4. *Manichitrathazhu* (1993) [Malayalam]
5. *Kanchana* (2011) [Tamil]

6. *Bulbbul* (2020) [Hindi]

7. *Lapachhapi* (2016) [Marathi]

The criteria for selection are the following. Within the narrative of the film, there need to be either the presence or a belief of the presence of a feminine ghost, and at least one of the motivations of the ghost needs to be revenge against the people responsible for her death.

A majority of the selected films were released post-2010. This is both because of the greater accessibility of films from that era and the fact that there are not many films from before this era that fulfil the criteria for selection. *Stree*, *Talaash*, and *Bulbbul* are all popular Bollywood movies. *Stree* and *Talaash* have both grossed over 150 cr at the Box Office. *Bulbbul* was released on Netflix; hence, the number of views of the material is indeterminate. *Neelavelicham* is a remake of the film *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964), one of the oldest movies with a feminine ghost in it. I chose to use the remake because there were no subtitles available for *Bhargavi Nilayam*, and I lacked the ability to understand Malayalam. However, *Neelavelicham* uses the original screenplay written for *Bhargavi Nilayam* by Vaikom Muhammad Basheer. Film reviews of *Neelavelicham* claim the remake to be highly faithful to the original 1964 film (Praveen), (Shrinivasan).

Manichitrathazhu, *Kanchana*, and *Lapachhapi* are Malayalam, Tamil, and Marathi language films that have been remade into Hindi and other Indian languages. These are representatives of regional cinema that have been deemed important or impactful enough to warrant remakes in other languages so that the wider Indian audience may experience them. I watched *Manichitrathazhu*, *Neelavelicham*, and *Kanchana* in their original languages with English subtitles.

Importance

Film, while being art, is at the same time a mode of mass communication. It is important to look out for patterns that emerge in films and what they might say about the society they emerged in. The attitudes of society towards gender are reflected in the film. (Khadilkar, Khudabuksh, Mitchell 11) Because female revenge is a common thread in all of these, it would show what kind of revenge by women is permissible in media. Examining the atrocities committed against the women will show us what is considered worth taking revenge over. What are the processes that women have to go through to gain agency? How are these ghosts visually represented? Do these film narratives address the systemic problems that lead to violence and misbehaviour towards women? What is achieved by attributing monstrosity to these women? What comment do these films (inadvertently perhaps) make on the judicial processes available in the country?

Methodology

I will do a close viewing of each film through the lens of Abjection, and the Monstrous Feminine. The Abject is something that is opposed to the Subject, which is the “I”. However, it is tethered to the Subject in a way that drags “I” towards an annihilation of its meaning (Kristeva 2). The monstrous feminine is about how female monsters emerge from the unique relationship between Abjection and women’s bodies through blood and rites of defilement (Creed 14). I examine the narrative of the film to answer the following questions.

- 1) What are the reasons the women who become ghosts are killed?
- 2) How do the characters in the story view the ghosts? Do they fear them? Do they respect them? Or are they disgusted by them?
- 3) What are the behaviours and motivations of the ghosts?

These narrative questions allow me to look for the presence of abjection, excess, and possible common threads between the treatment of women before and after their death and ghostly return. I will also make a note of visual markers of abjection, which include blood, wounds, and teeth. I will look for visual representations of phallic power and the monstrous feminine. Definitions and explanations for abjection, the monstrous feminine, and phallic power will be provided in the respective sections where they are most relevant. Comparing how these narrative elements and visual depictions intersect across the selected film, I have attempted to find a common thread between the films to see how women and their ghosts are represented in contemporary Indian films.

Horror cinema and horror motifs

A lot of the films that I have selected are classified entirely or partially as horror films. However, these films are difficult to pin down as one genre in their entirety, owing to the tone-switches across their runtime. There are elements of comedy, melodrama, horror, musical, and action at different points of time in each film. However, the parts where they directly engage with threatening ghosts also differ from horror in significant ways. Noel Carroll distinguishes between horror that is generated via the consumption of art and horror that one experiences in real life. He calls the former emotion art-horror. An important element of art-horror is the presence of monsters. During a horror film, the audience must be engaged in emotions that run parallel to those of the characters on screen. "Characters regard them not only with fear but with loathing, with a combination of terror and disgust" (Carroll 23). The characters are horrified, while the audience is art-horrified. The monsters are fearsome as well as repulsive.

This is where Indian films differ in their horror. The characters in the film see the monsters in a disgusting and terrifying light, but the audience is actively discouraged from experiencing emotions that run parallel to those of the characters throughout the film. Usually, the beginning encourages the audience to identify with the characters that are horrified by the ghost. However, at some point in the narrative, the audience is asked to identify with the ghost or with the characters who are not horrified by the ghost. This change usually follows a section where the characters who were previously horrified by the ghost learn the story of the mistreatment faced by the ghost in her life. After this point in the narrative, the characters that are usually still horrified by the ghost are those that the audience is encouraged to dislike. The effect is that the

viewer, at the end of the movie, does not leave feeling relieved to be free from the art-horror created by viewing the monster.

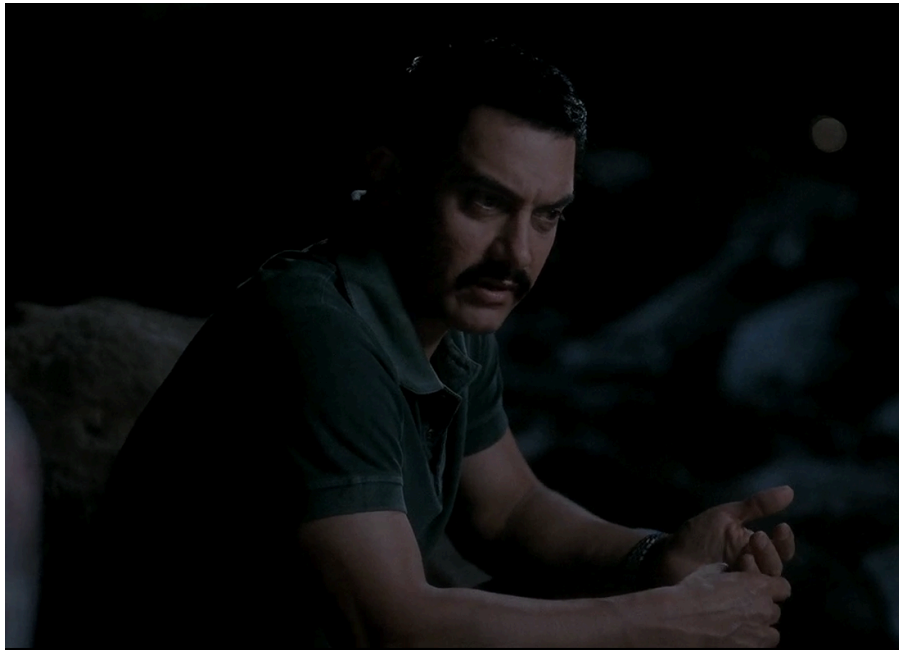
The reason why these movies are still considered to belong to the horror genre is because they retain the narrative elements and the visual language of horror cinema. There is an abundance of disturbing images and jumpscare (a technique which uses sudden movement on the screen, paired with loud audio designed to startle the viewer); the shots are either dimly lit or the colour saturation is reduced to a large extent, and the music is similar to what one can hear in a horror film. All of this, alongside the presence of ghosts, is what aligns all these films with the horror genre. Later in this dissertation, I use this alignment to allow myself to use theoretical material targeted at horror films and apply those insights to these films.



Kaveri appearing as a jumpscare (*Lapachhapi*, 2016)



The monstrous face of Stree (*Stree*, 2018)



A muted color palette (*Talaash*, 2012)

Use of the feminine body and excess

Since these films are adjacent to the horror genre, the nature of the genre needs to be discussed. Like horror, other genres like comedy or melodrama are characterised by the audience reflecting the emotions felt by the characters. These genres are also marked by bodily excesses. In horror, there is an excessive display of blood and gore. In the horror films where blood and gore are absent, an excess of fear is conveyed through screaming and crying. These actions also involve exaggerated bodies. Linda Williams associates horror, melodrama, and pornography together as Body genres. They hold a common “spectacle of a body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion” (Williams 4). Women’s bodies are used across the three genres (horror, comedy, melodrama) as conduits for the delivery of these emotions. That means women’s bodies go through uncontrollable motions to indicate emotions across the spectrum of body genres. The emotions of intense pleasure, fear, and sadness are indicated by the motions of moaning, screaming, and weeping.

Identification with the characters on screen is associated with perversions of sadistic or masochistic natures depending on whether there is an identification with the one who is being victimized on screen or with one who is inflicting the victimization. “the horror film may present an interesting, and perhaps instructive, case of oscillation between masochistic and sadistic” (Williams 6) This equation gets the most complicated in horror as there is a pattern of identification with the terror and helplessness of a woman and also her later empowerment. In the films that I am studying, the body of a woman also becomes an embodiment of the emotion of rage. Uncontrolled spasms appear in the form of screaming, shrieking, and wailing.



Bulbbul screaming after her ghostly rebirth (*Bulbbul*, 2020)



Ganga, as Nagavalli, showing uncontrolled anger (*Manichitrathazhu*, 1993)



Kanchana screaming and dancing at the *Durga* puja (*Kanchana*, 2011)



Stree shrieking uncontrollably at Vicky (*Stree*, 2018)



Kaveri wailing in anger and anguish (*Lapachhapi*, 2016)

These wrathful ghosts are shown to be connected to *Durga*, a goddess who is the embodiment of feminine rage. “She (Durga) holds the paradoxical nature of a woman who can feel anger and pain, yet still feel love and compassion for herself and others” (Amazzone 48). Kanchana, before enacting her revenge on the people who killed her, dances in celebration of a puja dedicated to *Durga*. She is seen wearing a Garland of skulls as *Kali*, another form of the goddess *Durga*, wears. (Amazzone 202). Stree always appears in Chanderi during the annual festival of the goddess, so the arrival and departure of the devi becomes a signifier for the arrival and departure of Stree. The shot in which Bulbbul is resurrected, centers a statue of *Durga* in the frame. Later in the film, when a young girl is asked about the “*churel*”, i.e. Bulbbul, she refers to her as “a *devi*”. Similar to *Stree*, the final confrontation between Bulbbul and her brother-in-law happens on the last day of *Durga Puja*. The day of the departure of the goddess *Durga* signifies the day

that Bulbbul is also burned away out of this world. In *Manichitrathazhu*, Nagavalli ties her promise of revenge against Shankaran to *Durga Ashtami*, the eighth day of *Durga puja*.

When it comes to the expression of excess feeling, dialogue is considered to be the medium of the mildest of emotions. To convey stronger, excessive emotions, the actors switch to song and dance. “In the best musical theater, the best writers always knew that they would write a story and that basically it would then be cannibalized so that the songs would occur in the most emotional places, when the character could no longer talk about their — what they wanted, they would burst into song.” (Kaye). Just as for anger, women’s bodies are used to embody the emotions of melancholy and love in films like *Neelavelicham* and *Manichitrathazhu*. Bhargavi never speaks to the writer, opting to write notes on his pages as he sleeps. However, the only time he hears her voice is when she sings a lamentation for her lost love and life. Ganga, as Nagavalli, performs song and dance throughout the film, which is occasionally heard by other characters. The only performance that is shown to the audience is the one towards the end of the film where Nagavalli pines for the love of her life, asking, “Did you visit me? Do you know of my feelings for you?” (*Manichitrathazhu*, 2:18:30). The films under scrutiny in this study, while being ambiguous in their genre classification, still exhibit the properties of body-genre films.

While these films empower women by making them conduits of godly rage, they also victimize them, because the terror caused by the ghosts is also experienced by women. These terrified women also express their fear through their bodies, as tears, screaming, and uncontrollable shivering. We need to reconcile the opposite depictions of women in these films as both victim and as an empowered ghost.

Carol J. Clover addresses these two polarising depictions of a woman in horror cinema with reference to slasher films. She asks if the male audience can identify with female characters and if the female audience can identify with male characters. Is it possible for a female character to be masculinized by the actions she takes enough for men to identify with her? Clover refers to the woman in slasher films that survives the killers spree of murders as the “Final girl”. The “Final girl” in slashers uses phallic symbols i.e. knives, hammers, or machetes, on the killer to wound and penetrate his flesh. This action masculinizes the girl who had so far been a victim, as well as feminizes the killer. These final scenes are when the audience is expected to switch their identification to the “Final girl” from the killer. “This fluidity of engaged perspective is in keeping with the universal claims of the psychoanalytic model: the threat function and the victim function coexist in the same unconscious, regardless of anatomical sex” (Clover 2009). In Indian films, the switch in identification occurs in the opposite direction, from the terrified male/female victims to the terrifying female ghost.

By viewing the ghost as the threat and the human characters as the victim, we can reconcile the conflicting depictions of women as terrifying and as terrified. Some male characters are hence feminized in their actions so that they fit the mould of the victim. For e.g. Vicky and his friends in *Stree* are always terrified at night, regardless of the presence or absence of Stree. Raghava is particularly scared of ghosts, clinging to his mother and even refusing to be alone at night. However, Clover always considers the threat to be phallic, which, as I will explain, is not the case in these films. The presentation and expression of violence and vengeance stay feminine, in keeping with the association that the films make with the ghosts and *Durga*. “Durga ... provides

a model of expressing anger toward injustice in a constructive rather than destructive manner”
(Amazzone 48).

Additionally, unlike Clover’s model of the Final Girl, these films restrict information from the audience and slowly reveal that the murderous threatening ghost the audience was observing is actually the empowered victim of past crimes. While Clover’s model was useful to understand the switch in character identification, we need a model that can make women threatening without making them phallic.

Abjection and The Monstrous Feminine

In psychoanalysis, there are two opposing concepts: the Subject and the Object. The Subject refers to the Self, something that has agency and can desire (Honderich 2145). An object, being the opposite of the subject, is incapable of desiring and can only be desired by the subject.

The abject is something that does not respect boundaries, positions and rules. Subjectivity is determined by situating it in the symbolic order. The moment of the subject taking its place in the symbolic is the moment of the formation of the Self. The Subject “radically excludes” the Abject from its position in the Symbolic order. While an object is cut off from the subject, the abject is never separated from it by any boundary. “We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it” (Kristeva 9). The existence of the abject is necessary to define the subject. The first example of abjection that Kristeva gives is that of food loathing. She claims it to be the most archaic form of abjection. An example is the skin on top of the milk which, representative of the desires of a child’s parents, induces nausea in the child. Hence, when the child spits out the skin of the milk, they are establishing their “self”. At the same time, the skin that they expel is a part of themselves. “Since the food is not an “other” for “me”, who am only in their desire, I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which “I” claim to establish *myself*” (Kristeva 3).

Because the abject skin is necessary to establish someone, it threatens to annihilate the *self* if it crosses that border that separates it from the *self*. On a very physical level, the excretions of the body e.g. vomit, faeces, mucus, and blood, are abject. These induce abject terror when they

threaten to cross the line between themselves and the body. However, the corpse broaches this border by its nature of being the border itself. “It is no longer I who expel, “I” is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border?” (Kristeva 4). Death and the subsequent return from the dead threatens the boundary between the living and the dead. The ghosts in the films under study are women who were radically excluded from life, but they stay tethered to the living who killed her, hence threatening their destruction.

Some of the ghosts show visual markers of their death-abjection on their bodies. In *Stree*, Stree appears as a floating corpse, marked with the rot that corpses go through, e.g. grey, bloodless skin and missing flesh from the lower lip. The audience react to her appearance with disgust, which manifests itself in screaming and gagging in response to the rot. Trying to expel something, like vomit, out of yourself as a reaction to being confronted with the abject is an attempt to ward it off, to reestablish oneself in the Symbolic order.

In *Lapachhapi*, the ghost of Kaveri appears in the way that she died, covered in burn scars. The shot is used as a jumpscare, a technique where loud audio and shocking images are combined to induce a fight or flight response in the viewer (Muir 17). The jumpscare in *Lapachhapi* begins with Kaveri being at a long-shot distance from the camera. In less than a second, she moves into a close-up. Her approach threatens the boundaries that we make with the abject. Her corpse wants to approach, but the audience needs to distance itself away from it as much as possible because the corpse reveals the fragility of the living subject. This is what makes Kaveri abject.



Kaveri in a long-shot (*Lapachhapi*, 2016)



Kaveri approaches the camera, ending in a close-up (*Lapachhapi*, 2016)



Kaveri in an extreme close-up (*Lapachhapi*, 2016)

Barbara Creed compares women's bodies to the abject by relating them to polluting objects.

There is a special connection between female bodies and blood through the menstrual cycle. The living body is contingent on the fact that blood is circulating on the inside. When blood crosses that border, it becomes abject. Wounds that break the skin let blood out of the body and remind the Subject of its contingent existence. When a woman is going through menstruation, she bleeds from her womb. The blood leaves her body, and the sight of that blood is abject. "The body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (Kristeva 102). The maternal and the menstrual are both traces of a body's debt to nature. The secretions or discharge, e.g. pus, mucus, and blood, from any body (sex agnostic) makes it a defiled body, disconnecting it from the symbolic. Discharge of blood is related to blood impurity. Since women's bodies are regularly marked by blood, they become abject due to defilement. The monstrous women that are seen in films are, hence, doubly abject as women and as the dead who have been returned to life.

Their monstrosity, as discussed in the last chapter, does not come from phallic power. Instead, their power is connected to the abject threat of castrating female genitals. Freud interprets the sight of the mother's menstrual blood being seen as a result of her being castrated, i.e. he interprets that the blood belongs to the woman. Creed views the woman as the castrator, and the blood as belonging to the castrated man "If the child is aware that the mother's genitals or the bedlinen are periodically bloody, he could just as easily mistake this blood for his father's. He might fantasize that the man who inserts his fragile penis into the mother's vagina is taking a great risk" (Creed 112).

Since the horror and power that the vengeful spirits in Indian films hold doesn't come from a phallic nature, we can try to interpret it to be coming from castration anxiety instead. Creed argues that the Final Girl in Slashers isn't a phallic woman either. She is the *femme castratrice* (Creed 127). While I think it is easier to argue that the weapons used by Final Girls could be read as them wielding phallic power, the methods employed by the vengeful spirits in Indian films emphasize castration anxiety through the fear of the *vagina dentata* and the all-consuming womb.

***Churel* and the abjection of generative power**

The ghosts are often referred to as witches or *churels*. A *churel* is a specific type of female ghost who has her feet twisted around to point backwards. She is said to form when the woman dies while pregnant, on the day of her child's birth, or within a 12-day period of impurity after the birth (Crooke 168). Her impurity is tied to childbirth and to her generative power. She does not inspire fear through castration; she is not exactly the *femme castratrice*. However, the generative power of her womb is the source of fear. "The womb cannot be constructed as a 'lack' in relation to the penis. The womb is not the site of castration anxiety. Rather, the womb signifies 'fullness' or 'emptiness', but always it is its own point of reference" (Creed 27). An abject mother terrifies because she threatens to take one back into her womb. A mother becomes abject to a growing child when it takes its place in the symbolic order, by separating itself from her and defining its own identity by radically excluding her. A return to the womb threatens the annihilation of that identity. "The child can serve its mother as a token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn" (Kristeva 13). For the sake of authenticating their identity, the mother seeks the child. However, for the same reason, the child refuses the mother, leading to the fear of reincorporation.

The first separation, creating the first abject for a being, is the abjection of the mother. Since the womb cannot be constructed as a "lack", it stands on its own as a more archaic site of fear of "fullness" or "emptiness". Everything that bears this fullness or emptiness can be constructed as a symbol for the abject, archaic mother. The fear of this archaic mother and the *vagina dentata* are used by the female ghosts as methods of terrifying men that abused them in life.

When a child is inside the womb, it floats in amniotic fluid, their lungs being full of fetal lung fluid (Hillman, Kallapur, Jobe 3). The fear and phantasies of drowning can be associated with the fear of returning to this state, where one's submerged in liquid, unable to breathe air (Aloia 33). In *Talaash*, three rich men named Armaan, Sanjay, and Nikhil hire a prostitute from a pimp in Mumbai. The prostitute, named Simran, goes by the name Rosie when she appears to the policeman Shekhawat as a ghost. While Simran and the three other men are travelling, Simran and Nikhil fall out of the car. While they take Nikhil to the hospital, they leave Simran on the street, who bleeds to death. They leave her to die because they would get in trouble for hiring a prostitute because prostitution is illegal in Mumbai. Later, her pimp, Shashi, buries her in an unmarked grave.

Simran, after returning as a ghost, uses her ghostly powers to lead Armaan, Shashi, and Sanjay to their deaths. She appears to Armaan and Sanjay on the road where they had left her to die. They both swerve off the road into the ocean, where they drown to their death. I suggest that the ocean acts as the archaic mother, reincorporating the men into herself by drowning them. The ocean is where life is said to have originated on Earth (Russel, Hall 26). There is no secondary figure that "impregnated" the ocean using its phallus, hence the ocean can serve as the singular, generative womb for all life on the planet. Rosie, being a prostitute, is desired by others like an object, while at the same time disallowed to display any desires for herself. She equates the act of being intimate, being in someone else's embrace, to drowning. "I don't know where Shashi is; in what kind of drunken haze, drowning in whose arms. But how long can one stay submerged? Sooner or later, he'll have to surface" (*Talaash* 55:33). Her job as a prostitute allows her to

drown/submerge one in intimacy, making her a representation of the ocean herself i.e. an abject archaic mother.

In *Neelavelicham*, Bhargavi is a ghost that haunts the house named Bhargavi Nilayam. When a writer rents the house, the people in the village tell him the story of her suicide by drowning in the well, brought on because of her lover, Shashikumar, abandoning her and breaking her heart. For this reason, she is considered to be a bloodthirsty hunter of men. However, she communicates her real story to the writer, telling him of her love for Shashikumar and her jealous and obsessive cousin Narayanan's jealousy towards him. Narayanan was the one who killed her and Shashikumar. Narayanan then tries to kill the writer, so that Bhargavi's real story may remain buried. Both Narayanan and the writer fight using their knives, a phallic object, to stab each other to death.

However, none of them actually manage to stab the other. Instead, Narayanan meets his end by falling into the well and a piece of saree wraps around his leg and pulls him underwater. He is essentially un-birthed into the well by the abject mother that Bhargavi has become. While the well might not represent the *vagina dentata*, it can be said to represent the devouring genitals of an abject ghost, leading to a water filled womb. The entrance of the well, lined with shrubbery, also resembles the opening of female genitalia.



Shot from inside the well (*Neelavelicham*, 2023)

These films use the fear of a *churel*'s generative power against evil men. While the films mentioned above do not explicitly call the ghosts a *churel* or a witch, other films do. In *Stree*, the main character, Vicky, explicitly refers to the Stree as a *churel*. In *Lapachhapi*, Tulsi refers to the ghost as a *hadal*, which is a name for another female spirit (Crooke 352). *Bulbbul* sets out to specifically reclaim the name and visual appearance of the *churel*. While in *Stree*, Vicky shows concern about a *churel*'s twisted feet, *Bulbbul* actually shows the twisted feet on the *churel*. The figure of the *churel* is portrayed in the film as a fearsome protector of women, akin to a goddess. As the fear of the *churel* is associated to her generative power, so is that of these female ghosts, both of them being the representations of the archaic mother.

Woman as a vengeful spirit

The bite of a blood-drinking monster makes the blood flow and marks the body with imperfection. It becomes a reminder of one's debt to nature and drags it away from the symbolic. The image of a bloody wound brings the abject closer, and makes the blood-drinking monster terrifying. For a woman in control of her sexuality, the desire to drink a man's blood can also be seen as a metaphor for semen (Creed 66), activating castration anxiety because of a bloody mouth full of sharp teeth, or a similar image of a menstruating *vagina dentata*. The films under scrutiny in this study show women who are either sexually active as prostitutes or have experienced sexual freedom through their transformation into a ghost. Since castration anxiety is predicated on the phantasy that the penis is in danger when it is close to the vagina, having sex with a *femme castratrice* is dangerous (Creed 65).

In *Talaash*, Rosie is doubly abject because of her overt sexuality and her connection with the archaic mother. She invites Inspector Shekhawat, the policeman overseeing the case of Armaan's drowning, multiple times to have sex with her. Inspector Shekhawat feels judged by other policemen just because he is talking to a prostitute, because she is abject. To keep her abjection at a safe distance, she is treated as a sexual object. Any expression of her subjectivity is seen as a threat and is severely punished, which is also true for other prostitutes in *Talaash*.

When Taimur, an assistant in the brothel, propositions one of the prostitutes named Nirmala for marriage, she responds with, "I am a whore, and I always will be one, and you will be a whore's lame son" (*Talaash*, 57:27). She is convinced of her inescapable role as an object and refuses to indulge in any desires of her own. Nirmala eventually escapes the brothel with the help of

Taimur, but he is shot and killed. He had revealed the frailty of the symbolic order by giving subjectivity to a prostitute, and he was punished. In *Stree*, *Manichitrathazhu*, and *Bulbbul*, women who are seen as objects are punished for expressing subjectivity.

In *Stree*, the ghost that haunts the town of Chanderi, enters any house that does not have the request “Oh Stree, come tomorrow” and kidnaps the men who are alone, leaving their clothes behind. The low safety that the men in Chanderi are subject to echoes the poor state of women’s safety in India (The Hindu). Rudra, an expert on the paranormal in that town, instructs two of the main characters, Bittu and Janna, not to be out of their house at night. He also instructs them to go out in groups if they ever need to go outside at all. Women in India receive similar instructions to avoid being the targets of harassment and sexual assault by men, putting the onus of preventing sexual assault on the victims (Rawat 118). The presence of the Stree serves to invert the gender narrative typically present in small towns in India, like Chanderi, and reveals the contingent position of men as the ones holding subjectivity in the symbolic order. Later in the film, when all the painted walls saying “Oh Stree, come tomorrow” are vandalized, men begin to wear sarees outside the house to protect themselves from the Stree

All of these are examples of symbolic castration that the ghost inflicts upon the men of the town. Stree, before her death, used to be a prostitute who fell in love with a man who treated her unlike an object. When they got married, a mob of people from Chanderi killed both of them, leading her to become a source of abject horror for all men after her death. Yet, prostitutes are still abject in the town, as any interaction with them is seen as a cause of shame. Vicky is shamed for paying

a prostitute for her services rendered to his friend. He also feels shame when he discovers that his mother was also a prostitute.

Even Stree is often treated as an object of desire, regardless of the danger she poses. A couple of men theorise that when she kidnaps a man, she has intercourse with him before killing him, like a scorpion. A historian claims her motivation for kidnapping men to be to consummate her marriage with someone like her husband. She is always in her wedding dress and fully ornamented, complimenting the idea that she is stuck in time as a newly wedded bride. Her lips are painted red, but they hide a terrifying set of teeth that she reveals when angry. It is a representation of her *vagina dentata*. She is seen by the men in the town as a *femme castratrice*, feared for her ability to castrate.



Stree dressed in a wedding saree, ornamentation, and makeup (*Stree*, 2018)



Stree's sharp and bloody teeth (*Stree*, 2018)

When Vicky allows her to have subjectivity i.e. allows her to desire, rather than viewing her as a prostitute ghost, he realises that she is looking only for respect. The movie ends with the people in Chanderi changing their view of Stree from a predator to a protector. Stree was first punished because she was considered to be a threatening abject. Then she was made doubly abject by being a ghost, i.e. breaking the boundary of life and death while still being a woman in control of her sexuality.

A similar folktale of a monster is shown in *Manichitrathazhu*. A mansion is said to be haunted by the ghost of Nagavalli, a courtesan dancer in the court of Lord Shankaran Thambi from 150 years ago. She fell in love with another dancer named Ramanathan in the same court, which was unacceptable to Shankaran. She shattered the idea of her being merely an object owned by Shankaran by falling in love, and hence revealing the fragility of his position. To end this threat of abjection, Shankaran killed both Nagavalli and Ramanathan. She returned as a ghost, having

become doubly abject, and was subsequently trapped in one of the rooms of the mansion, unable to enact her revenge.

One of the descendants of this Lord, Nakulan, returns to the mansion with his wife, Ganga. The neighbouring house where Ramanathan used to reside is now occupied by Mahadevan, a college professor. After Ganga learns about Nagavalli's story, she opens the room in which she is supposedly trapped and finds her belongings. After this, the ghost of Nagavalli is said to be released. On top of other supernatural incidents, there is an attempt to poison Nakulan through his tea. People assume that it is the ghost seeking revenge against Shakaran's lineage. On the night before *Durgashtami*, Nakulan and his psychologist friend Sunny find Ganga trying to sexually assault Mahadevan, the professor.

Ganga appears to be occasionally possessed by Nagavalli, which the psychologist explains as a split-personality disorder. She also views Nakulan as Shankaran and Mahadevan as her lover Ramanathan. They decide that the only way to cure her is to let her Nagavalli personality fulfil her revenge. They manage to trick her into killing a doll full of blood instead of Nakulan. Nagavalli decapitates the doll and covers her face in its blood, in keeping with a promise that she had made earlier, "Today is Durgashtmi; I will kill you, drink your blood and dance" (*Manichitrathazhu* 2:12:30).



Nagavalli, covering her face in blood (*Manichitrathazhu*, 1993)

Regardless of whether the ghost of Nagavalli really exists, she is still feared by the people in the town. Her naturalised role as a courtesan and a dancer was to be desired. She was locked up because she broke the laws and used her agency to desire. Ganga, as a conduit through whom Nagavalli's revenge is expressed, also doesn't play the role of an obedient daughter-in-law. She opens the lock on Nagavalli's cage despite her in-laws prohibiting her. Nagavalli, in her act of killing the king and drinking his blood, invokes the imagery of the *vagina dentata* and the castrating woman. However, it is important to note that neither Shankaran, nor his descendants are subjected to any real vengeance.

Bulbbul explicitly mentions the *churel*, including her twisted feet. The child bride named Bulbbul is told the story of a bloodthirsty *churel* by her brother-in-law. Bulbbul is married to an older adult man named Indranil. Mahendra is his twin, and Satya is his younger brother. Bulbbul grows up with Satya and forms a friendship with him. Mahendra's wife, Binodini, sows seeds of jealousy in Indranil's mind, leading him to send Satya away to London. Seeing Bulbbul sad about his absence, Indranil is enraged and breaks Bulbbul's feet with a fire poker. This is the first violent expression of phallic power that Bulbbul suffers. He sees the friendship formed between Bulbbul and Satya as a disobedient exercise of Bulbbul's subjectivity. As her husband, Indranil claims ownership of her, treating her like an object. When her subjective expression threatens his position in the institution of marriage, he lashes out against her in anger and immobilizes her.

His twin Mahendra treats Bulbbul like an object in a much more direct way. He calls her a *gudia* (doll) and rapes her while her legs are broken, claiming that they are "playing". He also suppresses her expression in the most explicit manner, when he covers her mouth to prevent her from screaming in pain while he sexually assaults her. She bleeds from her injured legs and dies, returning to life as a *churel*. Dr. Sudip, a family doctor, finds her bleeding from her genitals and her twisted legs the next morning. Her return as a ghost is also marked with abject blood. Her bleeding legs are a reminder of a man's violence in response to being shown the fragility of the symbolic order. "Woman's blood, which symbolizes birth and life, reminds man of his capacity, even willingness, to shed blood, to murder" (Creed 62). Her bleeding genitals are an indicator of the role she would soon take as a bloodthirsty monster, a *femme castratrice*.



The phallic fire-poker covered in blood (*Bulbbul*, 2020)

20 years after her rebirth, Satya returns to the house to find that the *churel* has killed Mahendra. She goes on to kill three more people, all of whom abused women in some way. Satya suspects the killer to be Dr. Sudip, his decision biased by the fact that he believes that Sudip has tricked Bulbbul into having an extra-marital affair with him. In subtle way, Satya also treats her like an object of desire, unable to imagine Bulbbul having desires of her own. Later that night, Satya is taking Dr. Sudip away to get him arrested in a buggy. Dr Sudip sees her on the branch of a tree, her mouth full of the driver's blood. Satya sets fire to the forest. Bulbbul seemingly dies a second time, burning to death in the trees. She appears as a bloodthirsty monster, her blood-filled mouth activating castration anxiety within the men targeted by her. The color red, being the color of blood acts a metaphor for a woman's abject blood.



Bulbbul uses her sharp teeth on the paedophile, drawing his blood (*Bulbbul*, 2020)



Bulbbul wearing a red saree and with her mouth covered in blood (*Bulbbul*, 2020)

The colour of blood permeates the atmosphere of the whole film. The nighttime shots from 20 years later are all edited to look monochrome red. The moment of her death and resurrection is

punctuated by the moon turning red. Bulbbul's feet, at the time of her wedding, are coloured with red makeup. In her form as a witch, she wears a red saree.

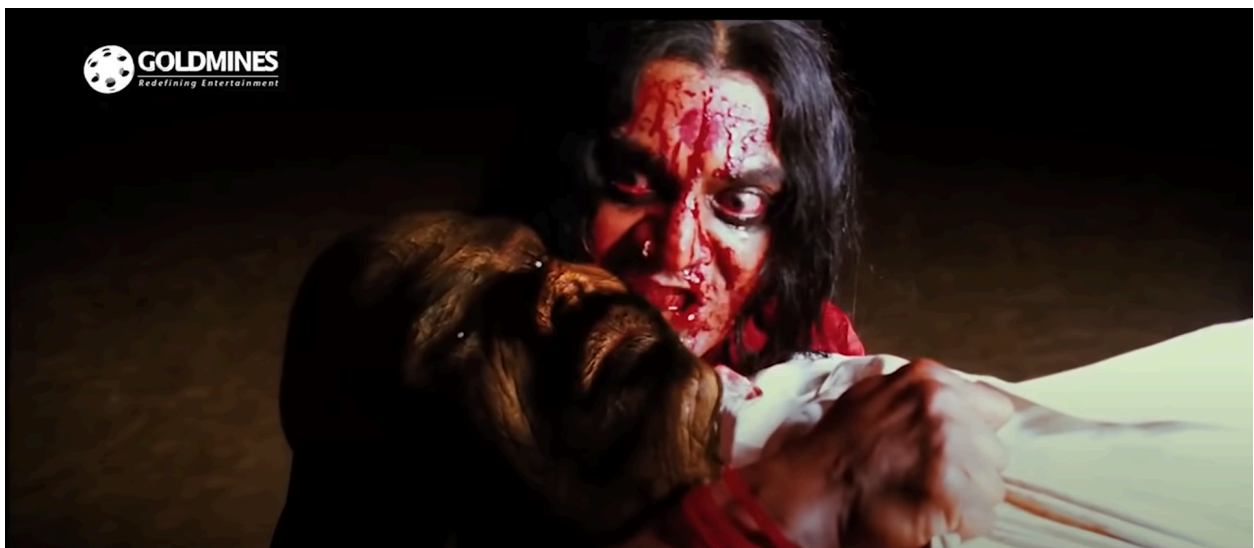
Red sarees are also the way that the titular character expresses herself in *Kanchana*. Raghava is a man possessed by the ghost of Kanchana. Kanchana was a trans-woman who was adopted by Akbar Bhai when she was kicked out of her own house. She bought a plot of land where she planned to build a hospital for the poor. Her land was seized by Shankar, an MLA, who then killed her and her found family. Kanchana lies at a unique intersection of marginalization and abjection. She is a woman, a trans-woman, and poor. As a woman, she is abject in ways of being denied subjectivity and as a trans-woman, she also threatens the gender structures of society.

When Raghava goes to her plot of land to play cricket, his stumps pierce Kanchana's dead body and are covered in her blood. Through the power of her abject blood, she infiltrates his house and possesses his body. Neither her body nor Raghava's body is marked by the blood of menstruation and they do not bear an abject debt to nature. Therefore, to express her gender identity, Kanchana uses blood and its colour to mark herself as an abject woman. While shopping for his sister-in-law, Raghava/Kanchana becomes obsessed with all the red sarees in the store; they ask to see all the red sarees and try them on in front of the mirror.



Kanchana trying out sarees in Raghav's body (*Kanchana*, 2011)

Later in the film, Raghava willingly lets Kanchana into his body, and they go hunting for Shankar. They appear on the beach wearing a red sari, their face covered in blood. They kill Shankar on the beach by tearing up his chest. They throw him back into the ocean, returning him to the archaic mother.



Kanchana drains a man of his blood (*Kanchana*, 2011)

The act of desiring done by the figure of the mother is also abject. The upholders of the symbolic order take children from their mothers because they want to separate the children's "clean and proper" body from the abject body of the birthing mother. In *Lapachhapi*, a family follows a tradition of female infanticide in hopes of a good harvest. Tushar and his 8-month pregnant wife Neha take refuge in that family's house because Tushar is in trouble with debtors in the city. Neha comes to believe that their hosts, Tulsibai and Bhaurao, want to take her child away from her. Through communication with the ghosts of three children and a previous daughter-in-law of Tulsibai, she learns the motives of the family that she is trapped with.

The ghost is of Kaveri, who's yet to be born daughter was planned to be sacrificed by her husband and her in-laws, Tulsibai and Bhaurao. When she refuses to let them have her daughter, her husband attacks her in anger and ends up getting stabbed to death by her. Tulsibai, Bhaurao, and their son Prataprao hunt her down and burn her to death. Ever since she has haunted the family and disallows any child from being born in the house. All pregnant women in that family end up slashing open their stomachs, aborting the fetus inside.

Kaveri is a manifestation of the archaic mother. When she desires to keep her child with her, her husband attacks her. He tries to reassert phallic power to keep generative power in control. After death, Kaveri returns as a ghost and acts as the one who withholds reproductive power, as the archaic mother. Three children of Tulsibai jump into the well, returning to the watery womb and being reincorporated into the archaic mother by drowning to death. Then, she withholds her generative power by disallowing any child from being born in the family.

The power of the ghost

A recurring theme among all the films is that agency is taken away from women when they are alive. They are punished with bodily harm and death. They regain their agency when they return as ghosts, to the extent that they are able to enact fatal revenge on the same people that killed her. A transformation seems to be a necessary element for a woman to gain power. By crossing the natural and social boundaries, they have become abnormal. By implication, “normal” women are without agency.

Abnormality can also be ascribed to possession. Nilanjana Gupta discusses a story about Aduri, a wife who is beaten by her husband because she is suspected of smiling at another man. It is closely parallel to the events in *Bulbbul*. The husband, Gayaram, is particularly enraged when Aduri asks, “But suppose I did look and did smile on the vairagi? What of that? Have I committed any crime?”

After she is beaten, she gets possessed. She performs acts that are forbidden for a woman. She laughs and jumps around the *verandah*. She appears in front of her brothers-in-law naked from the waist upwards while laughing and dancing. “Aduri’s “possession” takes on the form of doing everything that is denied to the Hindu wife and the years of repressing even her laughter and boisterous physical behaviour like jumping or bursting into a dance in the open, to the utter shock of her family” (Gupta 39). Gupta claims that by being possessed, women are afforded means to express desires by having them be the desires of the possessor.

A woman suffering from a disease or a disorder is also separated from the 'normal' women. Throughout history, women who would deviate from social norms of female behaviour would also be labelled naturally abnormal. Hysteria used to be considered a medical condition that would make women excessively emotional. It is no longer considered a valid medical condition. It was said to be caused by an abnormality in the womb. Specifically, there was an idea that the uterus would move to a different part of the body and cause excessive emotion (North 4). The emotional excesses that are displayed by women in the body genres would have been symptoms enough to diagnose them with hysteria.

The hysterical woman and the possessed woman are excluded from the 'normal' woman and are made monstrous. However, as in the case of Aduri, the possessed eventually returns to their undesiring and objectified form. Ganga is in a similar situation in *Manichitrathazhu*. She loses the extreme emotions that she was expressing as Nagavalli. She stops singing and dancing. For her, the abnormality is a temporary state. In the short time of their abnormality, they also become Abject. A similar monstrous power is claimed by women in the films I am looking at, but it involves a much more sinister mechanism.

To gain permanent autonomy and the ability to desire, the women take up a permanent abnormality, i.e. transformation into a ghost. They are all killed as a consequence of them expressing their desires of either choosing who to love (*Stree*, *Manichitrathazhu*, *Neelavelicham*, *Bulbbul*), finding social mobility (*Kanchana*), or protecting their children (*Lapachhapi*). When they are alive, all of them transgress, i.e. break the naturalized boundaries of what a normal woman should be. But the power of being a ghost allows them to transgress in additional ways.

They gain the power to strike fear into those who punished her with death and kill them in turn.

In the case of Bulbul, she gains the power to act as a guardian for other women in her vicinity.

Most importantly, the method used to silence their transgressions and expressions of subjectivity i.e. murder, is ineffective against their ghostly forms.

Conclusion

Considering the questions I sought to answer through my examination of all the films, certain patterns emerge. The women who become ghosts are killed for expressing their desires and highlighting the fragility of the Symbolic order by becoming a desiring subject. It is most apparent in the implied sexual slavery that most of these women suffer under. Stree, Simran, and Nagavalli were all prostitutes. Bhargavi, Bulbbul, and Kaveri were trapped or set to be trapped in controlling and abusive marriages.

All the ghosts are feared by those who are aware of their presence. These not only include the perpetrators of crimes against them, but also people living in their villages, town, or neighbourhoods. Often, the people uninvolved in the victimization of the ghost turn to support/revere the ghost when they learn the story of their life e.g. *Stree*, *Kanchana*, *Bulbbul*, *Lapachhapi*. The terror generated by the ghosts stems from either the *vagina dentata* or the archaic mother.

The ghosts went about in varied ways of enacting their revenge. Stree enacted her revenge against all the people in Chanderi, not her killers in specific. She never permanently harmed someone, but she kidnapped every man she could. Rosie focused her revenge solely on those who were directly responsible for her death. She does not target the people who perpetuated her life as a prostitute, which eventually led to her death. Bhargavi does the same; her only goal was to take revenge on Narayanan. Nagavalli, in Ganga's mind, was also content with killing Shankaran and drinking his blood. Kanchana aimed to kill the orchestrators of the murder of her and her family. Bulbbul aimed to kill the men who abused her and killed her, i.e. Indranil and

Mahendra. She also used her ghostly powers to punish the men who abused or mistreated other women in the village. Finally, Kaveri never tried/was not able to kill the perpetrators of her murder directly. She operated by depriving them of what they wanted from her. Ever since her death, no child was born in that family. However, by targeting the women who were tricked into becoming a part of this family, she was depriving them of their agency.

Horror films, or films with horror elements, provide a space for female characters to express extreme emotions. Women's bodies act as embodiments of these emotions. While the most common emotion is fear, involving screaming and crying, Indian films also allow women to express anger in horror films. When the woman takes up a monstrous form, she is able to transgress natural laws as well as societal laws. In these films, in particular, the monstrous form is that of a ghost. Indian films also include a switch in character identification from the terrified humans encountering the ghost to the terrifying figure of the ghost itself. The ghosts gain monstrous empowerment through abjection. Abjection is visually depicted through blood, the womb, and the *vagina dentata*, and narratively through a woman's sexuality and fertility. Becoming a ghost gives them the power to transgress without fear of retaliation from men who hold phallic power.

However, there is always a difference between the transgressions committed by the women before they died and after they became ghosts. When they are alive, they desire love, sexual independence, the safety of their children, and social respect. When they die, they are free to express their desires, but they are never fulfilled. Stree didn't live a life with the man she fell in love with; neither did Nagavalli nor Bhargavi. Kaveri never had a child of her own. Bulbul never got to spend any more time with Satya and also saw him return as a man who didn't

respect her. While Inspector Shekhawat acknowledged Rosie as more than an object of desire, she remained unknown to everyone else. Kanchana was the only one who saw her desire fulfilled. Her daughter took charge of the hospital she always wanted to build.

This is important because it shows that even when monstrous powers are given to women, they are rarely shown achieving the goals they set out to achieve. Their priorities shift to revenge as their previous goals become unreachable as their lover either dies, or is estranged, or in the case of Kaveri, she is unable to have children anymore. After their death and return as a ghost, their story becomes one of singular revenge.

While stories of living women taking revenge against people who victimized her in the past exist, the narrative of the vengeful spirit is unique because of the difference in power between the woman in her life and as a ghost. I suggest that the reliance of Indian cinema on the trope that the only way for a woman to gain power, autonomy, or justice is to undergo a permanent transformation of death shows that women are expected to sacrifice a lot of their personal goals and priorities to achieve justice. Instead of addressing the systems that underlie the victimization of these women, the films show stories of direct revenge. While films like *Stree* try to address systemic issues of respect towards prostitutes, their use of Stree as a representative of prostitutes and a simultaneous attempt to tackle the issue of women's safety in small towns de-emphasizes the message. All the other films encourage the audience to identify with the ghost towards the end, who is taking revenge against individuals that they do not identify with. This allows the films to end in a satisfactory way without the audience not having to question how they participate in the systems of oppression themselves. Even though they might have felt the terror

of the monstrous feminine earlier in the film, they always end with identification with the terrifying abject female that punishes evil individuals.

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