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### **The Element of Religion in Horror Movies**

**With Reference to the Conjuring Universe and Ezra**

#### **Abstract**

Horror movies create the feeling of fear in the viewer. In such movies around the world, we see that the element of religion is almost always present. Horror movies have evolved and their popularity has increased in the past few decades but the use of religion and religious symbols remain a constant factor. The present paper intends to analyze this consistent link between religion and horror films with reference to the movies that are part of the *Conjuring Franchise* (2013- ) in English and the 2017 Malayalam movie *Ezra*. The plot and different scenes from these movies shall be examined to understand how religion comes

into play in horror movies. The argument that horror films have become mouthpieces of religious propaganda shall also be considered.

## Introduction

The purpose of a horror movie is to scare the viewers and instill the feeling of fright in them. It is one of the most popular genres in cinema. It has existed for more than a century. Earlier it was inspired by the works of writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Bram Stoker etc. The themes are usually the supernatural and macabre (the fear of death). These movies perform the function of catharsis by exploring our fear of the supernatural, the unknown and irrational, and forces beyond our control. Normal life challenged by an evil force is a repeated plot subject. The sub genres among horror films include supernatural horror, science fiction horror, psychological horror, splatter films etc.

## History

The first horror films are credited to French film maker Georges Melies even though these were very short movies. The Japanese and Spanish film industries also produced many projects based on horror during the first decades of 20th Century. During the middle of the century with innovations in shooting techniques horror movies became much more realistic and hence popular. Dracula films based on Bram Stoker's stories were very successful. The first Indian horror movie was Mahal which released in the year 1949. It was a box office hit and in the later years many films were churned out in this category. The Indian audience is always intrigued by the genre and presently a dozen odd horror films release every other year.

The first true horror movie in Malayalam is *Bhargavi Nilayam* (1964). It was based on Vaikom Muhammed Basheer's story 'Neelavelicham'. *Manichithrathazhu* (1993) explored the category of psychological horror. The Indian film industry tend to depend on jump scares

and the supernatural when it comes to creating horror while Hollywood has experimented with themes like zombies, mutations, apocalypse, animals etc.

### Religion in Horror Movies

The victory of good over evil is one among the most common themes in stories since time immemorial. This stays true in the case of horror genre too. In most horror films, the evil force is brought under control with the help of religious priests or individuals with spiritual abilities. A Godly or saintly power rescues the affected individual or group of people with ceremonial rituals or ancient theistic activities. The use of holy water and the crucifix for sanctification of an individual possessed by an evil force is one of the most clichéd scenes in this genre. The idea that God is the last resort when a problem arises is conveyed through such scenes. In Hollywood horror movies, Christianity is glorified so much so that there were conspiracy theories that horror movies were produced by the Vatican in order to popularize Christian propaganda. All supernatural activity is associated with evil forces that work against God. And therefore the solutions obviously come around to recital of Bible verses and raising of the crucifix.

These movies offer religion and spirituality as a tool which can explain to us, the mysterious and unfathomable elements in life. The makers try to convince us that human resources aren't enough to deal with the evil and demonic; and therefore we have to turn to God. While movies that glorify religion tend to be welcomed with Skepticism, horror is a useful front behind which preaching can be done without offending non-believers. Many films portray the faithless realizing the inability of rational thinking alone in tackling certain situations in life.

It's much easier to convince people that god exists, once they start to believe that evil is real. And humans with their natural feelings of fear and anxiety about the unknown, find it

comforting that there is actually someone out there, whom they can depend on. Hollywood thus portray Christianity as the strongest weapon against demonic forces.

In Indian horror movies too the presence of religion is inevitable. While Hollywood loves Christianity and Bible Sermons Indian movie makers prefer Hindu priests chanting mantras and performing rituals. Ancient temples, ringing bells, tools to keep away ghosts (like hanging lemon and chilly, Trishul) etc. are very common images in Indian horror films. The most common causes of supernatural occurrence is an *atma*/ soul which couldn't find solace after death. Some elements like lunar eclipse which are not considered holy by the sacred texts appear in the movies likewise. Often forgotten ancient texts and rituals help to bring spirits under control and reiterate the invincible power of Gods and mantra.

Malayalam films follow the same clichés. Until recently most Malayalam horror films followed the same pattern of spirituality vanquishing the supernatural and did not dare to explore anything further. Now we shall consider the movies of the Conjuring franchise in English and the 2018 Malayalam film Ezra to examine how the element discussed above reflect in them.

#### *The Conjuring Franchise (2013- )*

*The Conjuring Franchise* or *Conjuring Universe* consists of five films (till now). It presents the supposedly real life incidents from the lives of paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren. The main 2 films *Conjuring* and *Conjuring 2* focuses on their attempts to help people overcome demonic intrusions and evil forces. Ed is said to be a self-taught demonologist and his wife claims to have extra sensory perception that helps her to understand the presence of demonic energy in people and objects. The couple is believed to have assisted numerous people in encountering hauntings. The subsidiary films *Annabelle 1* and *2* talks about astral and evil objects they have procured over time.

The films make lavish use of Christian icons and symbols as a tool against otherworldly powers. Crucifixes turning upside down symbolizing the presence of evil spirit is a common sight in these films. The makers show how important the religious methods and background of the Lorraines is an unavoidable aspect in enabling them to eradicate or control evil. More often than not the main characters find themselves in situations where their only resort is a crucifix or rosary held in hand.

The first incident in the series which is portrayed in *The Non* (2015) takes place entirely in an ancient Church where a nun has committed suicide. This film brings out the contrast between good and evil in full force as it talks about a 'demonic nun'. It has scenes where nuns keep chanting hymns without a break to ward off evil. Here again the hero has a haunted past who is given the responsibility to set things straight. The other films in the series bring in the church with lesser importance but equal glory. *The Conjuring universe* thus becomes another example of how horror films popularize religions propaganda. It delivered this goal to a larger audience, being one of the highest grossing horror franchises ever.

#### *Ezra (2017)*

*Ezra* is a horror/mystery movie in Malayalam, released in the year 2017. In the movie a couple moves to a new house and faces some paranormal experiences after buying an ancient Dybbuk. For the rest of the movie it follows the usual pattern of the genre. The major difference in *Ezra* that distinguishes it from other movies is the introduction of a religion and culture that is almost unknown to Keralites or rather Indians in general. It talks about the Jews who came and settled in India centuries ago.

The dybbuk and the rituals associated with it is essentially Jewish. As a result, they are forced to bring a Jewish Rabbi to know the history and perform necessary sanctifications. Indians are used to seeing the ceremonies of exorcism associated with Hindu tradition and to an extent Christianity. Therefore, the Jewish incantations and the concepts are a fresh

experience. But then again religion plays an inevitable role in the movie. It becomes the solution to evil in this movie too.

Thus the Jewish connection becomes the change in one aspect and stagnating element in another. A nail or a pot is replaced by the dybbuk, a Hindu Priest or Christian rector replaced by a rabbi and everything else remains the same. The message that God or a religious institution is the ultimate resort of a helpless human is reiterated through this movie too. Ezra represents the changing genre of horror as well as the never changing formula of which religion is an irreplaceable part.

### Conclusion

Religion has become a tactic to induce fear and moviemakers have happily adopted it as a tool for Horror genre. Movies from all around the globe have tuned into the same habit of projecting spirituality as the sole response to the supernatural. When we consider horror movies in Hollywood we realize that many a time these movies work as mere mouthpieces of the Church. If this is intentional or situational cannot be said for certain. This glorification of theism and using it as a tool has not affected the quality of cinema but it has caused a drawback in the form of repetitive and clichéd scenes and images.

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