Unpacking the Horrors of Patriarchy in Cinema

RASHA JAMEEL

When Netflix's *Bulbbul* (2020) premiered on the streaming platform on June 24, there was much buzz around the film due to it being billed as a "feminist, revisionist tale" by critics and audiences alike. There was a significant degree of criticism surrounding the movie as well, regrading the script, runtime, and insincere portrayal of feminist rage. All acceptable debates.

Here's what baffled me — people refusing to address the film as a part of the "horror" genre.

Perhaps you felt the same way, you also thought that the movie didn't warrant the title of a horror film. Have you wondered why though? Was it the lack of jump scares? The absence of preternatural malevolence?

If your answers to the previous questions are "yes", then you've failed to comprehend the horrifying nature of patriarchal dominance in our world.

The true horror in *Bulbbul* lies within its depiction of violent acts carried out against women. Of course, the movie isn't exactly the first of its kind. Let's travel back a decade ago when Darren Aronofsky's masterpiece of a psychological horror, *Black Swan* (2010), came out in theatres. Actress Natalie Portman ended up winning several different accolades for her performance in the movie as the delusional perfectionist, Nina Sayers. The gender-based horror in the movie shifts from being seemingly subtle to strikingly obvious.

Protagonist Nina's emotional spiral begins and is further catalysed by the art director Thomas Leroy (Vincent Cassel) for the Swan Lake ballet where she's been

cast as Odette/Odile. We see Nina witness the terrifying patriarchal grip on the lives of women in show business, as her ageing senior, prima ballerina Beth McIntyre (Winona Ryder), is driven out of a job by the misogynistic Thomas, and Nina herself

is then threatened with replacement and sexually assaulted at the hands of the ballet's director.

Black Swan showcases the harsh reality of women being treated as "disposable objects". Another one of Aronofsky's cinematic masterpieces, *Mother!* (2017), is imbued with similar themes and tones, albeit in a much gory manner. The film is heavily laden with Biblical references to Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, the crucifixion of Christ, etc. with the titular character acting simultaneously as a physical manifestation of Mother Nature and the Virgin Mary.

In *Mother!* (2017), Jennifer Lawrence's character deals with toxic and abusive behaviour from her significant other who eventually encourages an uncontrollable mob to treat his lover with absolute violence. While the aforementioned circumstances primarily allude to the growing threat of global warming and overconsumption, the distress caused to Mother might as well be ripped right out of the pages of the patriarchal reality we all know so well, with a woman having both her rights and voice stamped out in a state of chauvinistic terror.

Further exploring patriarchal violence as a source of horror, up-and-coming director Robert Eggers gave us the indie horror *The Witch* (2015), an eerie piece revolving around the practice of non-conforming women being dubbed as "witches". Eggers' drama puts the focus on female lead Thomasin as she attempts to make sense of the disturbing events around her whilst battling both misogyny and misandry from her own family. *The Witch* (2015) doesn't hover above the idea of witchcraft, but rather delves into

the superstition behind a witch-hunt. Through Thomasin, the movie also dips its toes into the bildungsroman genre, as we see Thomasin attain a certain degree of agency at the end, molding her own identity of a witch out of the ashes of a family tragedy. In recent times, Josephine Decker's *Shirley* (2020) and Leigh Whannell's *The Invisible Man* (2020) offered even more varying perspectives on the role of a toxic man in perpetuating terror in a woman's life. The atmosphere in both movies border on claustrophobic with the disturbed female protagonists gasping to breathe under the weight of abusive relationships. What adds to the dread in both movies is how the male antagonists are perceived amongst their social circles. They get away with their crimes because of the mask of amiability that they always wear at social gatherings, resulting in the abused women being perceived as either delirious or hostile.

South Asian audiences denouncing *Bulbbul* (2020) as a horror film only proves how accustomed we've all grown to hearing about violence against women. Those of us who've been exposed to the problematic side of Bollywood, have even come to normalise gender-based violence through movies such as *Kabir Singh* (2019).

True horror finds a way to nestle under your skin and make a home there. You constantly dwell on it. What can be more terrifying than realising that the unsettling feeling in your bones is just one bad day away from being a nightmarish reality?

The author accidentally poured Savlon on her head instead of her favourite essential oil. Teach her to properly differentiate between the two at rasha.jameel@outlook.com