



Research Article

Female Monstrosity, Body and *The Exorcist* (1973)

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Abstract

The present paper attempts to analyse the phenomenon of horror in relation to the female body. The study underscores the ubiquity of representations of female villainy seen across various cultures to understand how monstrosity is constructed and perceived. The study suggests that cultural manifestations of monstrosity often represent the fears, anxieties, and repressions regarding the female or the feminine. It argues that the female body perpetually exists in otherness. The study investigates the primary function of horror in order to call attention to the gendered channel of horror which necessitates the subjugation or brutalization of female characters in horror cinema. Furthermore, the paper also looks at the social implications of portraying recurring female ghosts in media and discusses the relationship between the male and female characters in horror. Alongside elaborating on female identity and its relation to horror, the paper analyses the condition of horror and monstrosity in the cult-classic film, *The Exorcist*. Deviating from its commonly studied elements, this research strives to identify and deconstruct how the film achieves monstrosity through the body of the female victim.

Keywords: William Friedkin, Kristeva, De Beauvoir, women in horror, female monsters, patriarchy, gender roles.

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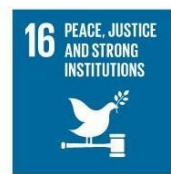
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Introduction

A point of intersection across cultures and traditions is that of establishing a connection between the female and the monstrous. The following chapter provides several instances of female monstrosity occurring in different civilisations and kinds of storytelling. It attempts to understand the female body, historically perceived as an inferior form of the male body. The subsequent sections elaborate an effort made by the author to analyse the perceived subordination of the female body and examine its affiliation with paranormal possession in horror cinema.

In *The Monstrous-Feminine*, Barbara Creed, chooses to focus on the phenomenon of female monsters. Suggesting that enough literature exists on the dynamic between the male killer and the female victim, Creed claims she wants to understand the woman as a monster.

She writes, "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (Creed, 1993, p. 11).

Madison Alisa Johnson, in "Woman as Place: The Utilization of the Female Body in Horror Film", speaking of women in horror, claims, "By necessitating the need for a female body that we can use symbolically for our own benefit, we as viewers agree to ascribe a utilitarian function to that body" (Johnson, 2016, p. 3). Though Johnson is referring to the horror trope of the final girl in the aforementioned quote, the idea carries a truth about female ghosts in cinema. The purpose of this study to deconstruct the politics of the horror genre to show how the category of the female ghost in horror cinema is a harmful practice that serves to vilify women and to inspire further comprehensive research in horror. The present study questions how the representation of women in horror cinema serves to affiliate the ideas of shock and terror with women and how it influences societal attitudes towards gender. This paper attempts to identify the relationship between women, monstrosity, and horror cinema to highlight the cinematic subjugation of women in horror by analysing *The Exorcist* and going to the source of narratives of female villainy and otherness.

The primary source of the research is William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973). The film was selected because of its cultural success and impact on the film industry and consumers of horror. This study attempts to identify a pattern of gendered representation that conflates the feminine with horror. It also uses a range of secondary sources to study the film such as Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous Feminine*, Julia Kristeva's *The Powers of Horror*, Carol Clover's *Men, Women and Chain Saws, Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers* by Sady Doyle and other works listed in the citation section. The secondary sources are used to supplement the arguments established by scrutinising the primary source to accentuate the patriarchal foundations of the horror genre in media.

As predicted, the study makes overt the link between the female body and the generation of shock or horror in possession films. It also proves how the body of the woman has perpetually been seen as the 'other' – a condition that facilitates the gendering of the possessed victim in horror films. The paper also helps elucidate how the general practice of feminising evil in horror germinates dangerous myths about women outside of the world of fiction.

The Female Monster

The condition of monstrosity can often be irrefutably located in association with female bodies across cultural texts and narratives. The societal and cultural internalisation of the gendering of monstrosity has produced several instances of female figures across transnational accounts relegated to the realm of villainy or horror. A popular example to consider here is the urban legend of Bloody Mary. Bloody Mary is believed to be an evil spirit one can summon upon chanting her name thrice in front of a mirror in a dark room, holding a candle. The legend suggests that the summoner may find a reflection of her standing behind them through the mirror. The virality of the folktale has also inspired many alternative renditions; with versions claiming that the invited spirit can be observed with her blood dripping, whereas other interpretations insist that the summoner can be dragged away by the hostile supernatural entity if the individual turns around to look at her (*The Bloody Mary Legend - The True Story of the bloody mary ghost*, n.d.). In South-Asian cultures, the 'Chudail' is a hostile female ghost who is recognised by her ability to rotate her feet backwards (Ansari, 2020). Other examples from urban legends and folktales include: the 'Pontianak' in Indonesia, the 'Banshee' in Ireland, 'La Lorna' in Mexico, the 'Slavic Rusalka' and the 'Kuchisake-onna' in Japan (Putri, 2020).

The wide body of Greek mythology cannot be exempted from this practice either, owing to its several female mythical demons. The Greek-mythology scholar, Liv Albert (2017), notices an unusually recurrent occurrence of female monsters in Greek Mythology as she explains the several types of monsters present in it. For instance, the mythical Empusa is a physically appealing woman who can shape-shift into a creature with fangs, flaming hair and bestial wings and consume the flesh and blood of those who fall prey to her deceitful appearance. She describes Harpies, monsters who have a woman's head and the body of a bird, Echidna, a half-snake and half-woman monster known for living alone in a cave who had a reputation of consuming anyone raw who wandered near her cave. She mentions the Sirens, who were known for luring sailors towards them with their captivating songs. The Furies who were deities of vengeance and possessed snakes in the form of hair and the wings of a bat, the Hydra who was a reptilian female water monster with devastatingly poisonous breath and the ability to regenerate. Albert also notes the Sphinx, who had the head of a woman and the body of a lion along with wings, the Chimera, a fire-breathing female monster who resembled a lion with a goat's head protruding from its back and a tail that ended with a snake's head as well as the female monsters behind the English idiom 'Between Scylla and Charybdis' – two immortal creatures who worked together to destroy ships. Another interesting example is of Lamia, a beautiful queen of Libya in ancient Greek mythology who was punished by Hera, Zeus' wife, for having an affair with him. Hera murdered Lamia's children with Zeus as punishment and since, Lamia has been known as a child-stealing monster who can even separate her eyes from her head and position them to spy on children even as she sleeps. Lamia's character was often used in Greece to extract obedience from unruly children. The most known, however, is the misconstrued character of Medusa who is punished with a grotesque appearance for being raped by the god of sea, Poseidon.

The occurrence of female monstrosity in Greek mythology is pivotal to understand meticulously as Greek mythology has been responsible for inspiring many other modes of character representation across borders. For instance, in the context of media, while Medusa appears in Percy Jackson & the Olympians: *The Lightning Thief* (2010), the Fates or Furies appear in the

sequel, *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* (2013). On the other hand, the female antagonist of Keats' poem, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is supposed to be an irresistible entity who charms the male lover before luring him into danger. The femme fatale, who is also described singing to the knight, has been compared to the sirens from the *Odyssey* (Lawrence, 2022), making the poem an important example of Greek mythology influencing literature.

Important to note is that the cultural vilification of women is not limited to narratives of horror but remains pervasive across other channels of storytelling. The association of malice with women can easily be discovered in some of the most-known fairy tales. For example, the wicked fairy godmother from "Sleeping Beauty", the evil stepmothers from "Cinderella" and "Snow White" as well as the witch from "Hansel and Gretel." The fables, which display a subconscious or unconscious gendering of the central antagonist, can be argued to be as old as time.

In *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) writes about the rituals that follow the construction and elimination of fictional monsters. He claims that the ideas of fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy are incorporated within the body of the monster. Finally, he concludes that "the monstrous body is pure culture" (Cohen, 1996, p. 4). Using a psychoanalytic perspective, Robin Wood (Wood & Grant, 2018) argues that anything that is culturally repressed must find a medium of expression "in however disguised and distorted a form" (p. 57). He suggests that popular culture, or particularly horror films, can serve as a repository for repressed emotions, especially in the creation of the monster. Similarly, Hepburn (n.d.) writes, "Monstrosity points to the ways that a culture assimilates or fails to assimilate knowledge of itself and nature, and the ways that a culture represents, and responds to, its knowledge of the body" (Hepburn, n.d., p.140). The commonality between all the aforementioned observations is the association of the monstrous body with culture. Although none of the aforementioned scholars discuss the particularities of the history of seeking monstrosity in female bodies, their analyses become crucial to the present study. The understanding of monstrosity as cultural offers a perspective into how systemic beliefs held by men against women generate misplaced feelings of anxiety, fear or even fantasy and aid in the construction of female monsters. In other words, horror can be viewed as the representation of the anxieties and desires of men.

The Othering of the Female Body

Similarly, in *Dead Blondes and Bad Mothers*, Doyle (2019) claims that women have been connected with monstrosity for as far as one can recall. She explains the gendering of the apocalypse as female in Christian myth. Doyle further elaborates how the perception of the female as villainous leads to the anatomical dehumanisation of women. She recalls a conclusion made by Aristotle that views women as disfigured men, a claim by Thomas Aquinas suggesting that the creation of women by God would have been a mistake if they had been incapable of bearing sons as well as Freud's famous interpretation of women as castrated beings (Doyle, 2019, pp. 7-9).

Though the anatomical reduction of the female body or the subconscious subordination of the female in terms of biology or philosophy can be attributed to a plethora of theories, a vital contributor to the marginalisation of women is undeniably the practice of feminising elements of horror, disaster or tragedy.

At this point, it is crucial to attempt to understand the semantic possibilities of the linking of the female with the horror. Doyle writes:

But a monster is not something to dismiss or look down on. A monster does not merely inspire anger or disgust. A monster, by definition, inspires fear. Beneath all the contempt men have poured on women through the ages, all the condemnations of our Otherness, there is an unwitting acknowledgment of our power—a power great enough, in their own estimation, to end the world. (Doyle, 2019, p. 9)

Doyle's analysis of the monstrous woman remains imperative for two reasons. Firstly, it provokes the reader to analyse the function of horror which irrefutably is to generate fear. The cultural attribution of villainy to the female does not only provide a systemic channel to the archetypes of storytelling, but twists, turns and contorts the channel to produce the ideal fable. In other words, the identity of the female is re-constructed and re-invented through fiction which does not support a representation of reality but a representation of a tradition of fiction. The female, feminine or the woman all become objects or symbols in storytelling that portend the occasion of evil. The French writer, Monique Wittig (1992), speaking of the feminine, writes, "Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the "masculine" not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general" (Wittig, 1992, p. 60). Presenting a corresponding argument, using Laqueur's theory, Clover (1993) explains that the two-sex model which views men and women as radically or essentially different beings is a modern construction. Older narratives regarding the distinction of the sexes as supported by the discovered medical, linguistic and pictorial records, do not represent a vital distinction (Clover, 1993, p. 13). The female body was subject to the one-sex model which understood the body of the woman in terms of the male body. As a result, the female body, was merely a subordinate and inferior version of the male body (Clover, 1993, p.14). Despite the replacement of the one-sex model with the two-sex model which began in the late eighteenth century, Clover argues that one-sex thinking has always continued. She refers to the ideas of penis envy and phallic women and declares them as the products of one-sex thinking (Clover, 1993, p. 14). Furthermore, Clover argues that the horror genre can be perceived as a repository of one-sex thinking where female protagonists in slasher films typically possess masculine traits and possessed men resemble women (Clover, 1992, p. 15). Though the construction of possessed men in fictional horror as feminine lies into the area of queer-codification of villains – where evil entities are described or portrayed as bearing the characteristics of the binary opposite sex, in an effort to intentionally or unintentionally cement the idea of villainy in homosexuality, Clover's observation of female protagonists in slasher films being linked to masculine dispositions falls into the research area of the present argument. The examination of female protagonists being victims of one-sex reasoning in slasher films is relevant to comprehend that the female protagonist in the possession film is as much a construction of one-sex thinking as the prior. However, it is not due to her identification with another sex but due to her inability to escape the perpetual gendering of evil in horror. This is the point where the theories of Wittig's one-gender idea and Clover's one-sex argument radically correspond. Wittig presents a compelling argument that problematises the supposed progress claimed by the gender-binary model. While the one-sex model explains the biological othering of women, the one-gender analysis explains the narrative and cinematic othering of

women. Despite the comprehension of the genders as different, the male or the masculine remains or represents all that is neutral or general. In horror, it is the feminising of maleficence which serves as evidence for the theory. The continual construction of the central element of horror in possession films, which often represents paranormal degeneracy in femininity through the body of the woman, arguably creates accidental, if not intentional, associations between the evil and the female. When one takes into consideration the vast body of horror cinema in the form of possession films that uses the figure of the female ghost, it becomes easier to locate the exploitation of the female or femininity in horror. The negligence or lack of effort made by possession films to fully comprehend the territory of masculinity, explore, or shape it can be used to understand Wittig's claim of the existence of one sole gender.

Following the aforementioned definition by Doyle, if the first function of horror is to generate fear for the audience, its second function is to inspire fear using the body of the woman as a vessel. In strict Freudian psychological reference, castration-threat anxiety is understood as the anxiety felt by a young boy upon the realisation of his sexual interest towards the mother and his awareness of the father as a more powerful rival (Bhatia, 2009). However, this research views the castration-threat anxiety metaphorically to understand the fear of emasculation in men. The possessed woman in horror, being the channel of fear, exists to create anxiety. In horror, the female body which is possessed, typically, also possess supernatural strength, agility and power. The physical differences generated in the possessed woman due to her spiritual contamination demonstrate a reversal in the representation of gender power dynamics. The woman who was observably inferior in power to the man prior to her possession, now becomes a threat to his masculine energy. Though this portrayal is only possible in the realm of horror fiction, the traditional genre of horror hardly intends to make commentary on the disempowerment of women. Instead, the recurrent practice of exclusively creating the possessed victim a woman with the marginal exception of a few cinematic instances, carries and promotes negative connotations of power in the hands of women and implies that women who wield power, usually more than the man, also wield the ability to create catastrophic events. As a result, the possessed woman easily serves as a sight for castration-threat anxiety for the men on screen as well as the male audiences. For the possessed woman's paranormal strength indicates a disruption of order in the hierarchy of power dictated by a male-dominant society. Important to note is that at the heart of the castration-threat anxiety, is the belief of the phallus being the centre of masculinity and virility. The impenetrable figure of the possessed woman in horror, therefore, not only becomes an active agent in vilifying the female identity but also a systemic product trained to inspire fear of women who do not align with patriarchal traditions. Common portrayals in paranormal horror movies often include men becoming the natural victims of their possessed female relations and generate fear in men by threatening the source of their masculinity.

The French philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir (2011) also voices her opinions on the perception of the female anatomy, its result on the understanding of women and their subjugation. In her groundbreaking text, *The Second Sex*, De Beauvoir writes:

Woman has ovaries and a uterus; such are the particular conditions that lock her in her subjectivity; some even say she thinks with her hormones. Man vainly forgets that his anatomy also includes hormones and testicles. He grasps his body as a direct and normal link with the world that he believes he apprehends in all objectivity, whereas he considers

woman's body an obstacle, a prison, burdened by everything that particularizes it. (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 31)

In the above extract, De Beauvoir effectively articulates how the body of the woman becomes culturally destined to remain in a constant state of otherness. Her observation of the 'subjectivity' that guides the female body crucially identifies the female body in horror which does not represent an objective reality, as mentioned earlier, but rather constructs a palimpsest to re-construct the female identity several times using the same framework of portrayal. This is how, often, the figure of the possessed woman in paranormal horror becomes an outcome of the male filmmaker's fantasies of violent women. It is also Doyle who reveals that the thing she has learnt from her study of monsters is that "fantasies about violent women usually conceal realities about violent men" (Doyle, 2019, p. 16). De Beauvoir's observation of the female identity being reduced to all that particularises the female body by the male perception also draws attention to why the female body itself remains imperative to discuss in a conversation on the bodily vilification of women in paranormal horror. It is therefore vital to note that the problem the present research deals with is not merely of identifying the ritualistic feminising of monstrosity but also the habitual denigration of the female in horror fiction.

The Possessed in *The Exorcist*: Subjugation and Vilification

The Exorcist is one of the most famous, commercially successful, and critically acclaimed films in Hollywood. Despite the exclusion of horror cinema from remarkable award ceremonies owing to its supposed 'anti-intellectual' nature, *The Exorcist* is recognised for being bestowed upon with two Academy awards as well as ten other honourable nominations. The plot follows the story of an actress and single-mother, Chris MacNeil, and her twelve-year-old daughter, Regan MacNeil. The pair seems to be happily living in Georgetown for the purpose of a film that Chris is starring in. However, the story takes a bitter turn for the two female protagonists as Regan is possessed by a demon. Chris desperately seeks to find answers in medical prognoses for an explanation of the implausible, regressive, and impertinent behaviour displayed by her daughter. When all her endeavours fail to recover Regan, she seeks the help of Karras, a local priest, who with the help of Merrin, a more-experienced priest who has performed an exorcism before, performs an exorcism on Regan to cast the demon out.

The Take (2020), a prominent popular-culture platform comments on the overt theme of religion in the film and provides evidence for the film serving the purpose of restoring belief in religion via its depiction of the clear victory of faith over science. It also brings attention to the patriarchy the film consolidates. The film attempts to imply the greater susceptibility of Regan to demonic possession due to the absence of a father from the family unit. Barbara Creed (1993), in her analysis of *The Exorcist*, asks, "What better ground for the forces of evil to take root than the household of a family in which the father is absent and where the mother continually utters profanities, particularly in relation to her husband?" (Creed, 1993, p. 64). *The Take* also elaborates the film's efforts to attribute her ultimate salvation to the two priests, who unlike her father, do not desert her but willingly sacrifice themselves to save her. It is also important to note that the MacNeil mother-and-daughter duo is not delineated as particularly religious. However, it is the entrance of the two fatherly male figures in the story that proves to be the solution for the twelve-

year-old Regan, completes the lack of a father-figure in her life and rehabilitates her faith in religion: as suggested by her act of kissing the cheek of another priest towards the end of the film. Owing to the film's popularity, *The Exorcist* has undergone scrutiny from different perspectives. Many interpretations of the film, however, fail to study the signification of the imposition of paranormal possession on the female body. At this point, it is crucial to attribute a meaning to the idea of monstrosity referenced for the purpose of convenience in conducting the current research.

The contrast between the 'self' and the 'other' is rooted in historicity. De Beauvoir writes, "The category of Other is as original as consciousness itself. The duality between Self and Other can be found in the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies" (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 32). Though the idea of the monster can be understood as the 'other' or the lack of the 'self', the views can be ascribed to a sense of oversimplicity that is disproved by the ubiquity of monstrosity in fiction and the terror it causes. Monstrosity is not to be understood as a system of significance but one that fails to assign meaning to itself. If the 'self' represents a system of order, the monster does not represent a lack of order or disorder but exists in a realm of corporeal and spiritual difference. The difference, however, is not a difference 'from' but the difference in 'between'. In other words, the monster is the space between the 'self' and the 'other'. Similarly, Hepburn, who offers a counter-intuitive analysis of the monster, explains, "Lingering on the boundary between visibility and invisibility, a monster inspires fear by virtue of its unlocatability" (Hepburn, n.d., p. 137).

In the *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva refers to the abject as "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva & Roudiez, 1982, p. 4). Felluga (2015) refers to Kristeva's idea of abjection as "our reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other" (p. 3). The monster, like the abject, is not the 'self' or the 'other' but it is that which threatens the difference between the two categories. The monster is the abject, it is the spatial difference between the 'self' and the 'other'. In Kristeva's theory of abjection, it is therefore the border between the subject and the object that becomes the cause of distress. Kristeva suggests that "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject" (p. 4). She also assigns urine, blood, sperm and excrement to the area of abjection. The human body, thus, becomes important in the theory of abjection. If the abject is of the realm of bodily repugnance, the exhibition of the biological functions, disfigurements and eccentricity of the human body as a consequence of sickness or paranormal contamination is the impeccable source of horror or disgust.

In *The Exorcist*, Regan is observed urinating on a carpet while her mother has invited company over, vomiting a green fluid on the face of Father Karras. The film delineates her face with multiple scars, gashes, wounds, blood, and vomit. Regan is also seen stabbing her genitals with a crucifix, twisting her head entirely around and walking backwards down the stairs on all four limbs to the horror of her mother. Her body is also seen levitating over her bed to signify her spiritual contamination by the demon. Creed writes:

Regan's body which becomes the site of this struggle – a struggle which literally takes place within the interior of and across the body. Slime, bile, pus, vomit, urine, blood – all of these abject forms of excrement are part of Regan's weaponry. Regan is possessed not by the devil but by her own unsocialized body. (Creed, 1993, p. 75)

To construct a body in abjection by brutalizing or violating it for the purposes of fear or pleasure is to dehumanise the body. *The Exorcist* uses the female body and contorts it into a "playground for bodily wastes" (Creed, 1993, p. 74). If the female body in possession horror films can be viewed as a base or source material for horror cinema, it implies the possibility of the female body existing as an imperishable product available for infinite bodily distortions. In this sense, the female body becomes one with the abject and the object. For in Kristeva's theory the abject is the space between the subject and the object. She writes, "the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I" (p. 1). Therefore, the function of the abject is to position the human subject in the position of the object or to cause discomfort by diminishing the distinction between the two. If the soulless corpse-like body of Regan is perceived to be the ultimate form of abjection, it can be suggested that it is the function of the female body to cause alarm, panic, disgust or horror in the film. A significant instance in *The Exorcist* is when a psychiatrist visits Regan in her home and attempts to hypnotise her and the alleged other self within her. The mission fails as Regan leaps onto him, attempting to bite off his genitals. This scene perfectly illustrates the aforementioned castration-threat anxiety the female monster inspires. It is also worthy to note that *The Exorcist* is said to be inspired from a real exorcism of a young boy in Maryland (Yang, 2021). As a result, the construction of a girl in monstrosity becomes a conscious decision of filmmakers. *The Exorcist's* vast popularity also influenced several filmmakers to create similar films with similar monsters. Creed notes a few of the several: *The Devil Within Her*, *Abby*, *Cathy's Curse*, *Lisa and the Devil*, *To The Devil – A Daughter*, *Audrey Rose* and *The Sexorcist*. Creed also explains that all the films depict a girl or woman being possessed by a demon and illustrate the body as vulnerable and susceptible to possession. She claims that the imitations also graphically display the destruction of the victim's body (p. 60).

However, to declare susceptibility or a reduced resistance to possession is also to imply the likelihood of the resignation of the self to monstrosity. If the monster is perceived as the in-between and Kristeva's abjection is viewed as that which threatens the border between two categories, it is the abject body of Regan that becomes the source of monstrosity. Though categorically Regan has always been recognised as the helpless possessed victim of the film, Regan also becomes the difference between the 'self' and the 'other'. Regan becomes and remains the monster.

It is also crucial to state that the film makes several attempts to distinguish Regan from the demon who has possessed her. One of the major examples of this is when Chris unbuttons Regan's nightgown to discover the words 'Help Me' written on the inside of her skin. The cry for help also serves as a confession that attributes the eccentric and violent behaviour of Regan not to herself but the demon who has established control over her. Although Regan is merely used as a medium to exhibit and create horror, *The Exorcist* was arguably one of the first major films that presented a graphic female body for the value of horror. The evident transnational and transcultural practice of brutalizing and violating the female body in horror films, to some extent, can certainly be attributed to the wide success of *The Exorcist*. From this perspective, the efforts to distinguish

Regan from the demon that has possessed her are of little value. The tradition of the violent and villainous possessed female victim in horror contradicts the usage of women in horror as channels for horror, as they may appear on the surface. The culmination of this culture of decades is the cinematic desecration of the female body in horror cinema. This is the point at which the channel or medium can no longer be distinguished from the product. It is where the intended and unsuspecting medium merges into the consequence, creating a framework of cinematic representation that ritually distorts, obscures and degrades the female body. In other words, the monstrous female body does not just convey horror but also create horror.

Finally, important to note is that *The Exorcist's* representation of a possessed woman who is healed or cured towards the end of a horror film, furthers the notions of the 'damsel in distress' in paranormal horror. As a result, a male saviour to rescue the possessed girl from herself, for at that point, the boundary between the possessed victim and the demon who has possessed her remains thin, becomes essential. Furthermore, the requirement of the grotesque female body in paranormal horror also provides a seemingly satisfactory explanation for the infliction of violence on the female body, which is arguably portrayed the most effectively in *The Exorcist*. If the construction of the female body in paranormal horror is to be understood as the representation of the fears and desires of men, it is also essential to study the function of the body that not only consolidates the male saviour-complex but also becomes a ground for the achievement of permissible violence of the female body (the blood, sores, vomit, scars on Regan's face as well as the act of strapping her to her bed) which may not be accomplished via the same ease or criticism in other genres of cinema.

This work seeks to identify the layers of female monstrosity delineated in horror cinema and its impact through a critical analysis of *The Exorcist*. It hopes to problematise the general desensitisation experienced by consumers of horror films who encounter the character of a female ghost. It also hopes to contribute to the present literature on horror cinema that strives to promote critical analysis of the condition of female characters exposed to the paranormal.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper tries to dismantle the cultural figure of the female ghost by highlighting the historical and medical subordination of the female body. The study also looks at various narratives of mythology and culture that reveal a bias against women by pairing the female or the feminine with evil or catastrophe. The paper also proves a reversal of gender dynamics in horror fiction which allows the possessed woman to hold supernatural strength, agility, and power. Though, this may appear as a subversive form of representation, the presentation of women as ghosts does not create any privilege for women in the outside world. On the contrary, it propels an association of women with susceptibility to evil and even contamination.

The paper attempts to shift the conventional understanding of monstrosity from monster being the 'other' to viewing it as the difference between the self and the other. In the context of *The Exorcist*, it explains how the possessed female body becomes the object (separated from the non-monstrous self) as well as the abject (difference between the self and the other). Moreover, the research also sheds light on how the horror genre relies on women being the channel of horror.

It argues that the tendency to use the body of the woman as a tool to generate horror, distorts the female identity. This distortion of the female body leads to women being not only a channel, but also the source of horror itself. Furthermore, it looks at how horror films often create a possessed female body and rely on a male saviour to save the woman from herself. Lastly, it also argues that using the body of the woman as a location of sacrilege permits unmitigated perpetration of violence on the female body in horror – a task difficult to execute in other genres.

Though the paper briefly touches upon queer coding of evil entities in fiction, it is not within the scope of the present research to discuss the representation of homosexual subtext in horror. The nature of this study also limits the understanding of gender to the binary. However, it offers opportunities for further research in the field of gender and intersectionality.

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