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From Assimilation to Resistance: Body, Identity and Intersectionality in *Ghoul* (2018)

Abstract: This paper critically examines the intersections of gender, religion, and social politics through the character of Nida Rahim in the Indian Netflix miniseries *Ghoul* (2018). Through the protagonist, it analyzes a struggle for bodily autonomy and identity in a dictatorial State, problematized further by the subtext of supernatural invasion. A close reading of the text with the theoretical backing of Foucauldian analyses of power and identity, Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality, reveals the series' attempt at proposing resistance to the authoritarian powers through the media representation and portrayals. The recognition and the acceptance of power imbalances, and a gradual resistance to generalized and prejudiced perceptions for various sections of the State population, form the core of the series. The paper analyzes the processes of assimilation in a militarized State and the dangers it poses against one's individual and collective identity.

Keywords: identity; power; intersectionality; body; women; religion.

Introduction

Popular media produce cultural outputs that feature various embodiments of the intersections of religious debates and nationalism. These representations get imprinted in the collective identities of marginalized sections of society. Often positioned in different groups, bodies, and identities, nationalism and political fervor in a State use the beings and bodies of that state`s inhabitants to engage in power struggles. Social realities and media representations thus have a reciprocal impact on each other.

With the advent of video streaming platforms and the evolution of the culture of film and television in India, a shift in the traditional viewing practices can be observed. The accessibility of media, ease of consumption, binge-watching practices, etc., are a few of the many aspects of the emergence and rise of OTT platforms in India. Platforms like

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Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and Hotstar provide a wide range of options for films and TV shows, both mainstream and regional, suited to individual viewership. As the preferences for audience diversify, OTT content providers find themselves competing with mainstream media productions, bringing marginalized and unrepresented voices to the forefront. OTT platforms are quick to adapt to changes in social attitudes and trends, reflecting cultural evolution and broader ideological shifts in society.[1]

The Netflix miniseries *Ghoul* (2018) utilizes the intersectional identity of a Muslim woman working as an interrogator at a military detention center, amid supernatural beings and interventions to carry out a social commentary about the State and religious politics. The series is set in a dystopian future in India, focusing on Nida Rahim's character, played by Radhika Apte, navigating her position in the State during a civil crisis. What this study tries to do is to trace the global strengthening of movements that are neo-fascist in nature and the subtle but relentless resistance to them. This series is a cultural product of the same nature, where the intersection of a gendered and marginal identity offers forms of resistance to the hegemonic powers.

The story takes place in a geographical location distanced from the general public, a Foucauldian panopticon[2] with the prisoners being surveilled at all times and the bounds of morality and humanity being forsaken. "Meghdoot 31" is the name of the military detention center where anti-national elements of the State are imprisoned for 'Advanced Interrogation'. It has 12 officers, including Nida Rahim, who use violent apparatus to interrogate the prisoners in order to get to the 'truth'. The detention center becomes a microcosm of a dystopian militant State and forces Rahim to confront her ideals, her convictions, and her decision to denounce her father to a fascist government, basing it on her belief of him having committed an act of treason against the State.

Rahim's character and the analysis of her actions and decisions in the series paint a larger picture of the way women, their bodies, identities, and choices are regulated and controlled in the process of the functioning of the State. The trajectory that the development of her character follows also hints towards a myriad ways such contested identities fight against the system of oppression. It highlights identification, resistance, and resolution of the processes of marginalization of a group and suggests media, film, and television as tools to voice social concerns.

An auteurist analysis of the series reveals how Patrick Graham focuses on the outcomes of practicing extremism. As a British filmmaker distanced from the Indian political landscape, he blends various aspects of the universal tropes of horror cinema and creates the protagonist of the series, Nida Rahim, as a complex character navigating the dystopian Indian future.[3] Dystopian narratives have often served as political allego-

[1] Devdas Menon, "Beyond Binge-Watching: How the OTT Video Streaming Platforms Have Transformed Indian Television Culture," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, December 19 (2024), 1–25. https://doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2024.2442863.

[2] Foucault's panopticon is an extension of Jeremy Bentham's model of a prison with a central surveillance system in place, a metaphor for the exercise of power in a State through constant surveillance.

[3] Sonali Srivastav and Shikha Rai, "Metanarratives of Identity in Web-series: A Narrative Analysis of Netflix's Ghoul (2018)," *International Journal of Media and Information Literacy* 4, no. 2 (2019): 50–59.

ries that reflect collective global anxieties. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) are popular examples of dystopias that work as political allegories. Shows like *The Hunger Games* and *Alice in Borderland* can also be analyzed as dystopian explorations of social and moral crises. The non-specificity of the location of Meghdoot 31 and the temporal ambiguity add to the dystopian world-building that inevitably makes the viewers expect the absurd and unfamiliar.[4]

Militarized state and intersectional identity

One's experiences are affected by the various ways in which different parts of their social identity intersect. Overlapping categories like class, caste, gender, religion, and sexuality produce varied lived experiences for different societal groups. A culmination of these intersecting experiences dictates the position we occupy in the social structure we are a part of. In her work on Intersectionality Crenshaw critiques reductionism and challenges single-axis thinking that overlooks the complexities of one's identity.[5] As a Muslim woman in a militarized State working for the majoritarian government, Nida Rahim experiences the space of the Advanced Military detention center differently from her coworkers.

Rahim is taken to the detention center blindfolded. It is explained that the location of the center is classified and must remain so. Her arrival in the unit, therefore, strips her of sight, both literally and metaphorically, as she observes the doctrine of violence and power at the center. The officers exclaim how they have music playing at all times, windows blackened and curtained, to keep the prisoners from knowing the time of day. The control over the temporal realities of the inhabitants also serves as a tool of discipline and control in the center. An officer explains to Rahim the blacked-out windows, indicating that the temporal distortion affects the body clock of both the prisoners and the officers. This contorted sense of self and the world can be further understood in the way Rahim navigates her identity in the detention center.

As a woman in a male-dominated space, Rahim is constantly required to prove her loyalty to the State by carrying out her duties as an interrogator against political prisoners. The detention center is portrayed as a hypermasculine environment where violence is the norm and expectation, and the only way for Rahim to assimilate is to participate in the violence being carried out against prisoners. She informs the militants of her father being involved in 'anti-national' activities, and it is this act that possibly paves the way for her as an officer in the detention center. She has been recruited to interrogate the leader of a terrorist sect, Ali Saeed Al Yacoub. Rahim is compelled to constantly affirm her patriotism in order to integrate into the institution. She is expected to be hyper-violent towards the political prisoners and demonstrate

[4] Manidip Chakraborty and Shubham Bhattacharjee, "De-Familiarizing the Familiar: The Strategies behind the Dystopian Narratives in the OTT Platform in India," *International Journal of Cultural Studies and Social Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2024): 82–88.

[5] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

her dedication and loyalty to the Nation. What needs to be analyzed is whether her introduction in the unit carries transformative potential or further constrains her individuality.

Conforming to the manner in which the State violence controls Rahim and orders her belief systems, she becomes a part of the State and exercises disciplinary power over her father. On her way to the detention center, Rahim tells her father how their community has always been taught the wrong ideas. While her father, Shahnawaz Rahim, played by S.M. Zaheer, refers to Muslims as his people, she distances herself from her communal identity. She refers to herself as a Nationalist who places her belief in the government and the repressive steps being taken to tackle anti-national elements. In the miniseries, Rahim is portrayed as someone who challenges this stereotypical portrayal of a Muslim woman that helps her assimilate with the militant government. The rise of the neo-fascist movement not only makes her compromise elements of her religious identity but also her gendered identity. She becomes a part of a system that runs on conformity of identity, and her community is seen as alien, invasive, and 'other'.

The collective demonization of Muslims in the dystopian State becomes evident when the fear and paranoia intensify in the detention center. Rahim realizes that despite her acts of service and loyalty to the State, her religious identity and the generalizations about her community will render her a suspect in times of crises. Edward Said's framework of *Orientalism* focuses on bracketed categories that serve to formulate an image of the "Other": the incomprehensible, exotic, and alien category as opposed to the cultured, mannered, and familiar Occident.[6] Said's work focuses on the manner in which power acts and dominates through reductive stereotypes and is important in understanding how the othering of a community takes place. Rahim's identity pushes her to the margins, where she is the enemy, a suspicious traitor. Said observes how Orientalist narratives overlook any form of complexity in one individual identity. Hazel Simons elaborates on the sexualization and objectification of Muslim women throughout history and how contemporary societies still observe constant policing of women's bodies and identities.[7]

When Rahim joins the workforce, Major Laxmi Das, played by Ratnabali Bhattacharjee, objects to her presence. She urges Colonel Sunil Dacunha, played by Manav Kaul to imprison her remarking that they know "all about her people and her religion". In another instance, Das asks her if "her people will be a problem". Even though she has displayed her loyalty to the regime, Rahim is constantly reminded that she doesn't belong. She is talked about as the other, as a part of the community that is understood to be anti-State. In the area assigned for lunch, Rahim is seen sitting alone at a table as everyone eyes her movements. It is only Das that approaches her which would hint on how her being a woman is also a part of her other-ed identity. She joins her not to give her company but to interrogate her further on how she feels about inflicting violence

[6] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Penguin Books, 1995).

[7] Hazel Simons, "Orientalism and Representation of Muslim Women as 'Sexual Objects'," *Al-Raida Journal* (2002): 23–32.

on the prisoners and if she is capable of doing it. It is not only a question that probes at her religious identity, but her gendered identity as well.

There are various instances of similar patterns of generalizations that can be observed throughout the series. In an instance where Rahim is required to change into an official uniform, Das overtly exclaims how women in Islam favour covering themselves and examines Rahim's hesitance or lack thereof to resort to the way of dressing required for her job. What can be observed from both Das's remark and Rahim's generalizing of her religious community by saying she doesn't comply with the way it treats women is the way a particular religious expression is criminalized in an authoritarian State. Sanjeev Kumar comments on the construction of a unified Nation in popular media, with the Muslims being viewed as the distinct 'other' by mannerisms of being, attire, and strict adherence to the Islamic codes of conduct.[8] Rahim's character is a part of a larger net of constructed representations where the characters carry markers of differentiation, alienation and threat. Her subjection to a constant policing of the different aspects of her identity reflects broader patterns of behavior observed in the power structures around her.

Bodily surveillance and struggle for autonomy

Women and their bodies have historically been a point of contestation. Their bodies often become an embodiment of the State to inscribe ideologies on, to control and govern, and make a spectacle out of. In a neo-fascist State like the dystopia created in the series, women, their sexuality, and bodily autonomy are challenged. Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi emphasizes how "fascism acts against the interests of the masses, and particularly against those of women, when it imposes on them a social, political and intellectual practice which forces them to submit immediately to exploitation".[9]

Following the concept of the panopticon, Foucault notes how the subject being watched becomes "an object of information". Colonel Dacunha, sits in his control room, watching over the inhabitants of the detention center. A system of surveillance is in place that makes Rahim, the other prisoners, and officers subjects of the panopticon gaze. It is not only the inhabitants of the detention center but also Dacunha being controlled by the larger power systems in play. As a disciplining mechanism, the detention center enforces power over both the loyal and the rebellious agents in the State to ensure not just the physical but ideological control of the subjects.[10] Bodily control and subjugation are tools of power, dictating the relationship between the State and the bodies of its inhabitants. Judith Butler suggests that bodies endure and live within regulatory schemas and are not independent of constraints and regulations.[11] The

[8] Sanjeev Kumar, "Constructing the Nation's Enemy: Hindutva, Popular Culture and the Muslim 'Other' in Bollywood Cinema," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2013): 459.

[9] Maria-Antonietta Macciocchi, "Female Sexuality in Fascist Ideology," *Feminist Review* 1, no. 1 (1979): 71.

[10] Chakraborty and Bhattacharjee, "De-Familiarizing the Familiar."

[11] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), xi.

power structures that give shape to these regulations also determine the definitions and meanings ascribed to these bodies under power. Rahim's identity and body are contested arenas of constant struggle for autonomy and reflect the militarized control of her being. Her experiences, thus, are produced as a symptomatic result of the power imposed upon her in the detention center.

To analyze the bodily struggles further, it is imperative to understand the ways in which the dystopia imagined in the series features very few women amid the many male officers and prisoners. The two officers present, Rahim and Das, are both components of a fascist regime. They are also categorized overtly into the two religious identities of a Muslim and a Hindu. The choice of characters and names seems symbolic of the way totalitarian States lack spaces for women to articulate themselves as separate from the power structures in place.

Das deviates from the conventional definitions of femininity by adopting an overtly violent attitude and internalizing the misogyny prevalent among her male counterparts. Her character is also representative of how fascist regimes require and function on a severely violent and hyper-masculine social structure. Das believes that violence against political prisoners is the only way one can attest to their loyalty to the State. Rebecca Tapscott explains how "national-level authoritarian power is produced and diffused into society through gendered local encounters."[12] Through the concept of militarized masculinity, Tapscott tries to explain the difference between unaccountable violence and regulated discipline. The entire series is rampant with instances of bodily heckling and violation. Rahim's body is a victim of both the state and the patriarchal social structure. Constant manhandling of her body by the interrogators and officers is internalized by her as she deems it important, rather necessary to ensure the smooth functioning of the power structures.

The series also incorporates supernatural elements that further complicate the ideas on body politics and bodily autonomy that are central to feminist discourse. The series features the invocation of 'Ghul' or Ghoul, a monster of Arab origin that feeds on human beings. The introduction of a being as a Ghoul adds further layers to the social commentary that the series undertakes. The supernatural Ghoul speaks in an indiscernible language, is nameless, feared, and arouses suspicion about its identity. It is alien and threatening, locked in a cell to torture. The series begins with an unfamiliarity with the character of the Ghoul, and as the story progresses, it comes to mirror the framework within which the 'other' is imagined and created.

It is essential to note that the emergence of the Ghoul triggers the transformation within Rahim. It is when she is treated like the Ghoul itself that she questions the power being inscribed on her identity. The summoning of the Ghoul is also a result of an act of violence on one's own body. Invoked by blood sacrifices, the Ghoul preys on the guilt and fear of the people, assuming the face of the last person it feasts on. It further complicates the various ways in which bodily violence plays out in a totalitarian regime and, in the process, creates and subjugates its subjects.

[12] Rebecca Tapscott, "Militarized Masculinity and the Paradox of Restraint: Mechanisms of Social Control under Modern Authoritarianism," *International Affairs* 96, no. 6 (2020): 1565.

The authoritarian control of the body in a militarized State is not restricted only to the institutions of confinement and policing but also pervades domestic spheres. Colonel Dacunha's physical abuse of his wife traces a continuity of bodily control and violence and how it organizes both public and intimate relationships. In his confrontation with the Ghoul, it is revealed that Dacunha's wife is fearful of the war-hero persona he carries. Her resentment towards him and the violence inflicted upon her as a punishment for dissent mirrors the treatment of the enemies of the State. Another instance reveals how an inmate's wife and child were tortured and killed in front of his eyes to extract confession. Bodily control and violence thus emerge as the primary tools of control in an authoritarian Nation, following Foucault's understanding of the body as the primary location of the inscription of power.[13]

Reclaiming autonomy and identity: a tale of resistance

Being a woman, it is not just her religious identity that Rahim struggles with, but bodily autonomy, assertion, and finding space in a gendered, hyper-masculine military confinement. Her identity is fixed on the margins. She takes over professional roles that are stereotyped as categorically and conventionally masculine, as she struggles with the need to position herself in an environment hostile to her being.

In a setting that suspends all belief systems, where everyone is in danger, and where the enemy imitates their own, Rahim is required to defend her identity continuously. She complies with this subjectivization by power, often claiming that it's good for the welfare of the State. It is only when she is transformed into an object of terror, confined in a cell as a traitor, an identity both supernatural and alien, that she questions the very system she had been upholding. The introduction of the Ghoul in the detention center exacerbates Rahim's already precarious intersectional identity, deepening its instability. She is locked away in a room that connects to the interior of the detention center through a tunnel and to the exterior through a locked door. With her are the other political prisoners in a struggle to affirm their identity as human beings.

The space and Rahim's identity in it can be connected to what Gloria Anzaldúa termed as "Nepantla" or "Nepantleras".[14] An expansion of her work on hybridity, which she describes as *Mestiza Consciousness*, being a nepantlera means existing in the middle, without having to favour specific parts of your identity. With Rahim gradually realizing that she wronged her father and her beliefs faltering, the space of imprisonment transforms into Nepantla – a site for change, a place where the old self dies and the new self, or the Nepantlera, is born. Anzaldúa describes it as an identity that's changing and denies any definition. Rahim's stance changes in that space as she attempts to escape out of that room with a prisoner who is rendered mute as a trauma response to witnessing the killing of his wife and children at the hands of his

[13] Ann J. Cahill, "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body," *Hypatia* 15, no. 1 (2000): 43–63.

[14] Martina Koegeler-Abdi, "Shifting Subjectivities: Mestizas, Nepantleras, and Gloria Anzaldúa's Legacy," *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States* 38, no. 2 (2013): 71–88.

interrogators. The room works as a space that suspends Rahim's trust in the system as she notices bullet marks and belongings of the prisoners piled away in a corner. In his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau talks about the objects and stories connected to them carrying transformative potentials.[15] Finding old glasses and purses of the people who were killed in the detention center transforms Rahim's character. It forces her to look and think beyond what she has always believed in. As she evades the attack of the Ghoul, she also leaves behind her former complicity with the system and begins to question the power that surrounds her. In a physical struggle with Das, Rahim bites off her ear and questions the incessant suspicion directed at her in the center. The act signifies a disruption in the power dynamics at the institution. She not only questions the power imposition on her identity but also manifests it in a physical act of resistance.

Her character's trajectory follows a path from compliance with the authoritarian State to becoming part of the collective struggle of her community and resisting assimilation into oppressive systems. The realization that her appointment as an officer in the center was a result of Ali Saeed taking her name compels her to reassess her father's critique of the State's narrative of patriotism. From being someone who reports her father to the State for indulging in forbidden and anti-regime literature to someone who recognizes the marginal, intersectional position she occupies Rahim, through the story, explores her faith, her identity as a woman, and as a member of a marginalized group. In a final collective confrontation of the officers with the Ghoul, Rahim decides to side with the supernatural. She proclaims faith in her father's ideals and resorts to helping the ghoul eliminate the officers in the center.

Rahim's resistance to the regime is not stark. It is gradual and slow, a subtle change in thought until it festers into a self-inspection. It is at the intersection of gender, religion, and national identity that her resistance and agency take place. She stands as a sole resistance to the entirety of the detention center and, by extension, the State. Sara Ahmed describes 'willful subjects' as those who refuse to yield, who do not submit to the regime, who "might be striking in her appearance not only because she (they) disagree/s with what has been willed by others, but because she (they) disagree/s with what has disappeared from view." This can be seen in the instance where Rahim stands alone in the end, with her gun pointed at Dacunha, whom she claims to be the Ghoul. She is targeted by the army and is seen as a traitor, following which she is taken to jail. She appears alone, but alarmed and clear of her understanding of her place in the State.

Rahim's invocation of the Ghoul toward the end of the series can be observed as a metaphor for inherited resistance. The series, at various junctures, foregrounds the trope that 'the enemies are among us', further fueling the communal conflicts prevalent in the State. This political instability in the State is materialized in Rahim's body, represented through the climactic act of her drawing a blade from her mouth – a symbol of self-sacrifice, self-assertion, and the pursuit of knowledge in the manner of her deceased father. By aligning her body and self with the supernatural, she transforms

[15] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (University of California Press, 1984), 118.

her state from being a passive member to an active participant in the struggle for self and collective identity. The Ghoul, as a fantastical intervention conjured by Rahim, substantiates her stance as a counter to the absolute power being exercised in the State.

The series highlights Rahim's journey from assimilation to resistance, from an observed and exercised distance from her community to an understanding of the workings of absolute power. It draws attention to various tools of bodily control and subjugation and the counters that can be offered against them. *Ghoul* as a series offers an exemplary critique of the global systems of authoritarianism, policies of control and subjugation, and the repression of critical voices. It also brings forth the way in which women, their bodies and voices are governed and regulated, pushing them to the peripheries of social and political order.

Conclusion

As a media-text, *Ghoul* serves as an example of the way cultural outputs reflect the mechanisms of society. Women and their bodies are contested sites for power and struggle, and in a world observing a global rise in right-wing fascist tendencies, they become furthermore vulnerable and precarious. Resistance to doctrines of absolute power can be observed in the form of social movements, activism, and media campaigns worldwide. Popular culture also serves as a tool of resistance, highlighting the social and political shifts in society.

Nida Rahim's character undergoes a transformation from a myopic viewpoint of her surroundings to a broader and nuanced understanding of the power structures that dictate her position in the State. The paper follows her contribution to the systemic villainization of a group to her gradual resistance to it. It emphasizes her struggle for autonomy and the individual and collective identity of her community. The series serves as a condensed representation of the larger social structure, but Nida's character reflects the broader struggle of various groups of people, battling their own beliefs and ideas to reach an understanding of their position in the world. Her character suggests the possibilities of reclaiming bodily autonomy and agency and urges a critical articulation of the world around us.

Ghoul as a series opens up avenues of enquiry with the likes of horror and dystopian fiction being potent genres for studying social and political crises, inviting a reimagination of bodily agency and autonomy. The critical frameworks offered through the narratives in the series urge the viewers to question and dismantle the structures of oppression and marginalization across the globe.

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