



Beyond the Familiar: Cultural and Religious Horror in the select Novels of Neil D'Silva

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Nathan***Abstract:***

This article explores the crossways of religious and cultural horror in contemporary Indian horror fiction. Investigating how author Neil D'Silva used year old cultural, religious and ritual belief system to evoke fear among the readers. The combination of horror with Indian cultural and religious belief systems portrays a specific space where familiar becomes fear and sacred becomes sinister. The author often uses mythology, folklore, and religious customs to create a sense of fear which reflects with readers on personal and collective level. This transformation of normal and customary supernatural events into something that is more social in nature as well as acknowledging them, is what this attempt communicates. From this perspective, the article analyses how these horror stories respond to contemporary social concerns like caste, gender, and religious rivalries through horror as an examination tool for social tensions. Today's Indian horror writing breaks the barriers of culture and religion to provide insightful opinions about how tradition intersects with modernity, as well as what is sacred and what is not thereby enlarging its parameters in the literary field of India. With this research, one can better appreciate global horror literature since it emphasizes on what makes Indian writers' work special when it comes to this category.

Keywords: culture, customs, folklore, horror, Indian fiction, Neil D'Silva

1. Introduction

Horror is a popular genre across the globe and has a wide range of audience which still upholds it as a profitable in both print and visual versions. Horror fiction has long been a medium through societal fears and anxieties are explored. Horror often used to explore the dark side of the human psyche. But when it is blended with cultural and religious contexts it transforms into a new dimension which makes it as a collective consciousness of the societies. Horror literature has always been deeply rooted in Religion and culture, serving as the backbone for some of its most important motifs and narratives. The combination of these aspects in horror allows writers to discuss collective worries or fears that people have had throughout history, often touching upon uneasy issues such as taboos or

even great existential dilemmas which are common among all human beings irrespective of the epoch they lived. This is important because it invokes the social fears, pulls from the masses and confronts with reality what we know and do not know. Like faiths, cultures also contribute significantly to horror literature by instilling fear. This aspect of culture is perceived by people's way of understanding horror's aspects and circumstances. Some of these aspects of culture contain uncanny elements that are often used in horror stories, especially in relation to their beliefs, rituals or practices. Culture based stories, myths and fables have a broader understanding since they bring to mind some memories which we all share deep down. In the context of Indian literature, this genre takes a unique turn, deeply mixed with country's rich cultural and religious heritage.

Indian authors increasingly have started to blend elements of horror with cultural and religious themes, creating narratives that are both terrifying and reflective of the complexities of Indian society. The theme of horror in Indian literature draws its strength from the psychological influence of religion and culture. Often, horror stories in India are nothing but tales based on fear of the unknown though they are amplified by beliefs associated with different religions and cultures. By means of various styles, moving religion with culture, superstition is sometimes expressed as Indian horror literature. Horror writers base their stories on collective fears produced by these trans-generational superstitions. In India's horror literature there are many tales of cursed trees, things that incite terror and evil spirits drawing from local myths and taboos. The fear is not just of the supernatural but also of the consequences of breaking religious or cultural taboos (Sharma, 2020). The everyday presence of different religious symbols and practices ensures that when such subjects are used to write horror stories, a person feels a sense of fear that is nearly fundamental.

Neil D'Silva is a contemporary Indian author who made a significant contribution to the Indian horror genre, specifically in the sub-genre of religious and cultural horror. His works have a uniqueness of a perfect blend of folklore, superstition, and religious beliefs with elements of psychological and supernatural horror. D'Silva structured his narratives that are not only terrifying but also deeply reflective of the society from which they origin. As critics have noted "D'Silva's work often challenges the reader to confront the dark side of faith, where devotion crosses the line into fanaticism" (Sharma, 2020). More over his works allows readers to explore the unknown, not only in the form of supernatural elements but also in the form of rituals, traditions, and fears that these cultural residues invoke. Through his vigorous story-telling nature D'Silva pushes the readers to rethink the role of tradition and culture in shaping the human fears and anxieties.

D'Silva's horror is characterized by distinctive elements that make it unique—his use of religious practices and beliefs as a basis for fear being one such thing. It reveals how important religion

really is within our societies today because every work he has done contains some kind of ritual or symbolic representation rooted deeply into our culture; these things are not just scenery for him but rather the main theme (even if sometimes they are incidental). For instance, there is an old cult with horrid rituals in Maya's new husband from which comes all this terror. The main character—Maya here—is enmeshed in a web woven into ancient astrology that remains hidden from plain sight while appearing severally online at once due to their horrific nature itself. This fear comes from within us when we don't know what awaits us next and can be even amplified when these matters seem sacred at first.

This study aims to explore the embedded relation between religion and culture in D'Silva's novels. By finding how these elements play a crucial role in creating fear and what they reveal about the societies portrayed. This paper will throw light on broader implication of religious and cultural horror in literature.

Yakshini:

Yakshini is a mythical work blended in a modern world scenario which portrays numerous incidents of cultural and religious elements which escalates the horrific nature. It was published in 2019, marks a break from the stereotypic horror genre. It is filled with Indian folklore, culture and religion and accompanied by ancient myths of Yakshinis. Yakshinis are supernatural beings often connected with fertility, seduction, and nature. This novel can be cited as a watershed work in the history of Indian horror writing. It narrates the story of a naïve teenage girl Meenakshi Patil, who has been subjected to various hardships and tortures which eventually lead to her death. After her death people of the village elevated her to a status of Goddess and started worship her. This novel is also a perfect blend of mythical folklore with a contemporary setting which not only creates an eerie and fearful atmosphere but also produces thoughtful opinions on the religious and cultural base of fear in Indian society.

Yakshinis are attendants of Lord Kubera, the God of wealth according to Indian tradition. Yakshinis are naturally portrayed as beautiful, seductive, and dangerous. *Yakshini* is a prominent figure in the Indian mythology. In *Yakshini* D'Silva skillfully attempts to portray a mythical creature to fit in to the current modern context and he also succeeded in his attempt. According to Kumar (2019), "D'Silva's horror is deeply cultural, drawing on the fears and anxieties that arise from the clash between modernity and tradition.". D'Silva's portrayal of *Yakshini* highlights the cultural fear of unknown and the supernatural which deeply rooted in the Indian society. The *Yakshini* in the novel is not just a supernatural being but a symbol of hidden fears of humans which is hidden under their

psyche. *Yakshini* also holds a prominent place in religious horror, specifically through the depiction of rituals and superstitions that surround the supernatural. It is not only a mere monster but a symbol of feminine power, both destructive and alluring.

Yakshini, portrays a world where the line between religion and superstition are blurred and where rituals adopted by the people to ward off evil can themselves become symbols of fear. One of the important aspects of religious horror in the novel is the usage of rituals as a means of solution to any kind of problem. The belief in the power and effect of rituals mirrors a broader theme in Indian horror fiction, where religious practices are to be believed both protective and dangerous. “This is good for us. Through his rituals, he has opened up the pathway between his Bhoomi Loka and our kingdom. You will be going down that pathway and be born in the body of his seventh child.” (D’Silva 200). The novels also portray how these rituals which introduced to provide safety, can also trap weak minded people in a cycle of fear and violence. Religion is a double-edged sword in *Yakshini*. One side it provides a sense of solace to the villagers. On other side, it escalates their fear of unknown and the supernatural. D’Silva skillfully uses the dilemma. “Yes. An entire human birth. And it is poetic irony. The child in this woman’s body is already a boy, but their foolhardy yajna will now make it a girl—you. So much for foolishly praying for a boy child! I will never understand the human race or their hankering for male children. You shall be born in the body of this couple’s daughter and will live in her body till she dies.”. (D’Silva 200). The above line clearly shows a common ritual followed in Hinduism named Yajna (Creating sacred fire and worshipping it). It is widely believed that doing this ritual would cleanse the impurities and grants the wishes of the person conducting the ritual. In this novel the yajna conducted by the Patil family to benign a boy child has failed and took a wrong turn.

The ritual went wrong. There were things to be done specifically, and the tantrik did not have the right knowledge. I was sitting next to him under the sal tree in our garden, which is where we performed the rite. At one point, through the corner of my eye, I saw something horrible coming at us from the skies. Then I felt this searing pain in my womb and immediately the tree caught fire. That was not a good omen, Meenu. The tantrik abandoned the ritual and ran away. (D’Silva 129).

The above-mentioned lines clearly portray the extent of belief by people, especially on the rural side, in cultural rituals and their effects. This is just a single example of how people are willing to risk their lives to get something they desire. Such kind of rituals some time may create deadly damage like loss of lives who indulge in it. There are numerous such examples, which can be cited even today, where humans are killed to appease God and Goddess. *Yakshini* vividly depicts such a scenario where an innocent girl has been made a scapegoat and has lost her life.

The Yakshini's presence in the novel is a strong sign of cultural fears connected with female power and sexuality. Religion plays a vital role in Yakshini. The novel has lot of Hindu beliefs and rituals using to heighten the sense of fear. The Yakshini is also depicted in a way that instigates the reverence and fear linked with deities and spirits in Hindu religion. D'Silva's use of religious symbols is evident in the ceremonies and rituals depicted in the novel. These moments are depicted to highlight the tension between known and unknown. The ritual which intends to protect and purify often fail to do it which eventually highlights the limitations of human understanding in the face of supernatural.

Maya's New Husband:

Maya's New Husband a ground breaking work to the Indian horror genre which intertwines cultural and religious elements with graphic thrill of horror. The novel was published in the year 2015. The novel explores the life of Maya Bhargava, a school teacher whose routine life is disturbed by the chilling and gory secrets of her husband named Bhaskar Sadachari. The novel has been set against the backdrop of modern Mumbai city, particularly surrounded by Aghori sect who are known for their extreme religious rituals and practices. The Aghoris, are followers of Lord Shiva and are depicted as cannibalistic in novel which serves as a main point of horror. D'Silva's depiction of these characters and incidents kindles fear but also motivates the readers to reflect on the intersection of spirituality and savagery in Indian culture. The use of Hindi terms such as "sindoor" and "Mangalsutra" further roots the narrative in Indian tradition, creating a sense of authenticity that amplifies the horror elements.

Cultural horror appears through the dismal images of brutality and gore which go hand in hand with the Aghori's rites. D'Silva's graphic accounts of blood sacrifice and flesh eating are not just to elicit horror; they illuminate the darker sides of mankind and the extremes that people can reach in devotion or survival. As Singh (2021) observes, "D'Silva's novels are as much about the horrors of the supernatural as they are about the horrors that arise from the misuse of religion and the rigid adherence to cultural practices". By probing into these horrors, one shines more generally upon our unwholesome humanity where there is an uneasy juxtaposition between what is divine and what is vile.

The religious horror in *Maya's New Husband* is skillfully associated to the mythology surrounded by Lord Shiva and his worshippers. The Aghoris are depicted as both feared and misunderstood, showcasing the duality of destruction and creation that is centered to Lord Shiva's mythology. D'Silva uses this to explore the themes of power, obsession, and aftermath effects of unnoticed desires. Maya's attraction towards Bhaskar despite of his wicked and cruel nature, shows how the dark forces are capable of luring the innocent victims to doom. Also, the book's construction,

partitioned into four sections, reflects Maya's journey into terror, resembling her emotional and mental unrest with the increasing brutality surrounding her. Every section depicts numerous layers of fear, unmasking not only Bhaskar's dangerousness but also awareness of oneself as a monster. As Maya wrestles with what she wants versus what she fears most—the matchless grotesque mockery that rings in her mind—this psychological horror escalates until it is too much for her to stand up to the grotesque truths about herself.

Padma removed the flash drive from the computer. "What am I supposed to do with this now?" she asked. "That's your call. Do you think you should show it to Maya mam? She is his wife now. She must know, I think." "Okay, I will transfer the clip on my cellphone and give this back to you. I will show it to her. But, I still wonder—why did he take the heart?" "Well... Do you know what one of the bloodcurdling rituals of the aghoris is?" "What?" "Eating human flesh. (D'Silva 124).

The above-mentioned lines is about one of the rituals followed by the Aghoris, who follow Lord Shiva and dedicate their lives to him. They would eat the flesh of dead bodies from the funeral pyre. They would do this to purify the souls of the dead and consuming the flesh by them would elevate them to a status of godly scavengers. This ritual has been slightly varied to create horror among the readers. D'Silva depicts it as Bhaskar Sadachari, a self-proclaimed Aghori who starts to kill people and eat their flesh. According to Aghoris, the consumption of dead flesh is considered sacred. But Bhaskar misinterpreted and distorted the act, which made him a cannibal.

Maya's New Husband emerges from Neil D'Silva's effort; it remains a culturally and religiously horrific story that captures the intricacies of contemporary Indian life. The novel is filled with rich variety of mythological allusions as well as psychological depth which urges readers to meet human vices square on. Additionally, one of the other major aspects that contribute to the development of a sense of religious horror in this novel is an examination of karma. An impending doom and a pervasive sense of guilt arise from the notion that one will pay for their actions in another life.

The fear experienced by the main character raises psychological terror within the story because she believes that gods might punish her. It is a feeling of inevitable doom coupled with constant feelings of guilt results from believing that if you do something wrong now, it will catch up with you later. Thus, if one were to look at it from these angles then it might not be surprising that her fear of karmic punishment would only intensify the psychological terror found within this storyline. This text satisfies all criteria for being a significant contribution to Indian literature because D'Silva has mastered fear mixed with social criticism resulting in an unfathomable mood.

Neil D'Silva manages to create a distinct voice in horror writing by combining religion and culture. His novels have something for everyone since they delve deeply into Indian traditions while also exploring the common themes of fear, the unknown and blind faith. The uniqueness of his work lies in using religion and culture not only as sources of fright but also as ways of criticizing societal standards. For this reason, D'Silva reaches out to many different people; familiar yet eerie is how he writes.

2. Conclusion

Horror novels by Neil D'Silva go beyond the traditional forums making a deep investigation into cultural and religious fears. By combining folklore, traditions and beliefs D'Silva builds a narrative where everyday life becomes eerie and holy subjects blend with the unholy. His books do not merely induce fear in one's heart but they also require one to think; in other words, we have to face such terrors which are usually left unnoticed like cultural practices and belief systems. D'Silva's talent for mixing cultural specificity with universal themes of fear and survival makes his tales resonate with a wide range of people, so that they attract both general public and people who understand the nuances of Indian culture.

In addition to that, D'Silva's knack for interlacing age-old constituents and contemporary predicaments has a broad appeal hence creating an exclusive scope for Indian terror on an international platform. It is evident that as he persistently augments his collection, his writing enhances the category while debunking some of the clichés frequently linked to this type of literature. In his stories, he vividly recounts that horror stems from inside ourselves which have complexities in terms tradition, religion or personal identification. On the whole, Neil D'Silva's contributions to the Indian horror literature, specifically from cultural and religious perspective, it is important to note that his writing has a significant influence on the genre and even for the entire literary domain. His novels, which are filled with Indian mythology and deal with the complications of modern Indian life serve both as a source of entertainment and as a means to encourage readers to think critically about social problems that are need to addressed immediately today. As a result, Neil D'Silva's books remind us how much frightening terrors happen inside our own cultures and faiths. Through taking an unfamiliar road and going beyond the surface emotions that are ingrained in them, his work is an important addition to its tribe since it brings a new angle at horrors. In other words, it is significant because it is different but equally full of tradition coming from different backgrounds.

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