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REREADING MYTH IN MOVIE: AN ANALYSIS OF *STREE*

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Abstract:

*Myths have always been a matter of interest and curiosity for all. Myths are the significant part of every culture meant for propagating values, morals and life related lessons. Myths, though imaginary and non-logical, are closely related with human psyche. Existing since the period of orature (oral literature) and folk literature, myths still appeal to human beings even in the period of science and technology. Utilizing the core interest of people, movie makers from Hollywood to Bollywood are going for movies based on myths either as horror movie or comedy horror movie and proving highly successful at the box office. Present research paper traces the concept of myth, difference between myths and legends, types of myth, notion of cultural myth, urban legend, co relation in myth and movie and influence of myths in Hindi movie *Stree*.*

Keywords: *Myth, Cultural Myth, Legend, Movie, Stree, etc.*

An overlook on the notions like myth, cultural myth, legend, urban legend, myth and movie making will illuminate certain ideas about the same.

• Myth:

Myths have been a matter of thrilled curious interest for human beings. Myths generally have cultural denotations as these merge from the culture itself. Myths are fabricated for variety of purpose such as to create awe for certain practices, places and people. Britannica encyclopedia explains, ‘myth, a symbolic narrative, usually of unknown origin and at least partly traditional that ostensibly associated with religious belief. It is distinguished from symbolic behavior (cult, ritual) and symbolic places or objects (temples, icons)’ (Britanica.com). Myth is also explained as, ‘an ancient story or set of stories, especially explaining the early history of a group of people of given culture’ and also as, ‘a commonly believed but false idea’ (dictionary.cambridge.com).

• Cultural Myth:

A cultural myth is a traditional story that holds specially significance for the people of given culture Vasyl D. Shynkaruk and others explain the phenomenon of culture in the abstract of their article as, “myths provide meaning and purpose to all elements of culture. Myth underlies cultural reality- it is a core culture. If we imagine culture as an onion comprised of different layers (the onion model of culture) then myth is the Centre of it- it is core beyond articulation” (researchgate.net).

Basically, myths are closely connected with human psyche. In this regard, Joseph Campbell explains myths as, “a society’s outward manifestations of inner conflicts and desires. They represent the expression of unconscious fear and desire. Psychology exists within mythology” (shortform.com).

• Legend:



People believe that the person or the event has actually existed or taken place. Legends are unfalsifiable such that they are impossible to disapprove (simplicable.com).

• **Urban Legend:**

- (a) Is a contemporary legend. These may play on people's fears and can be quite dangerous as they can cause people to make irrational decisions or support irrational policies. Alternatively they may be relatively innocent stories that make life more interesting (simplicable.com).
- (b) Urban Legend is also called urban myth, a contemporary legend or modern legend... with a contemporary setting and familiar everyday objects. Similar to older traditional folk tales and legends, urban legends spread through word of mouth but are increasingly shared through print, digital and social media...the term urban legend began appearing in folktale studies in the mid-20th century... urban legends are also typified by short, neat plots that involve a series of odd events or unlikely coincidences followed by a twist ending. Folklorists distinguish between urban legends and rumors, gossips, misinformation, hoaxes and conspiracy, most of which lack the urban legend's telltale narrative structure (Britannica.com).

Various explanations and views about myth and legend bring home the fact that both these notions are fictitious as there is no logic or fact behind them. These notions are more or less developing on the some imaginary idea and are closely related to human psych or reverence for some kind of supernatural power. But all in all it is matter of interest for common people because from literary viewpoint it a type of storytelling and caters curiosity of human beings. Being part of folklore thee two notions may or may not have plot or features except that these notions emerge from culture of the region as well as human's awe for nature.

An article about Irish mythology contains comment on distinction among four types of storytelling- 'a traditional definition of myth establishes it as a story concerned with the activities of gods and goddesses. Traditional definition of legends puts forth that it is a story concerned with the deeds of quasi-historical hero. Folktale and its fairy infested subcategory fairytale are both concerned with supernaturally tinged conflict of everyday people. (While explaining modern definition of legend)... a legend is a heroic story set in the recent past that is popularly considered historical but remains unverifiable. Straddling the line between sacred and secular, legends do not usually have religious significance but often have national or cultural significance' (irishmyth.com).

In an interview to a magazine, Director of the movie, *Stree* has acknowledged influences of some myths on the movie, although, *Stree* develops its own storyline which is interestingly mythical and allows to have feminist interpretation of it. It will be interesting to know about the myths spread on social, digital media and print media.

Naale Baa Myth from Karnataka:

A popular website quotes the cultural myth/urban legend of **Naale Baa** as follows:

Popular folk legend from across Karnataka, *Naale Baa* (come tomorrow) had been found written on walls and doors of the town for certain years to prevent entry of malevolent spirit into home. It is believed that the ghost/witch roams at night, takes away children. Some variations record the belief that the witch/ghost calls person's name knocking the door without written, *Naale Baa*, if replied, the person would die committing blood. In some versions, the spirit is believed to be a bridal ghost who roams around the town in search of her house. The legend went viral during 1990 I Karnataka. The myths, 'A witch roams the streets in the nights and knocks the door. The witch apparently speaks in voices of your kin so you would be deceived to open the door. If you open it then you will die. So the residents came up with a smart idea of writing *Naale Baa* outside the doors and the walls of their



house. So when the ghost reads it and it goes back to come again the next day and the cycle repeats' (quora.com).

Naale Baa is reported as a popular urban legend from Karnataka because it developed around the urban part of Bangalore but this urban legend, that is even called a cultural myth, evaporated with the modernization and growth of the area. Based on the myth, a horror and thriller writer, K. Hari Kumar wrote a story in his book, *India's Most Haunted Tales of Terrifying Places* (Harper Collins, India, 2019)

Myth of Nishi Dak from Bengal:

Dani Redd explores the myth of *Nishi Bhoot* that, 'the *Nishi Dak* are ghosts of people who were not given proper burial and appear as shadows in the distance....' (culturetrip.com)

An article, 'The Most Popular Ghosts in Indian Folklore and Mythology' (Jan. 26, 2020) further elaborates on *Nishi Dak* as- 'The *Nishi Dak* belongs to the most dangerous category of ghosts. *Nishi* means night and *Dak* means call. It is also called the night spirit. *Nishi* calls its victims in the darkness of night in the voice of a loved one. It is said that *Nishi's* voice comes from far away and when the victim follows its voice and reaches a deserted place, then the helpless victim has to face the terrible form of *Nishi*. The victim who follows *Nishi's* voice, never returns alive. This dangerous spirit commonly encountered in Bengal- where it is known, *Nishir Daak* or call of Night Spirit. In Bihar and Jharkhand it is known as the *Nishi*' (amazingworldreality.com).

Aditi Sen puts the same information in very dramatic manner. She writes- 'at the witching hour, you may hear a familiar voice calling your name from a distance. This voice only says your name thrice, then stops. It is the voice of *Nishi*, a spirit who will capture your qi if you answer its call... *Nishi* only came for children' (openthemagazine.com).

Mythical stories, folktales, word literature, movie are different kinds of modes of expression having myriad kinds of influences on the readers and audiences. The idea of intertextuality allows liberal adaptation of these into each other to cater the requirement of novelty and popularity for continued existence. Kristen Strayer in 'Myth and Cinema' writes, 'Narrating a myth and making a film are two arts that have very little in common...despite this difference, we can think of film as a productive vehicle through which modern and ancient myths can be told' (labocine.com).

Apart from film adaptations of classic literature, myths have widely influenced movie making and strengthened the genre of horror movie. An article in 'The Week' sightsees the significance of myth in Indian movies as, 'Indian horror cinema will perhaps come-of-age with folk stories. Ancient Indian folk tales offer a treasure chest of ideas which are waiting to be seized and repurposed into nightmare narratives with resonance across human histories. Ram Gopal Verma's *Raat* (1992) and *Bhoot* (2003), Kannam Iyer's *Ek Thi Daayan* (2013)... or even Amar Kaushik's comedy horror *Stree* (2018) are all examples of mature, genre blending, striking new.' The same article records a quote by Rahi Barve about horror in movie, 'Horror is not about the supernatural. It is always about the people, a good horror film really respects the element of fear without any cheap thrills and easy screams. It is brilliant and beautiful' (theweek.in).

Rereading myths in Stree:

Hindi movie *Stree* (2018) by a debutant director Amar Kaushik is genre movie with a subtype of horror comedy. Oxford Bibliographies explains, 'Horror-comedy is a generic hybrid that deliberately provokes an emotional shift from terror, suspense or dread to hilarity. In comedy-horror-its-relative-a playful tone predominates but it is undercut by horrific or startling events or effect' (oxfprdbibliographies.com). *Stree* is a fine combination of comedy tending towards irony and horror in co relation to the myths of *Naale Baa* and *Nishi Dak*. The movie's storyline incorporates both the



myths partially. The movie begins with celebration of *Navratri* in a town named Chanderi from Madhya Pradesh, India. The rumor is, a female ghost, *Stree* wanders during the four nights of *Navratri*, locating men walking alone on the streets in the night, calls them thrice from behind in luring tone. If they turn back tempted by her call and look into her eyes, they disappear, leaving behind their clothes. To keep her away, the people have colored the walls of house with a line, '*O Stree kalaana*'. The leading male character in the movie, Vicky is a tailor by profession. Apart from being a skilled professional, he is an artist and a romantic fellow who has fallen in love with a nameless young girl who annually visits Chanderi during the period of *Navratri*. Her appearance deepens the element of mystery in the movie. Vicky is time and again warned by his friends Bittu and Jaana to be aware of the girl as she may be the *Stree* because of her dreading demands. They suspect that she might be performing black magic but Vicky, so blind in her love, does not even suspect her. Rudra, the so called 'wisest man' and a librarian in the town, knows the story, why the *Stree* became a ghost. In the past the town dancer fell in love with gentleman from the same town. Both of them wanted marry and lead a respectful life but the town's people did not allow a town dancer to be a respectful housewife, hence they killed the man on marriage day. The dancer committed suicide. Hence she turned into a ghost probably to seek revenge on town's people. Incidentally, Jaana encounters the *Stree* and disappears. Vicky, Bittu, and Rudra decide to bring back their friend. A local politician also declares reward for the one who will bring back the disappeared men from the town from the clutches of the *Stree*. The nameless girl too joins them as she too has lost her near and dear one. They read the story of *stree* turning into a ghost from an old book. Surprisingly the page containing remedy to get rid of the *Stree* is missing from the book. Therefore they all go to the story writer, Shastri. Shastri, being very old, is in the state of oblivion. He is still lingering in the political era of emergency. He holds the town people responsible for treating the dancer atrociously. But he also gives a solution in the form a riddle to get rid of the ghost. The very meaning of the riddle suggests Vicky as the key to that riddle. Meanwhile Vicky is shocked by the fact that he is son of a prostitute but by brought up by her lover who could never marry, probably because of the social pressure. Vicky then takes the challenge and they all make a plan to call the ghost to celebrate *suhagraat* with Vicky, the illusory groom of *Stree*. They feel that the ghost is after the men because her carnal desire is not fulfilled. Accordingly they arrange everything in a deserted castle. The ghost arrives. It is planned that when Vicky and the ghost are having their union, the nameless girl will hand him over a spelled knife to stab the ghost and get rid of it forever. During the implementation of the plan, Vicky realizes that the *Stree* does not seek lascivious gratification. Rather she demands respectful treatment that is given to a family woman by the society. Vicky's fear for her turns into compassion. He denies to stab her. The nameless girl asks him to cut her hair plait at least to decrease her wild power. He does that. When they come out of the place, they are surprised to see the disappeared men emerging from the dark place one by one. Next year, when the *Stree* comes to the town during *Navratri*, a statue at the town's gate attracts her. That is the statue of *Stree* with a line at the bottom, '*O Stree rakshakarana*' (Hey woman protect us). The movie ends on the *Stree* going back.

The Director has finely fused the content of both the myths. Like *Naale Baa* (come tomorrow), the walls of town houses in the movie are painted with a line, '*O stree kal aana*' (Hey woman, come tomorrow). Like *Nishi Dak*, the *Stree* calls her victim thrice. But then the movie develops on its story line. The director has used the device of irony to lift the movie from turning into a common horror movie.

The movie plot puts forth two contradictory side of the same situation at the very beginning to make the audience familiar with two extreme ends of male attitude towards women. It is a *Navratri* celebration. Celebration of divine power of goddess. Traditional attitude of deification woman is reflected through the practice. But the same time is also dangerous because of the grisly appearance of



the *Stree*, a female ghost. The director has subtly portrayed two opposite responses of men to women- desire and fear. The response of fear for female power is suggested through *Navratri* celebration as well as dread for the female ghost. At the same time the response male desire for woman is reflected through Vicky's romantic feelings for the nameless beautiful girl as well the cheap aspect of same desire through the item song in a stag party.

The director has not only retold the myths but also created re-tale of the myths. The device of irony exposes patriarch social hypocrisy. On one hand he exposes the conservative mind of the town's people in the past who deny a dancer to be a respectful family woman. On the other hand the same town treats a prostitute's son with equality so that he should be able to lead normal life. Their generosity inspires Vicky, the son of prostitute to redeem them off the curse of *Stree*.

Being a commercial venture, the Director cannot avoid the temptation of male gaze and objectification of female character but he does succeed in conveying a message that can provoke the audience to think about sufferings conferred on women and what could happen if the wrath of woman descends on them.

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