

Abstract

This assignment will analyse three different Indian horror films that all exhibit elements of the Gothic film style. The goal of the assignment is to identify and analyse these Gothic traits, and in the process see how the Gothic style, mostly associated with Western works, is adapted to the unique Indian culture and historic developments to make statements about them. In addition, the type of and amount of Western influence in Indian Gothic films will be looked at too, with the assumption being that this influence gradually diminishes over time. By employing literature about Indian Gothic and horror, Western Gothic, and about each specific film, the results should show that Indian Gothic has evolved over time as the country has too, and that specific developments in the country have had a direct impact on the film landscape.

Process

The assignment will be divided into three parts, with one for each film. Before the analysis of the films, and for the sake of contextualisation, a paragraph will be dedicated to relevant events and developments in the country that directly affected the film landscape. I will subsequently discuss each film and identify the Gothic elements of them, using definitions from Richard J. Hand's & J. McRoy's *Gothic film: An Edinburgh companion*. In addition, I will discuss what each film critiques and comments on using the Gothic style. The conclusion will summarize the findings and emphasize what separates Indian Gothic from its Western counterpart.

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What is meant by Gothic?

The term "Gothic" has been used to denote several different things over time. From an architectural style from the mid-12th to the 16th century, a literary style between the 1700s and 1800s (Punter 2013, 1) and more modern movements in music, the term can sometimes be hard to narrow down. In this assignment, the term will be used in its film style context. To answer the question of what exactly is meant by a Gothic film style, writings by Richard J. Hand and J. McRoy in *Gothic Film: An Edinburgh Companion* (2022) will be used. The two mention associations of the "barbaric", the hostility of nature, melodrama, monsters, social commentary, and complex characters as some of the major characteristics of the style. Based on these associations, I draw my own definition of Gothic film as such:

Gothic, in film form, is derived from earlier architectural and literary styles. The settings tend to be dark and remote, and with a tragic history behind them. The characters are often struggling and morally complex. Death and the supernatural play a large role, even if the supernatural is logically explained away. Societal issues like gender roles, class struggles, and more are often critiqued. Romance is often present with tragedy looming over it. The boundaries between the past and present are likely to crumble, resulting in a clash between the two.

Section 1: *Mahal* (1949): Muslim Ghosts and the Nehruvian era

When moving into a new palace, Hari Shankar discovers a mysterious painting of a man identical to him, as well as a beautiful ghostly singing girl named Kamini. Claiming that he is the reincarnation of her lost lover, she enchants him with her beauty and orders him to join her so they can live happily together in the afterlife. After Hari's friends and family try to help him avoid the seductress, he marries another woman, yet his love for Kamini is too strong, leaving the wife to end her own life from sorrow, framing Hari. Eventually the truth comes out about Kamini, and who she really is.

Section 1.1: India's Film History around *Mahal's* release

India's independence had led to somewhat of a cultural reboot, to put it in filmic terms. The country had until this point been under British rule, but after a multitude of movements and protests, including the one of famed Mahatma Gandhi, the country officially became independent in 1947 headed by its first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Early into his leadership, Nehru enacted various social reforms to help steer the country in a modern direction closer aligned with that of the rest of the world. This included greater emphasis on democracy, equal rights for women, and perhaps most importantly for the future wave of Indian cinema, an exorcism of the spiritual in favour of the rational. The country would move in a direction of secular rationalism where all religions were to be treated equally, but they were not to interfere in governmental matters or stand in the way of human development. The "porous boundaries between the past and

present” (Pernau 2023, 3), i.e. the hold that these traditional beliefs had on society, had to be destroyed in order for the country to properly stand alongside the rest of the modern developed world. Films of this time often questioned traditions and conservative values, while forwarding many of the values that Nehru believed in, and Nehru worked closely with many different cinema figures to create a cinematic landscape that felt modern, yet still authentically Indian (Ghosh 2019, 94).

Released only two years after India's newly found independence, *Mahal* would lay the groundwork for many films in the mystery and supernatural horror genres to come. Later classics like *Madhumati* (Roy 1958) and *Bees Saal Baad* (Kohli 1989) would both borrow their fair share of elements from the film, such as their mansion settings with histories of death, mysterious characters, and overall visual style. *Mahal* heavily employs the German Expressionist style, with chiaroscuro lighting in many scenes and dark shadows playing a large part in directing the viewer's attention and devouring the frame, as well as various geometric shapes casting shadows over the character's faces. The acting, however, remains relatively low-key and subdued, something atypical of most German Expressionist films. At the centre of the film is our protagonist Hari Shankar, a well-educated lawyer who is torn between a seductive spirit and his friends and family who repeatedly tell him to “use (his) intelligence” (Amrohi 1949, 22:23) to free himself of her spell. Despite his repeated attempts to do so, marrying another woman and moving to a cottage away from the palace, he finds himself unable to move on and forget Kamini and her promises of eternal love and happiness.

Hari's attempts to “move on” from Kamini and release himself from her grip evokes the entire nation's process of moving on from the pre-Independence era of religious supremacy to the new era of Nehruvian secular rationalism. In similar fashion to Hari's struggle, this process did not go without resistance. The post-Independence era was one that was dominated by an unquenchable desire to move forward, almost no matter the cost. One of Nehru's newfound desires was to majorly develop the Indian infrastructure, be it industrial machinery or dams, something he referred to as “...the temples of modern India” (Pernau 2023, 3) due to their importance. But in order to modernize and develop the country's infrastructure sufficiently, vast amounts of rural areas had to be meddled with and often demolished, leading to many rural and urban tribal populations being displaced and forced from their land. This expansion, as well as events like Partition, forced large groups of Muslims to flee to Pakistan. A void had been left, one that would continue to haunt the later Indians that settled in these deserted and abandoned locations. Pernau

(2023) argues that among other things, *Mahal* is a film about the fallout from Partition, and that the absence of the previously present Muslims haunt the film in many of its frames. He points out that the mansion's location is close to Allahabad, a city with a sizable Muslim population. The mansion's appearance is also said to be of Indo-Persianate style, predominantly associated with Muslim culture. This then suggests that the film's doomed lovers, Kamini and Hari Shankar's previous incarnation, are Muslim characters who have been given another chance of reconnecting in a Nehruvian world that has moved past them and their pain.

Section 1.2: *Mahal's* Gothic style

Kamini at one point tells Hari that she is stuck between the realms of the living and the dead, "...sometimes in the valley of death, sometimes on the road of life" (Amrohi 1949, 51:30), insinuating an inability to fully cross over to the afterlife and therefore remaining in limbo until some sort of action is taken. This would make her something like a *Bhuta*, a generic term used for a spirit of a deceased person, or a *Preta*, a more specific term for a spirit stuck between realms as a result of a violent or sudden death. As is common with most other Gothic works, a past injustice is at the centre of the story, that echoes into the present. Kamini and her lover were separated by tragic circumstances, leaving a lasting desire to reunite. The common clash in worldviews is also evident in the film, with Hari struggling between listening to his heart, telling him to follow Kamini and everything she says, and his brain, telling him to see rationally and not fall for her tricks. We can interpret her as a "threat to the social "order"" (Hand & McRoy 2022, 2), as her mere existence serves as a threat to the Nehruvian rationalism.

A scene that exemplifies the extent of the film's Gothic and German Expressionist inspirations is the scene where Hari first sees Kamini. Immediately after discovering the painting of his double and puzzling over it, the clock strikes two and we get the first of many rounds of the film's theme song, *Aayega Aanevala* (Oh, my beloved will return) (Fig. 1.1).



1.1 Hari first hears Kamini's voice

While at first seeming concerned at hearing a voice of unknown origin, looking around worryingly, concern eventually turns to fascination as he investigates the mansion looking for the mysterious singer. Permeated by shadows throughout his search, Hari eventually gets a look at the singer through some window bars after having seen her from afar (Fig. 1.2)



1.2 Hari gets his first proper look at Kamini



1.3 Kamini observes Hari through the bars

After seemingly scaring off Kamini, he continues wandering around the mansion, after which Kamini assumes the position of being the observer through the window bars (Fig 1.3). In both instances, the characters are shrouded in the shadows and obstructed by the bars. The bars may be representative of the dividing force between them, with Hari fully inhabiting the realm of the living and Kamini being in a limbo state between the living and dead. When both characters later interact with each other, Hari is told that he is not to touch Kamini, putting a now invisible barrier between them. Near the end when Hari is locked up for the death of his



1.4 Hari and Kamini (Asha) separated by bars again

wife, he and Kamini are once again physically separated by bars in between them (Fig 1.4). The two of them spend the entire film separated by both physical and metaphysical barriers, much like how Hari's mind (the rational) and his heart (the emotional) are separated and operating independently from each other with one urging him to give himself up to Kamini and the other to avoid her. The interaction between the two might also be seen as a representation of the collision between past and present, with Kamini representing the looming past and Hari as the modern, ideal, present Nehruvian man. Even after the truth has come out about Kamini, revealing her identity to really be of the gardener's daughter Asha, Hari remains glued to her, still refers to her as Kamini, and looking no less in love with her than he did before. Despite the revelation of Asha's scheme, Hari still believes in their love so strongly that he still requests his friend to marry her to break his heart and allow him to seek her out in his next life.

Section 1.3: Final word on *Mahal*

Making sense of the film is a task many scholars and casual viewers have attempted to do over the years. The subdued and monotone delivery of the actors, the unexplained powers of Kamini despite her being a normal human being, the question of why Hari's friend doesn't simply grab Kamini and get her to stop her manipulation, and more are not explicitly answered in the film, potentially making for a somewhat confusing viewing experience. But in the end, these things may not matter all that much. The film is still considered a classic by many (Ramnath 2023), and the fact that it is still talked about today proves that it does a timelessness to it. Similarly to how Hari doesn't seem to care about Asha's manipulation and chooses to still believe in their everlasting love, we as the audience can choose to disregard some of the oddball qualities of the film and instead just engross ourselves in the romance between the two characters. As humans, we don't always act in ways that make perfect sense, and despite how the Nehruvian era prided itself on logic and reason, *Mahal* seems to serve as an example of how even in this era the heart might still hold significant power over the mind.

Section 2: *Manichitrathazhu* (1993): Female Psychological Suffering

A newlywed couple move into a mansion belonging to the husband's family despite warnings not to. When the wife opens a door to a closed off room, a supposed spirit is unleashed, and supernatural events occur. After denying the presence of the spirit at first, the family eventually calls upon the help of Dr. Sunny Joseph, who uses his talents in the field of psychology to help exorcise the spirit and restore normality.

Section 2.1: India's Film History around *Manichitrathazhu*'s release

The 1947 Partition would act like a monolith that would drive Nehru's secular rationalism forward. The event had created a huge divide between the two major religious groups, Hindus and Muslims, but the goal was now to avoid future Partitions and instill a convincing appearance of "idyllic oneness" (Mubarki 2016, 38) yet again. The secular rationalism ideals were intended to bring equal rights to each religion and culture, allowing for a wide range of beliefs to exist within a single society, though it is debatable just how equal things really were. Several films came out during this period with strong patriotic messages about unification and nationalism, many of whom dealt with at-the-time ongoing wars with China and Pakistan (Mubarki 2016, 39). As time went on however, the secular rationalism would be challenged by several emerging conservative groups who were strong proponents of Hindutva, or the belief in Hindu dominance/superiority. Modernity and science would continue to be challenged, evident in many films of the 70s and 80s

about science experiments going awry, and the old traditional ways would slowly gain momentum and become the dominant ways of thinking again.

Manichitrathazu separates itself from most contemporary supernatural horror films of similar styles. It is foremost a comedy, heavily involving scenes of slapstick and characters that add a lot of comedy relief, like Dr. Joseph himself and Unnithan. Additionally, it takes a psychological angle at the story where most of the other haunted house and possessed character films feature genuine supernatural occurrences. It is for this reason, along with it mostly centring around a female character, that the film has been viewed as a rather progressive film for its time. This view is not necessarily shared by all, as several film scholars have pointed out how the film feeds into the “madwoman” trope (Moses 2024, 218) where a female character acts improperly and outside the boundaries of what is considered proper ladylike behaviour and needs to be brought back to her submissive state by a knowledgeable male saviour. Still, it is considered a classic by many and has spawned several remakes in other languages like Hindi and Bengali with *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* 2007 and *Rajmohol* 2005 respectively, who each take the core concept and adapt it to better suit that culture, proving that the core concept is easily adaptable and has potential to appeal to different audiences.

The time around which the film was released had seen several developments in how gender roles and patriarchy were portrayed. The growing resistance to Nehruvian rationalism had led to a resurgence of the traditional conservative beliefs, culminating in a new wave of films from the 80s that would effectively serve as warnings of female empowerment, referred to as the “monstrous ‘other’ feminine narratives” (Mubarki 2016, 40). These films would feature beautiful women, often in the form of some otherworldly entity like a spirit or demon, who proceed to act beyond what is considered appropriate, acting unhinged and seducing and murdering men that come in to contact with them. *Manichitrathazu* does not fully inhabit all these attributes, but a few are still present. The female protagonist Ganga is indeed possessed by the spirit of a deceased person, but unlike most other films of this style the possession is psychological in nature rather than supernatural. The film does not treat her like a vicious villainess, but rather as a sympathetic victim. The goal of the film's male protagonists is not to destroy her, but rather to save her from her life-threatening condition.

Section 2.2: *Manichitrathazhu's* Gothic style

Despite its comedic elements and slapstick moments, the film still chooses to play several scenes rather straight as if it were an entirely serious picture, containing several different elements considered mandatory for a work of the Gothic style. The ominous looking mansion



2.1 Eerie mansion at night

is featured prominently during the night setting (Fig 2.1), foreboding and fear-inducing for many of the characters. It is also, like many such settings in Gothic fiction, haunted by a tragic event from the past. Very much like *Mahal*, the mansion in *Manichitrathazu* is said to be housing a spirit who came about when they were separated from their true love by a sudden and tragic death, leading to their continued haunting of the place. Regarding the supposed haunting, there is a clear clash in ideology between the older members of the family and the younger couple that moves in, with both Ganga and Nakulan expressing their scepticism despite being warned of the dangers of the mansion (Fig 2.2).



2.2 Nakulan sceptical of his uncle's tale

Section 2.3: Female Psychological suffering

But as the sacred lock is removed and the door to the abandoned wing of the mansion is opened, more and more strange and unexplainable events start to happen, and the one thing that nearly all these events have in common is that they end with one of the women in a state of hysteria and one

of the men trying to calm them down. One of the earlier instances of seemingly supernatural activity is when the servants get spooked by the supposed sighting of the spirit of Nagavalli, followed by the smashing of kitchen equipment and the glass of the clock breaking. Throughout all of this, Nakulan, despite appearing worried and scared himself, chooses to interrogate the servants, aggressively shout at them, and accusing them of making things up (Fig 2.3)



2.3 Nakulan accusing servants

Later on, the character Sridevi emerges as the primary suspect behind the events, leading to her being singled out and harassed. This harassment escalates in Sridevi being forcefully locked up in room all by herself (Fig 2.4), despite the lack of any evidence of her being the culprit at this point. This scene features several moments of melodramatic and exaggerated acting (Hand & McRoy 2022, 2) commonly seen in Gothic works.



2.4 Dr. Sunny grabbing Sridevi to lock her up

We later find out that Dr. Sunny knew the culprit all along, the Nagavalli-possessed Ganga, and a plan is set into motion to cure her of her illness. This plan involves a ceremony being set up where Ganga is brought in her possessed state and fooled into thinking that she has killed Karanavar, whom she sees instead of her husband. During the ceremony, Ganga is roughly restrained and even hit with a stick to get her to sit in the ritual circle (Fig 2.5).



2.5 Ganga about to get hit

These instances of judgement and patriarchal power relations paint a picture of how this film and many of its contemporaries portrayed women on screen. Malayalam cinema had already been making films for a few decades featuring protagonists with various mental disorders, but the portrayal differed wildly between men and women. Men with mental disorders were seen as heroic figures to be admired, while women had to be subdued and cured by a male professional in order to “preserve the existing familial structure” (Moses 2024, 218). In other words, the courtesies shown to men suffering from mental disorders were not extended to the women. In the film, Ganga expresses her own repressed traumas from her past through her possessed state, and this expression is met with fear and an insatiable need to “correct” it by the men around her. The same fear of her insubordinate and crazed state is transferred directly to the audience, as the film consistently portrays her in a terrifying manner with violent outbursts and threats of violence against other characters. Many of the earlier scenes of supernatural activities prior to the reveal of her identity are also shot differently to the rest of the film. The music choices are much more intense, and the film employs stylistic choices like POV-shots (Fig 2.7) to show characters being chased from the chaser’s perspective, seemingly drawing some inspirations from the *Evil Dead* films, and the ear-catching sound of frantically moving anklets is heard by the characters who become fearful upon its arrival.



2.7 The audience experiences the

chase through Nagavalli's (Ganga's) eyes

This is in quite stark contrast to the non-supernatural scenes that are shot rather conventionally and often with moments of levity and comedy. The choice to stylistically separate these moments of tension from the rest of the film suggests a deliberate intention to create a sense of fear for the audience (Menon 2009, 295), a fear of the woman who acts freely and outside of the boundaries of her expected submissive role. Further suggesting this specific portrayal of Nagavalli/Ganga are the various moments of physical violence against her. She is repeatedly grabbed and slapped around by Dr. Sunny, and the film spends virtually no time dwelling on these actions which suggests that the film sees no need to morally justify them and instead views them as mandatory and necessary. This is also evident when we look at the backstory of Nagavalli and her ultimate demise. Nagavalli was forced to live with Sankaran Thambi the Karanavar, or head of the mansion, where she likely would have become his concubine and part of the sambandham, essentially his wife. Choosing instead to go against this arrangement and be with her lover, she is punished by death and continues haunting the place if not as an actual spirit, then as a memory.

Section 2.4: Final word on *Manichitrathazu*

Manichitrathazu has proven itself to be a tremendously popular film both in its original version, and through its adaptations in other languages. Despite this, the end product still has some lacks when it comes to the representation of women with psychological sufferings. Director Fazil has stated in multiple interviews that he wanted his script to “have everything”, comedy, horror, music etc, and felt that mental illness was something that “people across the country would identify with” (Nathan 2018). The problem lies with the imbalanced tone between the scary and the funny, where the goofy characters undermine the very real suffering of its female protagonist Ganga, whose struggle gets reduced to a “emotional damsel that needs saving from the educated man to be brought back to the state of an obedient wife”. It is telling when auntie Bhasura tells Ganga

about Nagavalli's backstory, Nagavalli is singled out as a "blood-thirsty spirit" (Fazil 1993, 29:09), while her murderer is spared of such labels.

Section 3: *Tumbbad* (2018): Greed and British Colonization



A man's greed leads him back to the village where he grew up. There he finds a dangerous forgotten god and learns of a dangerous method for furthering his wealth. As time goes by, his greed overtakes him, leading him to potentially lose both himself as well as his family in the process.

Section 3.1: India's Film history around *Tumbbad's* release

The Nehruvian era had come to an end. It is debatable if it had even gotten properly started. Even though major steps had already been taken to move the country forward in a modernist direction, these did not always translate into everyday life very well (Mubarki 2016, 73) and there appeared to be simply too many hurdles standing in the way for them to be properly implemented. Among these factors were Nehru's death in 1964, wars with Pakistan and China and the country's inability to properly execute its plans on building out its infrastructure due to problems with land, had all led to considerable difficulties for India to truly "reboot" itself. Perhaps the biggest nail in the coffin would be the Emergency of 1975, a nearly two-year period where Prime Minister and daughter of Nehru, Indira Gandhi, and President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed declared a state of emergency for the country. Several atrocities were committed, the press faced harsh censorship, and political opponents were imprisoned. Due to Gandhi's connection to her father, it could be theorised that this only strengthened the country's desire to move away from the Nehruvian-secular-rationalism ideal, and to quicker get back to the conservative and traditional ways. This transition would only become more evident over time in Hindi cinema, and no less so in the horror genre. Modern Hindi

horror is about reaffirming traditional beliefs, overcoming obstacles through devout faith, and throwing out science and rationality in favour of “the olden ways”.

Directed by Rahi Anil Barve, Anand Gandhi & Adesh Prasad from an idea by Barve, *Tumbbad* is a mythological horror/adventure hybrid film. Barve, the mind behind the film, used his own personal experience with local folklore and religion to craft a film rooted in both, but still standing as its own original story. The film appears to take little inspiration from Western media, though Barve has stated in interviews (Wixson 2018) that some inspiration was taken from shows like *Game of Thrones*, likely the way in which the mythology and world are showcased, and *Tales From the Crypt*, where some of the creature designs and tone likely have been borrowed from. It was initially conceived as much smaller in scale, as Barve describes it as “very small... more clinical approach” (Whittaker 2018), but eventually it became larger in scale to accommodate the creators' greater ambition with the material. The film gained a great deal of attention for its intriguing mythology and well-crafted effects and held the honour of opening at the Venice Film Festival. It has achieved rave reviews across various review sites, leading to the development of a sequel.

Section 3.2: *Tumbbad*'s Gothic Style

The film features several key elements typical of Gothic stories. At the heart of the story is the setting of Tumbbad, a remote village with a dark and cursed history. We learn through our protagonist Vinayak's narration that there was a Goddess who symbolised wealth through gold coins and food through wheat, that birthed 160 million gods, and that the first of these and her most beloved, Hastar, became greedy and wanted both for himself. Fearing retaliation from the rest of the gods, the Goddess gave Hastar the gold, but denied him the wheat, and in the process hid him in her womb and made sure that Hastar would never be worshipped by humans and would remain completely forgotten. The people of Tumbbad fail to listen and build a temple to worship Hastar, thereby cursing the village to endure never-ending rainfall. The village is portrayed as cold and desolate throughout the film, always in the depressing downpour (Fig 3.1) and with few inhabitants ever shown. There are several monstrous creatures in the film who function as personifications of the character's traits or fears (Hand & McRoy 2022, 2) with the grandmother, Raghav, and eventually Vinayak taking on the appearance of fleshy ghouls as a result of their insatiable greed.



Fig 3.1 The exterior of Sarkaar's

mansion

Section 3.3: Greed

Greed is the big overarching narrative point of the entire film. It is portrayed as a generational and spreading disease, making its way through those in contact with each other. It is brought about from desperation and hunger, slowly eating away at the person it inhabits until they lose sight of all else, leading to their eventual downfall. Our protagonist Vinayak is shown to be obsessed with the supposed treasure of the village early on from his childhood, questioning why his mother is taking care of Sarkaar and the grandmother if they have gotten nothing in return so far. This greed in him continues to grow as he does himself, leading to his return to the village 15 years later. After finding the grandmother sprouting like a tree in her home, he asks for her to tell him of the method for acquiring the treasure he so desperately desires. She agrees to tell him, revealing the method of using wheat dolls to distract the physical form of Hastar and reach for the loin cloth where he keeps the gold coins. Vinayak then provides her with *Mukti*, or salvation, by setting her on fire, thus ending her cursed suffering (Fig 3.2).



Fig 3.2 Vinayak provides *Mukti* for

the grandmother

Upon his acquisition of this knowledge, he goes into a downward spiral of reckless spending, involving his friend Raghav and eventually getting him killed, drifting further away from his wife and son and finally meeting his end due to his unquenchably greedy desires.

Vinayak's family showcase the generational sufferings that greed causes. His father Sarkaar and the grandmother are both suggested to have history with Hastar, with the grandmother's monstrous state assumed to be the result of a coin-acquisition gone wrong, and Sarkaar's worship of Hastar leading to his and his family's shunning by the rest of the village. Vinayak and his wife eventually have a son, Pandurang, who ends up falling short of his father's expectations. His weak physical strength, something that would stand in his way of taking over his father's coin-collecting, leads him to be physically and verbally abused by his father. It is not until Pandurang suggests a method to more efficiently gather the coins by using multiple wheat dolls that Vinayak starts showing his son any respect and affection (Fig 3.3).



He plays hide and seek, like the Reaper

3.3 Vinayak takes his son to some

courtesans

When the two make their way to Tumbbad to put their plan into action, it ends up backfiring horribly, as the number of physical forms of Hastar has multiplied to match the dozen or so dolls they brought. The continued greed for more and more has led the two to an unwinnable scenario they're unlikely to escape from unscathed. In his final act, Vinayak decides to strap himself with the dolls and distract the monsters to allow his son to escape. Once surfaced, Pandurang discovers his father in a monstrous state, holding the loin cloth with coins and begging him to take it (Fig 3.4), asking him "didn't you want this?" (Barve, Gandhi & Prasad 2018, 1:36:50), to which his son replies with "no" before throwing the lantern at him to give his father *Mukti*. Only then does Vinayak potentially realize that all his son ever wanted was his father's love, and that the coins never mattered to him if that meant he could never see his father again.



3.4 Vinayak begging his

son to take the coins

Tumbbad's representation of evil separates itself greatly from our Western views and personifications of it. Evil tends to take on a figure in Western traditions, one that we can clearly see and identify, be it demons or the Devil itself. These figures tend to have specific goals in mind, often to spread themselves and their evil, and conquer “goodness”. Hindi mythology on the other is much less black-and-white with it. There is no singular world-conquering Satan-equivalent that personifies all that is bad, and evil as a concept does not really exist (Hazra 2024, 250). Hinduism identifies the true demons not as the Deities who appear scary or mean-looking, but rather those we all carry inside of us that we work to keep locked away and at bay.

Section 3.4: Colonization

The period the film is set in was one rife with exploitation from all sorts of angles, not the least from the British. The British colonization efforts are not given a lot of screentime, save for a few scenes involving Raghav and an officer discussing opium sales, but their presence is felt. It is their exploitation of the land that directly leads to most of the character's desperation to seek out their own ways to wealth. As pointed out in Yeldho, Nayak & Milky (2023), the setting also lets the film explore the concept of control. British colonization efforts accentuated the dominance that the English language had, which in turn gave the colonizers more control over the people. This led to stagnation in the country's cultural developments, and a great loss of identity, similar to how the characters lose their identities upon contact with Hastar and turn into lumps of flesh who barely keep any of their humanity.

Section 3.5: Final word on *Tumbbad*

Tumbbad's success proves that the horror genre's future is looking bright, and that audiences have a hunger for original and large-scale horror epics. Co-director Prasad reveals in an interview that prior to *Tumbbad* the genre had mainly consisted of lower budget B-movies that were not taken all that seriously, and that making a film on this scale was a huge risk, noting how even Marvel films "weren't doing that well in India" (Whittaker 2018). Despite the risk, the film has proven to be greatly successful, and is likely to inspire future filmmakers to take bigger risks when developing their films.

Section 4: Conclusion

The Gothic style has proven to be highly adaptable to India's own culture and history. Its focus on monsters, both human and supernatural, generational trauma, hauntings of the past, love, and death, makes it a suitable fit for telling stories within India's long history of injustices and developments. *Mahal* makes use of the style to comment on the fallout of Partition and how the supernatural lost importance during the Nehruvian era. Due to it still being early days in Indian horror cinema, its own film language had not yet developed, leaving the style as visibly borrowed German Expressionist. *Manichitrathazhu* showcases the emerging genre of "madwoman" films, the increasing use of mental disorders in films, and how gender roles were moving towards the older and more traditional pre-Independence views. The style serves as a tool to reaffirm traditional values and create fear around the unpredictable and non-submissive woman. *Tumbbad* explores how human greed becomes our downfall, and how the British colonization forced hungry and desperate people to take advantage of those less fortunate in order to survive. The Gothic style is then used to accentuate these atrocities and the tragedies they led to. *Mahal*, despite its status as a classic in its own right, exhibits a large amount of influence from Western works, borrowing a lot of its style from classic German Expressionist cinema, while *Manichitrathazhu* and *Tumbbad* stand as mostly original works, suggesting that Indian filmmakers have a strong confidence in their works and have found their own voice.

There are of course plenty of other Indian horror films that exhibit Gothic traits, and there will likely be many more in the future. The longevity that the Gothic style exhibits proves that there are plenty more stories to tell within it, leaving us to excitedly anticipate what more can be done with it.

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Filmography

Mahal. Directed by Kamal Amrohi. 1949; India: The Bombay Talkies Studios. 165 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boa8xY4FeWA>

Manichitrathazhu. Directed by Fazil. 1993; India: Swargachitra. 169 min

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qB9OYoX1XM>

Tumbbad. Directed by Rahil Anil Barve, Anand Gandhi & Adesh Prasad. 2018; India/Sweden: Sohum Shah Films. 104 min

<https://sflix.to/watch-movie/free-tumbbad-hd-8118.5361997>

