



Gendering the Spectral Presence: A Reading of Gender Construction in *Kanchana*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines notions of gender boundaries and sees the ghost as a luminal entity hovering between identities thereby questioning accepted notions of gender behaviour. Following Butler's notion of gender as performance, the paper through the ghost, shows how the female is performed by the ghostly; each performance being a repetition of notions of femininity thereby accentuating the stereotypical expectations of femininity. The notion of the feminine is at times strengthened by the ghost and at times questioned by the ghost. The paper studies each one of these representations of the female arguing that these representations are reflections of specific cultural and social demands of a particular period and that they reveal differing and contradictory notions of accepted female behaviour.

Within such theoretical perspectives on the ghost story, this paper draws attention to the figure of the ghost itself. It studies the gendering of the ghost in a ghost story and argues that the gendering of the ghost as female was a primary means of effecting social control by punishing transgressive behaviour. Such a gendering primarily in ghost stories by male writers was an effective means of social control effected by normalizing acceptable female behaviour through repeated performances and punishing transgressive behaviour. The gendering of the ghost as female resulted in stereotyping female behaviour in male writers to effect social control. The paper also examines the continuing popularity of the ghost and the ghost story. It examines the potential of the ghost story and the ghost to question and subvert gender and genre expectations. It purports that horror cinema, oral narratives and short stories placed outside the mainstream literary canon carry enormous potential to threaten the supremacy of the literary ghost and the literary ghost story. These texts openly voice issues and concerns which are hidden within the latter.

Key Words: Gender, horror cinema, female stereotypes, social control

Two years after the decriminalization of homosexuality and the visible presence of transgenders in public spaces like politics, media, social activism etc, *Kanchana*, the horror movie released in

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2011, projects a transgender identity as a source of horror. However, this paper sees *Kanchana* a Tamil movie dubbed into Telugu as a film that challenges all binaries and posits an alternative to heterosexual identity by performing gender. The movie *Kanchana* features a transgender ghost. The ghost is Kanchana, a transgender who is kicked out of her house for being abnormal. Kanchana is adopted by a Muslim, who has a son, a differently abled boy. Thus apart from a transgender, the film also features the Muslim and the differently abled boy as the minority. Kanchana does odd jobs and also funds the education of another transgender Shanti and educates her to become a doctor. She also buys a land with her savings to build a hospital for Shanti. The local MLA usurps the land and when she goes to confront him, she is stabbed to death by him and his family. They also kill the whole family of Kanchana including the differently abled boy. Very soon Kanchana possesses the body of the hero of the story and despite the efforts of the hero's family to exorcise the ghost, uses the body to wreak vengeance on the MLA's family. The hero himself wishes to help her and allows her to use his body. The film ends with the hero completing the construction of the hospital building for Shanti.

The paper argues that the film challenges essentialising definitions of gender identity. Drawing on Butler's theory, the paper argues that the two major characters in the movie - the transgender Kanchana and the hero are shown performing their bodies consciously, challenging gender binaries and easily crossing over the boundaries of the binaries.

The movie at the outset seems to follow the formula of any horror film which includes a victim ghost who dies unnaturally, returns as a powerful horrific figure taking vengeance but is contained by the end of the movie. Like the other ghosts in horror films, *Kanchana* does not have any agency; neither in her life nor in her death. She is a victim of society's barbarity. She lives on the fringes even while alive and also as a ghost. She cannot wreak vengeance in spite of becoming a ghost but has to seek the male body to take revenge. It is through the hero that she kills her enemies. It is the male body which helps her achieve closure by killing her enemy. In the beginning, Kanchana is shown to be a powerful ghost manifesting in the dark and creating fear in the members of the household. However one realizes she does not have any agency because it is only when the hero decides he wants to help her that she can possess him unlike other possession narratives. It is only when he removes the sacred thread tied by the extortionist and invites her to occupy his body that she can possess him. While transgenders are powerful in the myth, Kanchana is a transgender woman, who is helpless and needs a man to avenge her death.

The man she chooses to avenge her death is scared of the dark and of ghosts and expresses his fears in a series of comic scenes which bring out the feminine side in him. His masculine identity is strengthened by his cricket, the fights he rakes up with the local goondas and also his love interest in his sister in law's sister. And as if to make up for this aberration, he deliberately takes upon himself the possession, undergoing a transformation and becoming brave and courageous to help Kanchana, the victim, in avenging her death and that of other innocents. There is a gender ambivalence in the hero in his performances of his gender. However, the gender ambivalence is quickly resolved, because a popular mainstream film cannot afford to antagonize the social and moral fabric of the society. In spite of being a lot like women, the hero has a lover. He is masculine in his approach to the woman. And the ghost that manifests in him is not just the ghost of the transgender which would be a kind of challenge to his image. He also possesses the ghost of the Muslim caretaker and the idiot child. Although at no point these ghosts ask him for his body and its only Kanchana who seeks his body, there is a deliberate entry of these ghosts and their purpose is to let the hero remain a man, a person capable of violent acts. These two ghosts are introduced in the movie, to salvage the image of the hero. When possessed by Kanchana, the hero can only perform feminine activities, thereby limiting his acting capabilities and also

typesetting himself within the transgender identity. But being possessed by the two other ghosts, one of the Muslim caretaker and another of a mentally deranged child, the film provide the hero with lots of acting opportunities which can establish him as a masculine actor as opposed to the transgender identity that could stick to him if is possessed only by Kanchana. Being possessed by the Muslim and mentally deranged child, the hero can brutally kill the villains.

Kanchana's primary identity on the other hand, is that of a female, though she is a transgender. Thus performing her identity as a female, she is victimised by the society and at each stage she is helped by men, whether it is the Muslim caretaker or the principal of the school who admits her ward. In spite of being a transgender, in her dress etc, she is posited in the role of a mother and performs the functions of a mother. It is to strengthen her identity as a female that she dresses as a woman and also performs the roles of the woman including accepting motherhood. Even after her death she has to seek a male body to avenge her injustices. By seeking a male body, Kanchana is expiating her sin of being a transgender. By using the male body, she seeks a kind of role reversal, as if she has been allowed a wish to choose the gender. Thus though the film uses the image of the transgender as a horrific figure, it also seems to take back the agency and power and restores it to the male.

Despite the stereotyping of the transgender identity in the movie, this paper looks at the transgender identity as a site of resistance. While discussing two movies dealing with transgender identities in Indian cinema, Patnaik says that the movies produce

“a hijra identity in excess of the heterosexual law that wields its power through the police, through laws, market economy and social institutions such as marriage and family, making them resisting figures, who show through their un-abiding bodies, that the body is always in excess of the discourse that produces it”. From such a critical standpoint the hijra body as represented by the two films not only defies categorisation but points to the very limits of heterosexual categorisation demanding the need for restructuring identity politics so as to consider the complexity and heterogeneity of processes of construction. They shatter the outlines of the frame by disrupting the fabricated link between sex, gender and sexuality. Their bodies, both inside and outside of the (heterosexual) frame and compel us to rethink the materiality of the body itself as a process of becoming and a matter of cultural and historical production and reproduction, open to re-inscription. (Patnaik n.p).

The movie too, by employing a transgender identity offers resistance to heterosexual fixities thus demanding a need for restructuring identity politics. *Kanchana* is probably the only film to feature a transgender ghost. The ghost in the film extends the conventions of the ghost story and uses the space to address issues of construction of gender and recreates the body as a site for expressing multiple identities. The ambivalence in the construction of the hero's identity as a male provides a site for entering the discourse from multiple perspectives. The feminine self in the hero projected as a series of performances; his being afraid of the dark and ghosts, and after the possession by Kanchana; his dressing up as a woman, wearing a saree, stealing bangles from his brother's wife, using turmeric while taking bath are all posited as a series of conscious performances allowing him to perform the gender of the feminine.

This paper argues that the movie presents challenging questions on the construction of identity in terms of the binaries of gender. It argues that the construction of gender itself is problematic and cannot be within the binaries. Taking recourse to Butler's Performativity theory, the paper argues that the movie questions the notion of gender as a fixed identity and presents an alternative view of gender as a performative act characterized through repeated performances. The paper uses

Butler's theorization that gender is "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (Salih). Gender according to Butler is a performance and real only to the extent of the performance. She says that "gender proves to be performance—constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed"(Salih). It is argued that it is by performing a series of discontinuous acts that characters in the movie challenge fixed notions of gender. And the horror movie provides the site for such transgressions.

The movie shows the characters performing their bodies. The movie challenges stereotypical assumptions by showing each one of the characters doing the body. By inscribing feminine performances into the male body, *Kanchana* seems to be challenging accepted binaries of male and female. It is the hero who when possessed by the ghost assumes and performs different bodies, once that of the female, and at other time that of the male. This excess also challenges "the hierarchisation of the labour market as always already producing bodies as capable/male/masculine, exploitable/female/feminine or superfluous/transgender/unintelligible". (Patnaik).

In the movie, though Kanchana's ghost occupies a male body thus performing a woman in a man's body, Kanchana's identity itself as a transgender places her above the boundaries of gender binaries. It is through Kanchana's actions while alive but more so in her return as a ghost that she presents gender as performative. She is a woman in a man's body and perfectly capable of assuming both identities while alive. Acts that are feminine, like motherhood, self-sacrifice etc are performed by Kanchana while alive. She performs the role of a mother adopting a transgender as her daughter. There is a semblance of a normative heterosexual family when she lives with the Muslim caretaker. There is a man and two children placing her within the feminine identity. However, she also performs the male when she attacks other men for teasing her daughter and also when they occupy her land. Kanchana is able to perform both male and female functions. She can single handedly beat up the bad guys and also love her daughter and sacrifice her life for her. Hence while gender is divided into binaries, here is a body which transgresses these boundaries. Motherhood is re-inscribed in the transgender body.

On her return, Kanchana asserts her identity more forcefully. She performs acts which are a part of her identity as a man to woman transgender but without shame or fear. The ghost gets to do all that she wanted to do not but without fear when she comes back as a ghost. She can wear turmeric, bangles- things which she had to do behind closed doors. Now she can do it while inspiring fear without any sense of shame. The paper argues that Kanchana through her return is able to perform her gender in a way that is more than shameful and hidden while she was alive. Here she is not scared. She inspires fear. By inscribing her performativity onto a male body Kanchana is challenging and openly transgressing all boundaries of gender.

What is fearful in Kanchana is not the ghost per se, but the performativity of gender. The man when possessed by the ghost performs gender, performs activities closely associated with the feminine gender. Thus a transgender identity is what causes fear among the family and the spectator. The spectacle is presented by the ghost, the spectacle of transgressing gender roles. The hero's sister in law is horrified when she sees him admiring the bangles he has stolen from her. When she narrates the scene to her husband she specifies that it is this act of his which terrified her not the act of stealing itself. The man becomes a source of terror when he transgresses and brings out the feminine side of him. Thus Kanchana gets greater agency when

she assumes the role of a ghost performing her gender without fear for herself but causing fear through her transgressions.

By consciously parodying and performing gender, *Kanchana* questions and unsettles the binaries in gender construction. Having possessed the hero, Kanchana can straightaway get to her task of revenge but she does not. She suddenly seems to develop a fetish to perform gender, taking a lot of time doing her body, dressing it up, something which she is not particular about when alive. This conscious performing of the feminine through a series of repeated acts in a male body subverts the notion of a fixed male identity and re-inscribes the body as a fluid space to perform gender. Kanchana's haunting is important because she is trying to do this, re-inscribing of the body within the public domain, within a normative heterosexual male body placed within social discourses of the family. In spite of his transgressive behaviour, the hero can still remain within the public space or within mainstream discourses as long as he can perform both the roles. He is still a man in spite of his transgressions into the feminine. Since the hero has not been excluded or banished from the public space, Kanchana is successful in re-inscribing the feminine into the masculine within a mainstream discourse or within a normative heterosexual space. Kanchana lived her life in a marginalized space. She was an outcaste living the life amidst other hijras or other marginalized. However in her return as a ghost she brings the excluded transgender identity into the mainstream discourse by showing identity as fractured and inclusive which includes the masculine as well as feminine, thus re-inscribing herself into the public domain.

The horror in the body is constituted not by the return of the ghost but by the challenges posed to the hegemonic heterosexual identity. There is fear when the women see the ghost but there is greater horror in seeing the male body performing feminine gender. The parodying of feminine acts by the male body is what is constructed as horrific in the movie and this drag performance according to Butler, is "subversive to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler n.p)

Freudian readings show that uncanny appears with the resurgence of the repressed or the surmounted. And as Butler says,

To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarism, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety, suggests that heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome....that its effort to become its own idealizations can never be finally or fully achieved, and that it is constantly haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself). . . . I do think that for a copy to be subversive of heterosexual hegemony it has to both mime and displace its conventions (interview with Liz Kotz in Artforum).

By the introduction of the uncanny through the return of the repressed, heterosexual hegemony is questioned and subverted by displacing it as the accepted site of identity. Identities themselves are repeated performances and therefore by imitating the feminine which is the repressed other in the male, the male itself is reconstructed as an imitation. The feminine identity which is performed by the male is recognition of the suppressed or surmounted as well as the repressed animistic urges that remained hidden to normalize social constructions of gender. With the

resurfacing of these identities the dominant identity itself is displaced and becomes a site for multiple identities. The hero in the movie and the ghost become doubles both constituting identities of the feminine and the masculine and any other. The most popular poster of the film is one in which the heroine is carrying the hero in her arms, symbolic of the subversion of hegemonic identities representative of the film.

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