



Female Body as the Site of Demonic Possessions

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ABSTRACT

In the myriad of films about the demonic possessions, the body that undergoes possession and exorcism is largely that of the female gender. The female gender is portrayed as being passive in terms of being vulnerable to possession and in not being able to free themselves from the clutches of these demonic forces. The body undergoes gruesome violence that is self-inflicted by the presiding demonic forces. The female body then becomes the site of possession and violence that is directed at both her and the others. It is pertinent to note how and why the female body becomes easily accessible to demonic forces that render them as passive beings. The primary texts for this research paper are *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005). The films are representative of an ultimate justification of the atrocities committed to and by the female body.

Keywords: Demonic possession, female body, violence, sexuality, *The Exorcist*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*.

Movies with demonic possession as the central phenomena are not new. Repeatedly these movies come out raising a spur of curiosity, which is like a flame, soon to glow and die. Films such as *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* deal with this particular issue of demonic possession. The first deals with the story of a young 12-year old who is possessed by a demonic force only to be freed from its clutches towards the end. In the second film, the protagonist who is a university student unfortunately does not turn out to be lucky for she dies due to the torture her body suffers along the course of her possession. These films were based on demonic possessions like a myriad of many other films but it is important to note how the exorcisms performed in these films are Christian and Catholic Exorcisms.

In these two films, the protagonists who are possessed by demons are young women who are entirely passive and subjected to gruesome acts of violence throughout the film. Their bodies become the site on which the entire films' horror is justified. These acts are also sexual in nature. The female gender is passive in terms of it being vulnerable to demonic possession and in not being able to free themselves from the clutches of these forces. It is pertinent to note how and why the female body becomes easily accessible to demonic forces that render them as passive beings. In this manner, with no amount of self-control, the body is also made to perform appalling acts that seem highly inappropriate.

The objective of the paper is to try and see how and why the female body is rendered weak and passive that they become important only in the event of them being possessed. And how the female body is used as prop by which the villain (the demon) can exercise acts or violence that is horrific.

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The paper attempts to raise several questions to the texts in question. The reason for the usage of female body in opposition to male bodies and the kind of outcome it produces. The concept of the naive and innocent girl who undergoes a transformation to undergo and inflict terrible and gross acts that border on being inappropriate and offensive like eating bugs, spitting green bile and cursing and grabbing people. The significance of these acts of horror from these possessed female characters in comparison to a girl or woman who is not possessed.

The paper will use Barbara Creed's concept of "Abject" in which disfigurement of the body in horror films is a sign by which woman are pulled out to show her essential difference and also the conventional notion of impurity that can be traced in religious practices (Creed 71).

In the article, "A Critique of *the Exorcist*" McCormick talks about how the spirit that possesses Regan is an unseen male entity whose acts of violence are sadistic and which also borders on rape (21). In this regard the article discusses at length as to how the female characters in general throughout the entire movie are shown as being vulnerable. This article is crucial in looking at how in *The Exorcist*, all of the women characters are viewed as being highly passive. The article becomes relevant to the study in this manner to which the movie is also sexist. In *the Exorcism of Emily Rose* however, the protagonist is alone subject to such weakness.

Lindsey, in the article, "Horror, Femininity, and Carrie's Monstrous Puberty" discusses at length about monstrosity and femininity in relation to the film *Carrie*, however certain inferences drawn can be applied to the concerned primary texts of this paper. For instance, the article talks about how Carrie's puberty is marked by the onslaught of violence. This can be directly linked to how both Regan and Emily under possession express their sexuality through violence.

In Michael Dempsey's review of *The Exorcist*, he talks about the ways in which sexuality as it is portrayed in *The Exorcist* comes across as almost revolting (61). This is significant for the sexuality expressed here is not that of Regan but the potential of her sexuality by a male force that dwells within her.

Nixon in the article, "The Medicalized Bio-powered Body" talks at length with various examples as to the manner in which body is constantly used as a metaphor for a lot of social issues that has a cultural bearing. For example, he gives example of how certain representation of the body could be with the various "cultural anxieties" that constructs them (293). This can be used to analyse the manner in which the bodies of both Regan and Emily has been used to the conventional norms of patriarchy that is prevalent even if not dominant in a lot of cultures.

The article "Spirit Possession and the Gerasene Demoniac" talks at length about the significance and hidden meaning behind the small section from the Bible in which Jesus chases away the Legion on to the pigs. Here, there is a reference to the spirit as being unclean (Derret 287). This indicator of how the force that possess because it is clean latches on to something is impure as well. For instance, in the story, Jesus Christ chases the Legion who proclaims as being many and asks to be spared is sent to the pigs. Pigs in many cultures are considered unclean as well. In this light, the reason of these demonic possessions on women can be seen a means by which they are shown to be impure.

The paper looks in detail at the manner in which female body is referred to as the platform for spirit possession which in turn also invited acts of degradation both to the self and other. This does not mean that there are no films in which men are possessed by demons. However, that is the scope of another study. This paper becomes important in the light of demonic possessions followed by Christian Catholic Exorcism that imparts certain understanding of women in the light of the general and predominant patriarchal norm and to some extent sharing virtues of Christianity to define women.

Female bodies in *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* are represented as weak and passive for both invasion (possession) and as a site for the execution of the masculine will at the cost of degradation of the female body.

The films *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, both seem to be perpetuating the notion of the unknown and the dangerous with the use of female bodies. For instance, in both the films, nobody really knows how the demon really looks like for they take shape only through the characters they possess. Characteristic features of both these possessed individuals are that they look highly tortured, abused and battered by the onset of the possession. The unknown demonic entities in both the films are masculine. The instance of this in the statue of Pazuzu that is shown in *The Exorcist* and how in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, the legion is in possession of Emily. This shows how not just demonic forces but also male forces that use both victims.

In both these films, female protagonists seem to these evil forces on the virtue of being a woman. In addition, they are young, naive and innocent in the beginning only to be the stark opposite under possession. This can be looked at how on the virtue of being a woman, there seems to be an innate evil or in this case a tendency to invite evil on to her. In this way, both the victim and the demonic spirit in question inclines towards each other to bring out the monster that resides within them (Lindsey 35). The same can be observed even in the Bible, where the Devil tempted Eve and not Adam, for which she was condemned to bear the consequence of it not just through her life but also through womanhood since then on. In this manner, female body as it yielded to temptation can be seen to suffer its consequences henceforth. The first touch by the Devil left her vulnerable to forever be prodded and subjected to the whims of the Devil regardless of her will.

In both the films, the victims commit acts of gruesome violence both on themselves and the other. For instance, in *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, Emily is met with crushing force on her body in her first encounter with the demonic spirit. It pulls up her top against her will. Her body is contorted at impossible angles, resulting in multiple injuries to her body. Self inflicted wounds like cuts and scratches. She is denied the right to proper food and she is forced to eat insects. In *The Exorcist*, Regan too does not eat properly, she spits out green bile, and she is made to masturbate with the cross. She is even made to invite her mother to have cunnilingus with her. As a twelve year old, she urinates in public, screams out obscenities which is along the lines of asking to be raped and inflicts harm on others which includes grabbing the genitals of others.

Both the characters in this regard are made to go through intense suffering along with harming people around them. The concept of abject takes form here, for through distortions and violence directed at the body, their weak sexual side is highlighted in these instances. In these two films, there is the concept of patriarchy at play. The two victims come in between the villain and the hero who are both males. The villain who is the demonic spirit and the

hero, the Priest who performs the rite of exorcism. The female body here lies as a tool by which the hero can attempt to rescue these women and the villain by perpetuating atrocities on the female body. Here, the female body is a mere prop by which the villain can become more of a villain by his acts of violence through the body and the Priest, can attempt to show his valour by performing the exorcism ritual on the female body. Here, the female body is stretched and bent to suit the needs of other characters.

Damnation comes from the evil spirit and salvation through the Priest. In no manner do the female victims hold any agency here. In *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, Emily chooses to stay back and suffer for the greater good of humanity and its redemption of faith. However, it is also important to note how she can convey all of this only through Father Moore. In addition to this, she is only asked for a choice after her first exorcism rite that failed to rid her of the Legion that possessed her.

In this light, both these films become crucial in seeing how the female body which has almost become the norm of movies with exorcisms and demonic possessions. It kind of justifies the violence meted out against the victims by imposing the supernatural element to it. Hence, it becomes easier to dismiss it. For instance, if the same were to be shown as a repeated occurrence in other genres of films, then it would be made an issue of as it has and is being done already. This is not to say that the same has not being done for the films that come under the genre of horror, however, there has always been a form of reluctance to accept it. In this manner, the paper becomes important to see the manner in which such representations are value loaded with definite implications.

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