



# Understanding the Politics of Hagsploitation: A Reading of Select Horror Narratives of 20<sup>th</sup> Century

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## Abstract

*There have always been undeniable gaps between the experiences of women from all over the world. Across continents, within countries, in states earmarked for select population, experiences have been different. Hence, apparently it has not left much room for homogenous studies of female experience. It further gets complicated as female experiences vary in terms of their respective representational politics. In the association of ageing female with narratives of horror resides the crux of literary hagsploitation. This paper explores through select Bengali short stories, how literature deals with female ageism and the horror it harbours within. It is important to trace the course of female ageing to understand how it operates on individual as well as their collective existence. Despite certain common grounds identified by the First and Second waves of Feminism, a pressing need was felt to make distinct spaces for Womanism and postcolonial feminism to develop as independent feminist movements. In this paper, select feminist ideas of Barbara Creed, Simon de Beauvoir and Julia Kristeva will be focussed on with relevant references to other theorists.*

**Keywords:** witches, monstrosity, ageism, hags, gender

## Introduction

Witches, also popularised as hags are creatures born out of social, cultural and religious myths which has defined their abjected status within and outside literary paradigms. The pattern of their abjection has been identifiably different but a trace of commonality has remained at its crux. The classic image of hag, as an old figure, a crone has been associated with primal fear validating the existing structure of a misogynistic cultural space which does not accommodate sexually non-viable female bodies. The image of hag too has undergone a shift over the centuries. In The Monstrous- Feminine (1993), Barbara Creed identifies unwanted female ageing bodies as spaces of monstrosity at the centre of which lies the female reproductive body.

“All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Creed 26).

Susan Pickard however extends Creed’s idea of the monstrous female figure and identifies two separate representational form of the crone or hag figure, one being the victim (hag) and the other as the monster (hag). While the former is more likely a direct victim of patriarchal subjugation, the latter one is “associated with ageing femininity” (Pickard 1).

Cinematic fascination for projecting old women on screen playing figures of spectre, especially in the western film world is visible. An article published in Guardian by Anne Billson, “‘Hagsploitation’: horror’s obsession with older women returns” states that the mainstream horror films have timelessly associated with the old female spectral image, the



ever-present idea of degeneration and decay and they trend has resurfaced since the end of the last century. The obvious question therefore is, if it is a matter of celebration or of genuine concern as the figurines projected on the screen are also reflections of the contemporary social paradigm which only strengthens the already existing socio-cultural misogyny. The rising number of crone figures on film screens, quite painfully also suggests that the aged figure being played on the screen is also proportional to the lack of mainstream female lead roles for ageing women in the industry. The vulgar story behind the birth of cinematic ‘hagsploitation’ according to Billson began at the shooting of a gothic melodrama directed by Robert Aldrich, “What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?” which was released in 1962 and was a major hit of the decade. Bette Davis and Joan Crawford aced the roles of two ageing sisters struggling with and against each other, however, their successful hag-portrayals only brought them similar roles after the film being highly acclaimed. The pattern followed in hagsploitation focused on stripping the female characters of their sexual charm, beauty and productivity, which also is an act of disempowerment of the female body. The image of the degenerated female symbolised every unfeminine trait that the society categorically disapproves of. The manifestation of such figures on screen also in a way equated old age with horror, both on and off screen as it not only affected the career of the actresses but also re-established the patriarchal fetish for eternal youth in women.

The film “What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?” was actually based on a novel by Henry Farrell, written in 1960, which developed into the screenplay much later. The novel contained graphic representations of gothic violence involving two sisters no longer in their prime, an interesting war of the same sex. Although it is tempting to consider the literary narrative of Farrell, as an alternate point of origin for hagsploitation, but in the sphere of literature, the classification of elderly or old women as figures of spectral horror, as ‘hags’ is found in abundance. Bengali literature being one of the richest storehouse of south Asian horror narratives contains several horror stories involving the crone or figure of hag. In the context of hagsploitation, it can

definitely be established that literary hagsploitation precedes cinematic hagsploitation. Barbara Creed while commenting on monstrous females in cinema asserts that the unwanted ageing body, a site of horror existed and “haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago” (25).

The fear of the unknown terrain of female body lies at the heart of hagsploitation, both in literary as well as cinematic representations.

In Bengali literature, significant variations of Hagsploitation can be traced. In 1945, Sri Pramatha Nath Bishi wrote a short story named ‘Dakini’ and although no translation has been found so far, it happens to be one of the darkest tales from Bengal, an Indian state, which comments on the idea of hag and the process in which they are socio-culturally constructed. The story is about a well-educated middle class girl named Mallika who is married to a rich boy, a land lord, Shashank Chowdhury after being approved by his overbearing widow mother, Ambamoyee. Unfortunately, her coincidental improvement of health while her husband becoming thin works against her repute as a good wife. Moreover, her ability to read English (she had earned a Master’s degree) also pushes her away from the domestic spheres at her in-laws house. This isolation of Mallika can be read as the beginning of her journey to the transcendence extending Simon de Beauvoir’s idea of “immanence/ transcendence dichotomy” (Pickard 2). According to Beauvoir,

“In truth, all human existence is transcendence and immanence at the same time; to go beyond itself, it must maintain itself; to thrust itself toward the future, it must integrate the past into itself” (443).

While immanence is mostly associated with femininity, passivity, domesticity and self-immersive activities, a mere existence of animality, transcendence refers to powerful and active reclaiming of the world, a rather masculine domain which promises much more than animality.

Her failure to conform within the space of immanence primarily drives her towards transcendence where her transformation slowly takes place from an ordinary housewife to an extraordinary witch, beyond control.

Mallika unknowingly enters into a competition with her mother-in-law for the affection of her



husband. Now, this moment has to be identified as a common point for most of the stories which manifest hagsploitation as they invariably allows an unhealthy contest between the female characters, a point of conflict, and a clash of desires which stimulates the process of degeneration.

In this narrative, the first layer of horror unfolds with the grotesque sexual jealousy in the maternal figure which pits her against her daughter-in-law. Also, age here plays an important role as the malformed affection of the mother gets overshadowed simply by her maternal image of an elderly lady whose concerns are totally directed towards the well-being of her son. The author purposefully introduces two other female characters who work along with the central figure of the mother. One of them is a widow aunt, a cousin of Ambamoyee and the other one an occult practitioner who confirms that Mallika is a witch endowed with supernatural powers. Events follow and gaining the confidence of the husband, the trio conspires to drive her out of the house. The characterisation of the three elderly women, bereft of male sexual partners, possessed with quasi-religious knowledge and empowered by expert domestic experience also makes them potential hag figures from the perspective of Mallika. In her downfall, these three operates in the most crucial manner. The importance of their character also lies in the fact that they obliterate the binary of immanence and transcendence to a large extent. As potential hag figures, they transcend themselves from the normative female passivity, an existence of immanence and yet hold on to the power that is obtained from domestic control working that against Mallika. The trio manages to secure a successful balance between immanence and transcendence and challenge Mallika's existence altogether.

Already isolated in the house, Mallika starts imagining herself as a witch. In the mirror she looks at her image and explores physical features of a witch, an act of resistance as well as submission to the false identity being externally imposed upon her. The unfolding of the second layer of hagsploitation happens at this moment where an absolutely healthy young woman imagines herself as a pale, bloodless, cruel supernatural figure, scaring away her own husband from their nuptial space. In marginalising of

her natural self, not only the external forces operates brutally, but she herself becomes a catalyst in her becoming an imaged supernatural creature, a hag. Ironically here, her constructed identity of the hag allows her the power that she could not enjoy as a normal woman. Extending the former argument that the trio could be seen as hags, in their act of driving Mallika towards refashioning her former self and conforming to the idea of a hag, their individual as well as collective behaviour could also be possible seen as hagsploitation. Each of them are denied social acceptance in some way or the other. The widowhood of Ambamoyee and her cousin can mark them as direct victims of patriarchy. In Indian subcontinent, widowhood almost amounts to the end of one's life. The women are forced to live very isolated lives with all kinds of restrictions involving food, clothes and made to observe religious practices as their primary activity. The narrative clearly affirms that both of these women were bitter widows who indulged themselves into an evil power struggle with a much younger educated and married girl. Their disgust with Mallika is probably rooted in their subconscious imagination of her as the embodiment of everything that they no longer possess. Mallika is a threat to their existence and they collectively emerge as the counter threat to author her destruction.

For the occult practitioner too, normative social existence is not possible. She practices occult, a domain that does not readily welcome women. On the other hand, a female occult practitioner is never allowed to dwell within the regular domestic spaces reserved for women. Moreover, she is poor and thus monetary gain from Ambamoyee works as a motivation for her to malign Mallika as a witch.

The importance of the story 'Dakini' lies in the fact that it reveals how ordinary women become extraordinary 'hags' and in this painful process of becoming and unbecoming reveals the carcass of gender exploitation at large. However, the two separatist figures of the victim (hag) and the monster (hag) as suggested by Pickard takes a different turn altogether. While the transition of Mallika into a witch or hag which eventually causes her death marks her as the victim (hag), the monster (hags) here operate on a psychological level. They do not possess physical monstrosity but their wishful



negative actions which separates Mallika and her husband and compels her to commit suicide affirms their status as monster (hags). Rich in feminist content, Bishi's story remains a poignant example of hagsploitation in the oeuvre of Bengali literature.

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