



TREATMENT OF THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE IN INDIAN CINEMA VIS-À-VIS THE WORLD CINEMA

DR. ASHISH PANDEY

Assistant Professor, Department of English,
The English and Foreign Languages
University, Lucknow- Campus,
(UP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

This paper tries to analyse the difference in the treatment of a zombie apocalypse situation in western films and Indian cinema. Zombie films generally show corpses that are infected with deadly viruses that bring a slow death and rapid transformation in the host. The only way to escape a zombie apocalypse is to keep movie and kill the zombies in Hollywood films. The scenario is slightly different in Indian cinema where there haven't been many films based on the themes of zombies. The ones that are based on the western models have bombed at the box office, whereas those with what can be called the Indian approach have done well.

Hypothesis:

Indian civilization is heavily rooted in the belief that God is all loving and all powerful. Evil is a result of bad *karma*. When *karma* is purged, evil is removed and suffering ends. Faith in God can purge all evil and bad *karma* whereas in the western culture suffering is perpetual. In Indian culture, the ties with family and friends transcend the fears of death but in the western culture one must focus only on survival of the self and must sacrifice everyone and everything else.

INTRODUCTION

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Obsession with the Apocalypse in American Popular Culture

The idea of an apocalypse or end of the world and zombies taking over the world has been seen in the popular culture since 1916 with the production of the film titled *The End of the World* (*Verdens Undergang* in Danish). The film shows that comet passes near earth causing largescale unrest and havoc. In 1910 Haley's comet had passed near earth and that caused the film to be very popular among the masses. However, the idea of an end of the world or largescale destruction did not begin in the twentieth century. The roots of the belief in an imminent apocalypse can be traced to the Judeo Christian scriptures like *Book of Daniel* (200 BCE), *Book of Ezra* (100 BCE). However, in the twentieth century, there has been an increase in the obsession with the apocalypse due to the two world wars and the nuclear attack on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Films like *End of the World* (1931) *Deluge* produced in 1933, *Things to Come* (1936) and a satirical film entitled *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964) are some of the examples of early Hollywood attempts at producing end of the world movies. Later there were some quite significant landmarks like *Planet of the Apes* (1968) in which an astronaut reaches a planet on which apes have evolved like humans and humans are subservient slaves. He manages to escape the planet and return to earth, where he finds the human civilization destroyed by human beings, and the apes have taken over the planet. In 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* and subsequently *Dawn of the Dead* produced in 1978 started and popularized the trend of zombie movies.

Mad Max produced in 1979, and *The Terminator* starring Arnold Schwarzenegger produced in 1984 by James Cameron are significant dystopian films. *The Terminator* started the trend of machines taking over humanity and enslaving humanity in a bleak distant future, which became more prominent in its sequel *Terminator 2 Judgment Day* produced in 1991. In 1994 a film titled *In the Mouth of Madness* also showed a book with the same title authored by a fictional author Sutter Kane, causing widespread madness in the people subsequently in 1995 and in 1999 films like *12 Monkeys* and *End of Days* were produced before the much hyped millennium bug. The western filmmakers have sold this bleak picture of the world for more than 70 years with the apocalyptic films that deal with a nuclear blast like *Right at Your Door* (2007) and *The Bomb* (2015), or with machines taking over the world in *The Matrix* franchise of films. These films paint a bleak future for humanity which must be prepared for a life of constant fear where even bare survival is considered to be a blessing. Although dread of the ghosts, monsters and diseases has been a popular theme among writers in various cultures, but the sudden demise of entire humanity has been a late development especially popularised by Hollywood.

1.0 The Apocalypse vis-à-vis the Dystopian future

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It is very easy to get confused between the apocalyptic and dystopian genres. However, the distinction between them is also very easy. In dystopian, films and novels, there is an excessive government regulation and control in a bleak future after a restructuring of the society has taken place, owing to a global revolutionary or catastrophic event. But human life still exists, and there is no threat of large-scale destruction of life and property in dystopian fiction and films. The only tragedy and the loss is that of human liberty of thought action and free will. In 1984 George Orwell, depicts the attempt of the government to regulate thought, and even the slightest idea of rebellion in the human spirit is subdued. Apocalyptic texts deal with the event, when there is a large-scale outbreak of a pandemic war or a case of alien invasion. An apocalyptic text or a film deals with the attempts of the protagonist to survive the hostile attack and live at any cost. Thus there is a struggle for survival which is individual and not community-based. Quite similar to an apocalyptic film is another genre which is termed as Post-apocalyptic film or text in which the tragedy of nuclear attack, alien attacks or zombie infestation has already passed and the protagonist or the central character tries to live with the altered reality. Movies like *I am Legend* (2007) and *The Dog Stars* deal with a post-apocalyptic scenario.

1.1 The Zombie Apocalypse: Origins

The concept of a zombie did not appear out of thin air. In real life, there are certain human diseases that make a person act like a zombie. Diseases like Rabies and African sleeping sickness cause loss of motor coordination in the affected person. Flesh decay is caused in diseases like leprosy and necrosis. Another disease that is endemic to the residents of Papua New Guinea is called Kuru disease in which the neurons degenerate, which cause symptoms that are similar to the patients affected by the fictional zombie outbreak. One of the reasons that is attributed to Kuru disease is, the practice of eating the brains of the dead family members due to the cultural belief, that this practice would help the souls of the deceased loved ones to comfortably transition to the next level in the afterlife.

There is a popular view that zombies can be traced back to around 2700 BCE in *The Tale of Gilgamesh*. The following lines “I will raise up the dead, and they will devour the living, I will make the dead outnumber the living!” (Aragona) are interpreted as zombies by zombie enthusiasts, however, scholars like Andrew George find it “far-fetched!” (George). He opines, “The lines in question were adapted for the *Gilgamesh* epic from an older poem, known as *Nergal and Ereshkigal* (5.11-12, and again at 26-27), where it is found verbatim, spoken by Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Dead, as a curse. The Mesopotamian dead, however, were not zombie corpses but rather, as the *Gilgamesh* epic (tablet XII) shows, as cold, lonely souls imagined as dust-eating birds” (George). Bob Smietana in *Lifeway Research* discusses the interview with religious historian Kelly Baker, author of *The Zombies are Coming*. In

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Baker's opinion, "the major reasons for America's fascination with the zombie apocalypse are...the nervousness we have about other people—that you can never be sure if your neighbor is with you or against you...the idea that any moment someone could turn on you, says something about the cynicism of the early 21st century."(Smietana).

There is another reason that is attributed to America's fascination with the zombie movies. In the modern corporate culture, Americans are made to work seamlessly, endlessly, and are assigned duties in the office that are essentially non-productive; like compiling reports, which no one reads. This results in people not getting enough sleep. Because of getting stuck in long traffic jams and indulging in non-productive office work, people are not able to catch any sleep and they move through the office and the traffic like zombies with poor motor skills. This scenario is depicted very well in the film *Office Space* (1999) in which the principal characters Peter Gibbons works as a programmer in a software firm. He is stuck in the office for long hours due to his boss, Bill Lumbergh.

Kelley Baker, a freelance writer who has a doctorate in religion from Florida State University, has written a cultural history of zombies. She writes "zombies—unlike vampires, ghosts, and werewolves—are relatively new to American culture. They first popped up in 1930s movies. In those early depictions, zombies were living people whose minds and bodies had been taken over by someone else. More modern zombies—the kind of shambling undead found on *The Walking Dead*—trace their roots back to George Romero's films of the 1960s. His 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*, introduced zombies into mainstream pop culture. Zombies are the latest example of American pop culture being fascinated by stories about doomsday." (Baker)

Stacey Abbott in *Undead Apocalypse: Vampires and Zombies in the 21st Century* differentiates the various types of mythical monsters that are represented in the popular culture and finds zombies the most dangerous among the lot. She mentions that vampires can be repulsed with the help of garlic and can be killed by driving a stake through their heart; and werewolves are killed with the help of silver bullet. Various demons and malevolent spirits can be cast out of the human body by priests or exorcists; but zombies are an entirely different cup of tea. Zombies cannot be reasoned with and none of the above remedies work with zombies. The most frightening thing is that no one is immune to a zombie attack and everyone is at the danger of becoming a zombie.

1.1 The Zombie Apocalypse: Causes for its fascination

Much of the unsubstantiated theories about the origin of the fascination of American public with zombies state that mistrust in the neighbours, the fear of an impending doom and being obsessed with survival only seems to be a deliberate attempt to program the masses into

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perpetually living into a state of fear by the capitalist elite so that the masses do not become aware of the present problems facing them and do not rise for the redressal of those problems. The evil corporations plan on taking over of the natural resources of the country and want to exploit the humans and government resources, by creating viruses and subsequently antidotes and vaccines to make more money and hold exorbitant wealth at the cost of the public life and safety according to the conspiracy theorists that are not named here deliberately. However, there is also a counterpoint to this theory which includes the *Resident Evil* franchise of films.

In the *Resident Evil* franchise of films and video games as well as animation series, it is shown that at the root of the zombie apocalypse is an underground lab leak, (no relation with the Wuhan lab scenario intended) which unleashes the virus that turns human beings into zombies. In the film, the dangers of artificial intelligence are also depicted when “Red Queen” the AI locks the lab and tries to kill everyone inside the lab. Scientist from the corporation injects different kinds of drugs on two of their scientists namely Kaplan and Alice (Mila Jovovich). Kaplan (played by Martin Crewes) develops into an absolute monster whereas Alice (Mila Jovovich) evolves into a superior form of human with increased agility, strength, reflexes as well as being immune to various forms of injuries. Hence, the very theory of evil corporations, the elite behind the production of such films programming the message into suspecting their neighbours and thus living in a perpetual constant state of paranoia does not hold much water. But this counterpoint also has a counterpoint. There is a belief among the intelligentsia that films and novels are a way to program our minds by the ruling classes. James E. Cutting in *Movies on Our Minds* and Richard Weaver in “How Movies Affect Our Minds – Psychological Research 2023” discuss the impact of movies on programming the human mind. Weaver (2023) writes, “The human mind is driven to think in the direction its surroundings take it to. These are called stimuli and they function by ‘stimulating’ or encouraging the brain to create a perception about things. However, movies are something that tends to tease us differently up there *points at brain*. (Weaver and Weaver). Writing about the prediction of the Covid-19 pandemic predicted in the film *Contagion*, Soumya Karlamangla reported in *Los Angeles Times*:

During the Covid pandemic, there were conjectures that the film Contagion (2011) had predicted the Covid-19 pandemic in advance. Burns anticipated that a pandemic would trigger fear and distrust in government. In addition to the scientist characters, the movie features a freelance journalist played by Jude Law who questions the CDC’s motives, hawks a fake cure for the virus and gains fans as people grasp for answers after their loved ones’ deaths. The movie’s portrayal of panic and scapegoating is what Burns sees as most analogous to what is happening today, he said. (Karlamangla)

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Therefore without evidence it is impossible to say which point of view is correct, but the following points can be made about the American public's fascination with the apocalypse and other genres of movies that talk about the end of the world scenario. The reason behind the production of zombie and other apocalypse films is that when one is free from the essential struggle of life for managing food, shelter, clothing and other basic necessities and does not have any plans or vision for better future, one becomes complacent and lazy. This act of becoming lazy puts the people into a self destructive mode. This kind of behaviour is shown in the post apocalyptic film *Wall E* (2008) where human beings have delegated most of the work to machines and have become so lazy that they are unable to walk or exercise. Hence, when there is no incentive for creation, the person indulges in sociopathic and antisocial behaviour that causes destruction of the individual as well as the society around him.

The proof of this hypothesis was carried out by an experiment popularly known as Universe 25. It was a series of experiments that were carried out between 1968 and 1973 by John Calhoun who worked as a researcher at the national Institute of mental health. Calhoun conducted the experiment on mice in a perfect utopia for mice, which is also termed as a "garden of Eden" like scenario. In the experiment, different pairs of mice were introduced into pens that were specially designed for them. There was abundance of everything for these mice, food shelter recreational space. Eventually, their population increased and the pens became crowded. The utopia turned into a living hell with the mice, becoming violent and developed abnormal sexual behaviours, and the mothers began neglecting or even attacking their own pups. Calhoun termed this breakdown of social order a "behavioral sink." (Melchor)

The microcosm that started as a paradise eventually turned into an apocalypse due to the effects of over population. There was one more interesting on the location in the whole experiment. The children that were born into the Universe 25 series of experiments were not normal. They were not able to socialise or form normal relationships with the rest of the community. The final result of the experiment was the change in sexual orientation of both sexes. It was noticed that "...males compulsively groomed themselves; females stopped getting pregnant. They became "trapped in an infantile state of early development," even when removed from Universe 25 and introduced to "normal" mice. Ultimately, the colony died out. "There's no recovery, and that's what was so shocking to [Calhoun]," says Ramsden." (Melchor). In the American society with the excess of food and nutrition as well as access to abundance of recreational activities children as well as adults become incapable of finding any constructive reason to grow and hone their skills start entering into a self destruct mode.

1.2 The Zombie Apocalypse: Survival Guides and other effects on popular culture

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It is fascinating to note the emergence of survival, guide and books for fictitious problems and possible doomsday conditions arising out of those fictitious entities. *The Zombie Survival Guide* by Max Brooks 2003 is revered as the Bible for zombie enthusiasts. Although Brooks launched both these books, *The Zombie Survival Guide* as well as *World War Z* as satirical survivor manuals, but they are taken seriously by both conspiracy theorists as well as zombie enthusiasts. In this book Max Brooks advises the readers to take the threat of a zombie outbreak and eventual apocalypse very seriously. He advises the readers to be prepared to deal with the threat of zombies. In this book, Brooks gives various techniques and guides to survive the zombie outbreak which is caused by the Solanum virus. Some of the tools that he suggests for dealing with zombies is to cut off their heads. He advises people to use swords, instead of rifles and guns because they don't need a supply of bullets or waste time in reloading. He also advises to use a bike instead of a car to escape the zombie infected city and to move continuously instead of staying in one place he also advises the people to wear tight clothes and keep shorter hair so that the zombies cannot get hold of them.

There is another book entitled *The Zombie Handbook: How to Identify the Living Dead and Survive the Coming Zombie Apocalypse* (2009) written by Rob Sacchetto which gives similar survival techniques such as making a map and staying at a high vantage point and gather fuel medical supplies, food and staying in groups. The authors also mention certain surprising facts about the zombies such as the lifespan of a zombie 2.5 years and the capacity to eat around 6 kg of brain every day. Sacchetto also classifies zombies like the recently dead zombies, exhumed corpse zombies, demonic zombies, and mad scientist zombies. Some authors like Max Brooks trace the origin of zombies to 2700 BC in the tale of Gilgamesh. In their opinion, Frankenstein monster was also a zombie which seems to be factually incorrect, because the Frankenstein monster had feelings and the desire for a life partner, instead of merely devouring mindlessly, whatever comes into its grasp.

2.0 The Zombie Apocalypse: Portrayal in Hollywood and Asian Cinema

In Hollywood films and Asian Cinema becoming a zombie is equivalent to eternal damnation. When a person is possessed by a ghost, there is still hope that he can be revived by the grace of Jesus, but when someone become zombie, then the only salvation person can get is by shooting him in the head and blowing his brains out. Zombie is the free from any kind of insult or pain from getting beaten up. Zombie films generally show corpses that are infected with deadly viruses that bring a slow death and rapid transformation in the host. The host slowly becomes unrecognisable and after a while starts attacking the healthy human beings who again get infected with the virus. The host after becoming a zombie is devoid of all feelings towards friends and relatives. Once it is infected, the host can be sure of becoming a zombie and attacking its friends and relatives. The best thing that the infected

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host can do is to shoot itself in the head in order that it doesn't become the deadly monster that devours the ones he loves. The same is true for the healthy individuals as well in the western world. They must run away from the infected colony as soon as possible and if there is a close friend or relative that gets infected, he or she must be destroyed before they turn into monsters. Most of the plots of the movies like *Resident Evil (2002)* or *Train to Busan (2016)* show that any form of sympathy will cause other members to become victims themselves. The movies have the effect of brewing mistrust in the minds of the audience for fellow humans and citizens and instructed the viewers to lose any form of compassion for the rest of humanity. The message is clear, turn your heart into stone and run for survival.

Another very interesting thing is seen in the case of zombies is that they are interested only in biting healthy people. A zombie doesn't bite another zombie like a virus does not attack another virus or similar bacteria does not harm each other. The essential question therefore is that does a zombie become like a virus the virus wants to replicate itself. The zombie also wishes to pass the infection but it is not the desire like some people who are sick and want to make other people sick. It's not like that and is a completely different case because a zombie spreads the infection unknowingly when it wants to feed on a healthy tissue. The evidence of this theory is seen in *World War Z*. Brad Pitt who plays the role of Gerry Lane a former UN investigator who is requested to investigate the outbreak of the zombie pandemic has serendipity that zombies spare the sick. They are bent on biting or devouring the flesh of healthy human beings. In this way he is able to save the entire human race by inserting them with mild strains of curable diseases like flu, TB et cetera.

3.0 The Zombie Apocalypse: Portrayal in Indian Cinema

In Indian cinema and by Indian cinema one does not imply only Bollywood or Hindi films. Indian cinema comprises of Hindi film industry in Mumbai, Telugu film industry located in Hyderabad especially Ramoji Film City, Bengali film industry, Tamil film industry, Marathi film industry, and Punjabi film industry to name a few regional cinemas. In this section, we will discuss three films produced in India based on the theme of zombies. The first attempt was made in 2013 with the production of *Go, Goa, Gone*. It was unlike a Hollywood film in the sense that it had a mixing of the genres. It was classified as a horror, thriller and comedy but some critics classified it as a zombie comedy or "Zom-com". The film portrays the adventures of two friends Hardik and love who go to Goa in order to try recreational drugs. As chance would have it, they are invited to an underground rave party by a girl. The party is a ploy by the Russian mafia to launch a new drug for the youth. Something goes wrong at the party and they are attacked by the zombies on an island near Goa. With the help of a Russian zombie slayer played by Saif Ali Khan, the two friends manage to escape the zombies only to discover a much bigger problem waiting for them.



The film was an abysmal flop, earning a total of INR 12 crores only the box office. The film did not gel well with the audience and it had a bleak ending like most of the Hollywood films. Indian audience had to wait for another three years to produce a film based on the theme of zombies. In 2016 *Miruthan* written and directed by Shakti Soundar Rajan, starring Jayam Ravi, Lakshmi Menon and Anikha Surendran was released. It also did not get good a good reception and failed at the box office with a worldwide collection of INR 20 crores only. Its theme and action were quite similar to Hollywood films.

In 2021, *Zombie Reddy* was produced by Rajshekar, Verma and written and directed by Prashant Verma. The plot of a film revolves around the protagonist, Mario (Teja Sajja) who is a game designer. The film opens around the end of the pandemic in 2020 and the lockdown has been lifted. Mario is tortured a lot by his father who constantly turns him and compares him with his sister, who is good at studies.

When the lockdown is lifted in the pandemic, Mario comes to know that his game has gone viral overnight and there has been millions of downloads in the game. He is very happy and shares the news with his friends which includes Maggi (Daksha Nagarkar), an avid gamer. But this happiness does not last long, and he soon learns that the new game is on the verge of crashing because of the presence of certain bugs in the program.

He tries to get to get his friend's (RJ Hemanth's) help in getting the coding right but learns that his friend is getting married in a village at Rudravaram in Kurnool. His friend asks Mario to come to the village to attend his wedding and promises that he will fix the coding in an hour. When Mario is heading to the village along with two of his friends, they encounter a monster like human who is in chains and the monster bites his friend, who is a hypochondriac. The monster is controlled by a man in a white coat who resembles and falls into the category of a mad scientist.

Without going much deeper into the plot and the storyline of the film, it will be interesting to show the difference between Hollywood and Asian films vis-à-vis zombie Reddy. The turning point of the film comes when Mario, the protagonist along with the heroine played by Nandini Reddy and some other characters start killing the zombies, the USP of the self or the turning point, that differentiates *Zombie Reddy* from other films is that when the characters see their near and dear ones as zombies they cannot let go of them. When Maggie (Daksha Nagarkar) sees their mutual friend who was bitten by the mad scientist in the world of zombies, she is unable to let go of him, and he bites her.

In a Hollywood film, this would imply a long and painful death. The hero, Mario takes her and tries to save her from the zombies. Although she has been bitten by the zombie, Maggie still remains normal till the time the hero can discover the cure. The film reaches a

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catastrophic point when the entire village community and the nearby villages are about to turn into zombies completely. The worst and the most repulsive sight in the film is the scene where a mother has turned into a zombie and she is about to devour her baby. What the Greeks called *deus ex machina* and what is popularly known as divine intervention saves the day in the film. The holy water from the cave in the Shiva temple is discovered to cure all the symptoms caused by the zombie virus. The mad scientist had already discovered this and had documented it in a video cassette that is discovered by Mario. Everything becomes normal except the grandfather who was in a coma earlier and started walking after being bitten by the zombies. In a comic twist the family members decide to keep the grandfather in the zombie state as he still can move around instead of lying down. Besides the comic element, the film brings a ray of hope that nothing is greater than God. God is Almighty all powerful and there is no evil that cannot be defeated by God. Therefore, the film also brings out the difference between the Indian civilisation versus the western civilisation, it also a certain point that it is better to die with hope rather than to live in the bleak false fear of unknown entities that may or may not exist. The film got a warm reception at the box office and one of the web portals reported, "Teja Sajja's Zombi"e Reddy is roaring at the box office. The film has become the second most commercially successful of this year after Ravi Teja's KRACK. The film success marks a major benchmark in Teja's Sajjar career as it is the debut movie of him. Zombie Reddy has proved to be a family entertainer. Recently, the makers of the movie have thanked the audience and fans for making the film a splash hit at the box office. It is said that the makers of the movie have recovered their invested amount in a week of its release." (Post)

CONCLUSION:

The reason for this perpetual hope, and never say die attitude is partly attributed to the religious beliefs of the Indian people, those that follow the organized religions and the tribals who follow and revere nature worship. There is no concept of eternal damnation or perpetual punishment. Everyone is capable of attaining salvation through faith in God and no matter what one has done one can be forgiven by God. Even the spirits who are not capable of any action and cannot repent are said to be forgiven and redeemed by means of actions done by their family members on their behalf or through intervention by advanced spiritual masters. There haven't been any more Indian films that deal with the zombie effect apocalypse film till the time this paper was being written. But this does not mean that the Indian youth specially the Indian urban youth does not watch or relish films related to the zombie apocalypse. However, there is an objective distancing between the two unlike zombie fans and fan clubs in the West.

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