

Decolonizing Zombies in Global Cinema

Analysis of the Status of Women in the Two Zombie Movies: Miss Zombie & The Night of the Living Dead

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Abstract

This essay explores the evolution of the zombie figure in cinema as a reflection of shifting power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed. From early twentieth-century portrayals rooted in slavery and subjugation to modern representations embodying chaos and rebellion, zombies have mirrored changing social anxieties and hierarchies. The analysis focuses on *Miss Zombie* (Sabu, 2013) and *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), two films that reinterpret the zombie trope to critique societal norms and moral boundaries. The essay argues that cinematic zombies serve as allegories for human exploitation, loss of autonomy, and the cyclical struggle between dominance and submission. Through aesthetic, narrative, and symbolic shifts, zombie cinema reveals how power continuously reshapes itself—reminding viewers that the monstrous often resides not in the undead, but within the structures that seek to dominate them.

Context

The oppressor and the oppressed, master and the slave, the might and the weak; as long as human history was on earth, the conflict of power has

been at the center of all problems that changed the world. Interestingly, the conflicts due to an imbalance of power rather involved more narratives of the two opposite parties than the imbalance of power itself. Movies showed more

interest in representing power relations between people in the early 1900s, the zombie figure in the story as the catalyst following the evolution of movies asks the audience, “what is the zombie representing?”. The two movies, *Miss Zombie* (Sabu, 2013) and *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) will be analyzed in this essay to evaluate the points signified by the producers and their intentions in conveying to highlight the social norms we mindlessly accept, and the breaking of the boundaries to explore the impossibilities.

What is termed a zombie is a cinematic figure that first appeared in the early 1900s. As many questions of what the origin of the word zombie is, many theories are provided by linguists to support the idea it derived from foreign languages such as the French ombres (shadows); the West Indian Jumbie (ghost); the African Bonda zumbi and Kongo Zambi (dead spirit). It may have also derived from the word zemis, a term used by Haiti’s indigenous Arawak Indians to describe the soul of a dead person.

The role of the zombie from movies in the mind of someone who is living the twenty-first century would probably be a grotesque living-dead or a mutant that is an ultimate sign of the apocalypse. Yet, the figure zombie, when first appeared in the history of cinema was never harmful nor damaging at all; rather a solemn, dumbed, less intelligent creature often depicted as powerless and even often as a tamed monster.

The First zombie to be screened on television was through the movie *White Zombie*, which brought

the notion of zombies into the creative industry. A motif taken from the novel *Magic Island*, - a novel published in 1929 by William Seabrook, brought zombies into the world and soon dominated the market with its fresh new character. The first zombies introduced in the industry were mostly depicted as slaves, and all the other characters of the story as the masters; film makers defined these representations as a movement to express the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. The first movie to specifically characterize a zombie as a listless being is the *White Zombie*, in 1930. Ever since then was the era that set zombies as a representation of slaves, as *White zombie* itself was a story of a zombie used as an operation of some kind, much rather a living tool. After years of zombies being played as slaves, often implying the reality oppressed, the significant change was brought about by a pioneer who first established the cannibalise zombie, George Romero. The idea of zombie eating and hunting for human flesh was as exotic as when the idea of zombies was first devised. The idea of *Cannibalist Zombies* soon became the game changer, thus settling the zombie as part of the horror genre.

Miss Zombie

Miss Zombie, a Japanese movie filmed in 2010, depicts the emotional dealing between two women - the *Zombie* forced to serve as a slave in a household and the *Misses* of the house - with black & white screening and silent long-takes delivering the tension between the two.

The identity of the movie *Miss Zombie* consists of two big parts; the job as a woman herself and the recognition of her by the people around her. A woman who fulfilled her responsibilities as a Wife and a Mother gradually loses the two most important roles in her life to the new housemaid, a Zombie. Driven by the impulsive decision due to the loss of her identity, the chaos reaches its peak at its highest. A single Woman, a Mother, and a Wife; we often divide the role of a woman in society by those three names. The Movie raises the question, Is it the Role, a Wife and a Mother, that identifies a woman as a Woman? Why do we interpret the three differently, and what influence which societal change does this distinction bring? These puzzles - whether it was intended, or not - resolve soon when the Zombie takes over both of the Wife's identities by having a sexual relationship with the Husband and mentally becoming the mother of the zombified son.

The movie reforms the background plot of *House and the Family* as a modern society and modern people. The *House and the Family* as an allegory depicts the status and identity of the members of society through the struggle and decision-making of each character. Concepts such as 1) How a society treats a single woman without self-determining rights and 2) the co-existence and collaboration of two identities Mother and Wife leading the unfold of the story, *Miss Zombie* leaves the audience with shock and surprise.

The title leaves the first impression of the movie to the audience. As soon as the title is read, instantly, it is recognizable that all disputes and

shifts from the norm will eventually occur directly from, or at least related to *Miss Zombie*. The way a title works is that it summarizes the gist of the most important setting of the story; it is a set of words that best represents the intention of the Director. Then why must the director have named the movie *Miss Zombie*?

Why not 'Slave Zombie' or 'Zombie, Wife, and the Husband'? It should mean that the state of marriage and her gender contain great purpose. Her gender, in the development of the story, plays as an important factor that weaves all major themes altogether.

As listed above, the director constantly calls out the audience for the analysis of women's role and their duties. The overall summary of the story starts with a delivery the husband receives. The culprit of the problem begins as the zombie with manipulated DNA is hired as a maid as her memory as a human were removed, alongside her dignity and self-determinance she honed once as a person, causing her to bear rape from the workers and bullying from the children without any resistance. Once her past memory as a human is spontaneously brought back, the movie depicts these events as the cause of the confusion the family experiences. As the plot reaches its peak, the son drowns, and the wife begs the zombie to bite him, to bring him back alive. Now sharing the same DNA with the maid zombie, the son shows affection more to the zombie than his birthmother, the Wife. Unbearable to understand that she lost her son to the zombie and realizing in fact the husband had been

sexually inappropriate to the zombie, the Wife commits suicide at the end.

The emotional shifting of the mother must be inspected first. The Wife - and mother - committed suicide were not able to prove to themselves her reason for existence. Yet not to be deemed abnormal for one to lose her mind after the loss of loved ones, if the movie as a giant metaphor to be recognised, it is shown through the loss of her child and her husband and her death at last to deliver the tragedy that family was the only factor the wife was capable of identifying herself. Gradually losing her family one by one, the absence of ones that needed her as a mother and a wife has taken away her way to define her identity. Moreover, quite a few amounts of close-up scenes depicts that women's role in Japanese society during that period of time has completely been zombified.

It cannot be ignored that the place and time characteristics of the plot were the reason the director highlighted the duty of women. The cultural basis of Miss Zombie is Japan; it is widely a known fact that Japanese culture obligates women at its greatest from all three -Japan, Korea, and China- eastern confucianist nations. The Three Obediences, a philosophy of family unit had the greatest impact on gender roles in East-Asian culture. In the book of Confucianism, Confucius Says, states the three obligations a woman must follow in her life, as females follow man's words and depend on them. Thus, she must not make her own decision, therefore the three obedience exist: when before marriage she

must obey her father, during marriage must obey her husband and after the death of husband she must obey her son. The root Japan shows the significant characteristics of conservatism embedded in the society is due to the imperialist minds of the Japanese individual post-World War 2. The original philosophy, Confucianism and the new militarism and imperialism shaped people's understanding of the world and the relationships between people based on the vertical structure, thus the division of roles and duties between man and woman reached extreme bipolarity.

As the vertical structure of the society has been so deeply set since the end of the Imperialism, it was deemed normal that wife is subordinate to husband who earns money; inferior member of a society must pay obedience to the superior as the system of the society was solely controlled by men after the complete mix of Confucianism and imperialism post-war, woman were relegated from all economic activities, thus required to obey their only source of income, husband and son.

As the society gradually removed social and economic opportunities of women, their way of survival became completely dependent on man, captivating woman from expanding their influences and from becoming an independent individual of the system.

Thus, it can be understood by the historical background and the scenes specifically displayed that the status of a Mother and a Wife hardly ever have a subjectivity of their own. Although she has

an identity of being a woman, a woman's identity cannot stand alone by itself and must depend on others - a real zombie in the movie. The theme regarding subjectivity is intricately played out in the scenes of the zombie and the wife doing chores. It is not completely obvious to know if it is the zombie or the wife. Thus, Miss Zombie intends to clearly signify, although including the Wife and the Mother in the larger group of Women, which seems to be completely different from the Men's category, Woman is identified and approved of her existence only her dependence on men; the Husband and the Son. The commitment to suicide by the Wife could be considered a recognition of the fact her being is completely dependent on her husband and son, and not being able to find a value in herself after losing not only her loved ones but herself, thus choosing to be destroyed by herself. An irony in which the first decision to be made solely by herself has destroyed her the most at last.

The zombification of woman and its influence on others, it will be addressed more in details in the second theme; The significance of the second topic is the interactions between the zombie and the people around her. As quite majority of the scenes were descriptions of the zombie's passive actions, it is almost always depicted as vertical structure of relationship between the zombie and the Husband, the Workers, and the children in the streets. At last, Zombie in the history of cinema represents powerlessness and the grey zone between living and dead. Thus, the ambiguity throws another question of what makes

the zombie and the human different.

The zombie dresses the same, acts the same just as any other people in the village, following the same rules one human must follow. Yet the only difference from others is her self-determinance. As aforementioned in the introduction of the movie, self-determinance is one of the main themes Miss Zombie brings to the table. Zombie incapable of speaking and defending herself, and even when threatened, not showing any resistance, it was enough for the workers and the children to target her of their outbreaks of violence. Workers rape and force zombie to act in certain sexual ways during the day, and children harass her with weapons such as knife, hammer and scissors during the night, and recall the zombie's worthlessness and unfitting existence of her in the town. These phenomena, in the movie, portray the consequences a disadvantage causes and what tragic results it may bring to the disadvantaged.

Camera Techniques in Use of Comparison between the Zombie and the Wife

One of the most recognizable cinematic depictions is the use of cross-cutting for constant comparison of role of the two main characters, the Wife and the Zombie. Other techniques devised to emphasize the scene is the change in narrowing breach between their status as a master and a slave as the story reaches the climax. A significant difference between the two can be found in distinction of the attitude of the Wife and her effort to associate when first hired zombie

as a servant, and zombie's depressed mood alongside with unchanging facial expressions. Yet, as the Wife is depicted as an extremely subjective figure, so is the zombie, due to having a manipulated DNA. Thus, the repetition of the Wife and the Zombie obeying the husband's demands should indeed be seen as an identical behavioral pattern.

The cross-cutting is quite prevalent in *Miss Zombie*. Cross-cutting, a technique when filming a movie that cuts separate actions together and simultaneously shows each scene, specifically is intended to suggest the link between two different events or persons. The constant actions of women's hands doing house chores shown through the frames such as washing dishes, sweeping the floor, and hugging a child naturally drives the audiences' curiousness to wonder whether it would be the Wife's hands or the Zombie's until the face and the posture is revealed. These contrasts are quite significant in the delivery of the theme, as *Miss Zombie* specifically shapes these representations to convey the message regarding the role of a woman.

Often used in pairs with the cross-cutting, the director uses zooming into certain parts of the character's body to emphasize the intensity. For instance, where the scene repetition of showing weapons thrown at zombies to harm her, and the zombie staring at the weapons, all actions are reduced of movements, yet the contrast between the open window and the subtle movements of the zombie alongside gradual zoom-in creates a tone of melancholy and even depicts the

loneliness of the zombie for the audiences to guess on - a feeling which she could never feel due to her changed DNA.

The formation of camera techniques, in such a fashion of delegating the director's responsibility to analyze the story to the audience, requires a tremendous number of details in storytelling and listing the order of events. The Cross Cutting, with emphasis on objects or body parts, extracts the major points and hands them over to the audience to decide on their own conclusions.

The Night of the Living Dead

The second movie is one of the major works of George Romero's movies which completely shifted the trends in the history of cinema; filmed in 1968, titled *The Night of the Living Dead*. Unlike *Miss Zombie*, the analysis director's intentions and representations within the plot will be reduced, however, the analysis of individual characters will take a greater proportion in the analysis of this movie. The movie will be analyzed in the following order:

1. Summary
2. Cannibalism in Zombies
3. Role of Female Characters

The Night of the Living Dead begins with a sister, Barbara and her brother, visiting their father's graveyard. The flashpoint of the movie is when Barbara and her brother walk up to the hill to find the grave stone, and soon after are attacked by a zombie until it devours Barbara's brother alive. In fear, Barbara hides in the farmhouse not so far

from the hill, and soon after finds a dead body killed by a zombie and realizes the living dead are not one but in packs. While running around the house panicking, Barbara encounters another survivor, Ben. Calming Barbara down to listen to her what had happened, Ben slowly recognizes the potential danger they might face even hidden in the house. Barbara, blacked out in shock sits listlessly on the couch without a word until the climax of the story. Gathering tree branches and wood blocks for fire, Ben finds other survivors, this time in groups of families, in the basement of the house. Introducing each other their names, Mr. Cooper, the head of the family convinces Ben and Barbara to lock the doors and hide in the basement with them, since he has a daughter bitten by one of the zombies and the safehouse underground guarantees no other harm from the zombies. Ben argues with Mr. Cooper about whether to stay underground or find another place to hide, the only messenger tool, the radio warns the survivors the cannibalist zombies are deadly, as they attack humans for their flesh.

One notable setting in *The Night of the Living Dead* is the cannibalism of the zombies. In the history of cinema, the zombies have been symbolized as a slave without subjectivity of their own. However, after destroying this rule, Romero creates a new genre of zombies in horror movies. It is indeed a very iconic moment in cinematic history as it planted violence in the figures always deemed as calm and obedient. It was the first decolonization of the oppressed (the zombies) from the oppressor (the human masters).

Romero's movie is widely known as containing variety ranges of historical issues. Such as conflict between the black and white Americans, the Vietnam War, Immigrants, Women's rights, weaving all stories into one as an allegory, Romero lets the audience spot the issues for themselves. As much as a great number of issues are involved in one, this document will only focus on the issues regarding the status of women in the social movements under the chaotic circumstances of the United States of America.

The types of women illustrated in the plot are mainly divided into three:

1. Indecisive
2. Conservative
3. Progressive

The three characteristics shown above represent the choices women had to make after the course of chaotic events changed society completely. Women, especially in the movie *The Night of the Living Dead* explores the positions a woman must had to take in order to survive the wave of changes that influenced her severely.

Indecisive

Barbara represents the indecisive, panicked woman, who must decide either to stay or leave the house to escape from the zombies. The house as the society, zombies as the changes brought into America after World War 2, the indecisives were the ones who could not be the progressive nor the conservative; just as Barbara, the indecisives does not have a voice nor

responsibility as they did not choose any sides.

Conservative

Cooper's Wife, Mrs. Cooper is the traditional housewife who takes care of her family until the very end, where she is attacked by her own daughter and is killed at last. The movie uses the daughter as the metaphor for infected new generation, who later takes the old generation over. In the climax where Mrs. Cooper is gone, and the daughter is the only one to survive although infected, represents the decay of the women who refused to change.

Progressive

The other female character, the acquaintance's wife, is depicted as the progressives, who accepted changes and left the house (adapt to new change) when it was still possible for them to do.

Conclusion

The Identity of existing as a woman in the long history of the humanity, has been deemed as a subordinate being expected to submit and obey. However, the questions the two movies ask: what is the role of woman, and how does it function in society, and what choices did women make for themselves thus what are the consequences? And the answer to the challenge to the audience was given with number of creative solutions and directions in the movies and other forms of art including Miss Zombie and The Night of the Living Dead.

All issues regarding the status of a woman in the two movies spark from the change a new figure -

zombie - brings. The Plot and the Synopsis of the two movies linked to each other with the portrayal of trueness in woman's identity were naturally introduced to the audiences with other general problems. As we have reached the present where rights of man and woman are equal, the conflicts and arguments made in the past will be the root of the solutions to be seek in the future.

Citation

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