The Reworking of Arabic Myth and Folklore in Patrick Graham's *Ghoul*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to decipher how age-old folk culture travels across time and space and is transferred from word of mouth to screen/web in the contemporary times of digitization. The text I have chosen is a Netflix original miniseries by Patrick Graham, entitled *Ghoul*, that essentially reworks the Arabic folklore in a dystopian setting of a dungeon, known by the name of Meghdoot 31. It is a detention center for terrorists where each one of them is brutally interrogated, tortured and invariably murdered, and even their family members are not spared, in case they don't sputter out the truth. The web-series draws heavily from the pre-Islamic Arabic folk cult of ghoul, an undead monster that belonged to a diabolic class of djinn and was said to be the offspring of Iblis, the prince of darkness in the ancient Arab universe. It is believed that the ghoul survives on human flesh and eventually morphs into one as soon as it has finished hogging on it. The miniseries is a dystopic tale set in the future and incorporates the folk figure of ghoul to showcase a mirror to the world. It does so fundamentally to shed light on the paradox of the demon that resides within humans, that incongruously de-humanizes them. The story is deeply entrenched in India and is a smart blend of the old folk and the new media, an incredibly significant juxtaposition/intersection that I would also attempt to explore in this paper.

Keywords: Arab folklore, Dystopia, Ghoul, Djinns, Orality, Digitization, Web-series, Technology

Patrick Graham's *Ghoul* (2018), caters to the digital paraphernalia of the contemporary epoch and is set in a dystopian future which seems precariously familiar, and in an India that has been shattered and separated by sectarianism. In one of the first scenes, our protagonist, Nida Rahim's (Radhika Apte) car is stopped for inspection, and the policeman is embarrassed when she informs him that she works for the National Protection Squad, a paramilitary organization aimed to combat terrorism. One witnesses during the course of the Netflix miniseries, that throughout its run, it is fueled by characters and spaces that project their inherent jingoism and Islamophobia, and consequently the monsters or as the title of the series suggests, the 'ghouls' that reside within each one of them. Fundamentally a neo-noir with horror and surreal elements firmly interlaced together, *Ghoul* becomes a metaphor of the expanding dissection in India and other parts of the world. In the miniseries, a futuristic India has turned into a 'pan-Hindu' nation*, for* almost all of Nida's colleagues at the detention center are upper-caste Hindus and she's constantly treated with suspicion for her religious identity. This paper attempts to locate the origins of the ghoul legend, an offshoot of the Arabic myth and folklore, and argue how it is reworked in Graham's work to comment on the horrors of totalitarianism.

Originally shot as a feature length film, Graham's *Ghoul* had run into trouble with the censor board for its apparently politically volatile content and portrayal of the army, which is why it

was picked up by Netflix and trifurcated into an episodic miniseries of about forty-five minutes each. Graham, who has lived in India for almost a decade, came up with the idea after reading CIA documents about torture practices used after 9/11, and later, reports of military centers in Kashmir. He had a dream about being in a torture center in Iraq and then he thought, it would be refreshing to build a character who was an inmate, and even scarier than the place, guards, or the other prisoners and there's something unusual about him. This is how the series/feature was creatively developed. And it was a conscious decision on the British director's part to rework Arab folklore, set it in a futuristic India, and market as well as showcase the show digitally, fundamentally to reach a global audience.

The miniseries begins with an unsettling quote, 'Strike the deal with your blood … And out of the smokeless fire…The ghoul will come.' The scene then shifts to an inmate, later revealed to be Nida's father, Shahnawas Rahim (SM Zaheer)–cutting his hand and using the blood to draw an eccentric symbol on the ground. He murmurs an Arabic verse to summon a ghoul mentioned in Arabic folklore as the offspring of Iblis, the devil. In this post-sectarian era, the drama unfolds at Meghdoot 31 (figuratively precise, since *'megha,'* which means rain in Sanskrit/Hindi and several other Indian languages, is deliciously used in the narrative as a recurring motif), a labyrinth like detention center, where in a typical totalitarian regime, anyone who questions the state is brought to, for reconditioning, a euphemism for third-degree torture. Nida is a recruit in this militant, government-aided force, and she is brought to the facility around the same time as Ali Saeed (Mahesh Balraj), a notorious terrorist. Nida's religion makes her a traitor in the eyes of her people, and an outsider in the eyes of the soldiers at the detention center, even when she is extremely loyal for her country and informs her seniors about the possibility of her father being a terror suspect. Subsequently, her father is brought to the center, brutally interrogated and murdered, just like his fellow inmates.

Nida realizes eventually that she was brought two weeks prior to the completion of her training because Saeed had taken her name, and she consequently had become a terror suspect as well. Saeed is particularly a legendary man, believed to be a terrorist like the rest of the inmates, but with a shady past. The head of this facility is a decorated war hero, Colonel Sunil Dacunha (Manav Kaul), an alcoholic, and a self-proclaimed patriot, who is in an estranged relationship with his wife, and is mostly ignored by the officers. The most intriguing facet during the course of the web-series is however, the figure of the ghoul, that we first encounter in the form of Saeed, who is actually not a terrorist, but a ghoul summoned by Nida's father in exchange of his soul, what I believe is a rechanneling of the Faustian motif. The twist here is that the ghoul has killed the real Saeed and taken over his body. He knows the deepest, darkest secrets of the prison guards – secrets that they have planned on taking to the grave with them; and he eventually uses the same secrets to turn them against each other. After a massacre at Meghdoot 31, and Dacunha being shot by Nida, the latter is officially declared a traitor and detained. She summons the ghoul in exchange of her soul, right before the rolling of final credits.

Ghoul, primarily is a phantom like figure, present as an integral fragment of the Arabian folklore since the pre-Islamic times. Illustrated among myths as a cross between a spirit and a demon, the ghoul is counted among the evil d*jinns* in Arabic tales, fathered by Iblis, the

equivalent of Satan in Qur'an who refused to bow to God, much like Lucifer in the Bible. It's a fable creature that's been described especially as someone who robs graves and eats human flesh. Folktales in Arabic culture that encompass the motif of a fight occurring between a human being and a ghoul usually represent the ghoul as a hideous looking female creature seeking to harm others. Typically, the fight involves striking the monster with a sword and ends with victory. The female creature is sometimes called "Mother Ghoul" or like another relational term such as "Aunt Ghoul". She can change her form and appear to humans as anything she wishes, and she does so to scam wretched and helpless characters, usually men, into her power or abode, primarily to eat them.

Graham however transforms the ghoul figure into a male, possibly to turn away from the female monster figure overused in popular cinema across countries repeatedly as a retort to invert the idea of witnessing the woman, very much like a child as a traditionally repressed character. It is refreshing to not witness the same old tropes of women with long black hair often called *chudhails* and *daayans* (female spirits) with their feet upturned, or a vengeful *naagin* (snake-woman), the current fad(s) on Indian popular television. *Ghoul* instead uses the ghoul figure primarily in the form of a man, who is typically the victim in horror genre, especially in India, and I believe we should specifically laud Graham for bringing out this change in the Indian mass culture. The ghoul figure has travelled globally and eventually modified itself, just like any other folk subject. Found in early Mesopotamia folklore, besides the Moroccan *ghoul*, this demonic spirit travelled to Europe when Antoine Galland translated and penned the *Arabian Nights* (1704-1717). As mentioned, most of the origin folk culture(s) and early Western stories have construed the ghoul as female. She-ghoul, Amina has found many a mention among English writers. Charles Dickens describes Amina as "the awful lady, who was a ghoule" in his story, *'Story of Sidi Nouman,'* besides other mentions *(Sabika Razvi)*. The Bronte sisters were fascinated by Galland's evil ghoul cult as well. Ahmed K. Al-Rawi observes that most English language writers who portray ghouls as those who dig graves and hog on human flesh, have taken it from Galland's interpretation. This, he notes, is in contrast with what originally a ghoul was supposed to be. Al-Rawi argues that Islam could not get rid of these beliefs since they were inherently a part of ancient Arab folklore, their active imaginations, and are still very well-liked by the masses, which is why we come across them time and again in popular culture, including the works like Sui Ishida's *Tokyo Ghoul* (2017), JK Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, Prosit Roy's *Pari* (2018) and portions of it in Anurag Kashyap's *No Smoking* (2007) and Rahi Anil Barve's *Tumbadd* (2018).

In Graham's miniseries, the ghoul becomes an interesting Faust figure, for each of its principal characters signs a deal with the notorious devil, with their own blood, and summon it in exchange of their soul. The use of its figure is a step forward towards global entertainment, where the director is British, the setting is Indian, and the lore incorporated on an American digital platform is Arabic. It is a cross-cultural venture for sure and is something that is the need of the hour. It also feels as if the miniseries is a part of a post-feminist age, for it is set in a world where women are equally strong as men, and the same is represented as absolutely normal, minus the celebration of any kind of newly acquired right/freedom, a facet of the show, that I found explicitly intriguing and fresh. Gender therefore consciously enough, doesn't play

a role in the narrative. The series in fact reminds of a film like *Starship Troopers* (1997), where men and women are so equal that is quite normal for them to take showers together.

It is fascinating to witness this change, thanks to the advent of the digital mode, that spreads information within seconds, does not have a censor to curtail its voice, and hence, does not end up compromising on its premise and delivery. Oral and digital media, are two extremely different platforms used for expression in the present times and they share an intertextual relationship in the post-postmodern epoch, where often popular folk culture seeps into the web, and reaches out to the masses at a pace witnessed like never before, unlike the traditional way where it was passed on literally by word of mouth. This phenomenon becomes symbolic in the case of Graham's *Ghoul* as well, since just like the traditional process in which folk culture is typically exchanged, characters in this web-series are put into situations where they have to summon a ghoul, and just like the oral texture of the folk culture, this concocts a pattern that is recurring and would go on for generations to come. The ghoul figure becomes the only, and the final resort, that can save the day. The paranormal dissent is the only way out precisely, to get out of experiences and situations, that are ironically enough fed by the horror that humans are made of, and not ghouls or monsters. The tussle and wrestle are thus with the ghoul within, and the process is even more daunting than fighting the ghoul that is outside, the ostensibly actual monster. It is however the claustrophobic, encrusted spaces of the dungeon, that are spine-chilling and complement the mood of the miniseries. It almost feels like the audiences are under surveillance as well, just as the inmates and the officers, and this keeps them on the edge of their seats. All of them are trapped and have precisely nowhere to go.

The figure of the ghoul creates the foundation of the narrative, by thriving on people's guilt, working on the principle of reveal their guilt, eat their flesh. This is also how the lore marries the digital, and we are presented with an amalgamation of the two mediums. Shahnawaz had invoked the ghoul to deal with the injustice meted out to him, and to make his daughter understand her mistake. This ghoul takes the form of Saeed who is to reveal and expose its wrath, and in the process, the vices of the state's foot soldiers are coloured out. The eleven officers of the centre live in a cell with no natural light, originally built as a bunker, an underground shelter in case of a nuclear attack. Each of them displays bizarre, grey physiognomies and live by the rule that there is no room for empathy or sympathy. Despite being on the same side, they do not trust each other, and when struck by crisis, they turn on each other. Their worldview is hollow, and their demons often come out and pit them against each other. The monster within, is mirrored in the figure of ghoul, that ironically makes it easier to decide who the actual monster is. Two of the officers for instance, murder an innocent prisoner's wife and child right in front of him to get him to confess. As a consequence, they are both wrestling with remorse. At one point, even before the ghoul figure could channelize and take anybody else's form other than Saeed's, they get into a brawl, and one officer ends up murdering the other. As Dacunha tries to boost the morale of the dying officer by reminding him that he is a brave soldier, the latter makes a disturbing statement hinting that they all have blood on their hands. Through these actions, the ghoul reveals the violence of the state and those that blindly follow its beliefs. This helps Nida realize the error of her faith in the state, and thankfully thereby inverting the 'nationalist Muslim' (Aakshi Magazine) narrative that the

show was premised upon right in the beginning. The series is therefore a voice against the stereotypes that put anybody in a box and delimits their actions or curtails their freedom. It figuratively uses the cult of ghoul and invariably shows mirror to the audience, taking them completely in and making each spectator one of the monsters amongst the many.

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