

The Haunting Within: Memory, Motherhood, and Supernatural Belief in Hrishikesh Gupte's *Jarann* (2025)

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ABSTRACT

Hrishikesh Gupte's *Jarann* (2025) redefines the aesthetics of Marathi horror by fusing psychological realism with supernatural belief. The film revolves around Radha, a woman haunted by memories of black magic and the emotional residue of her childhood trauma. When she returns with her daughter, Saie, to her ancestral home, Radha's encounter with an old doll triggers visions that blur the boundaries between reality, superstition, and mental illness. The film examines motherhood, superstition, and moral fear as interconnected themes that reflect personal and collective anxieties.

This study interprets *Jarann* as a philosophical work of psychological horror that employs fear as a tool for self-examination and self-discovery. Using Noël Carroll's theory of cognitive horror, Barbara Creed's psychoanalytic feminism, Xavier Aldana Reyes's affect theory, and Avery Gordon's sociology of haunting, this paper explores how *Jarann* transforms the notion of haunting from supernatural intrusion to ethical reflection. The film's restrained style, sound design, and moral ambiguity align with the realist and reformist ethos of Marathi films. The findings suggest that *Jarann* represents a new direction in regional Indian horror, where fear becomes a metaphor for the conscience, memory, and the enduring power of belief.

Keywords: Marathi cinema, psychological horror, motherhood, superstition, trauma, conscience, Hrishikesh Gupte

Introduction

Horror cinema in India has evolved from its folkloric and supernatural roots into a medium that explores morality, identity, and trauma. Marathi horror has developed a distinctive voice through its engagement with ethical realism. Within this tradition, *Jarann* (2025), written and directed by Hrishikesh Gupte, makes a significant contribution. It reimagines fear not as a spectacle of the supernatural but as an inquiry into memory, guilt, and maternal anxieties.

Marathi horror films after 2000 reflect a shift from folk allegories toward psychological narratives that merge moral inquiry with genre elements (Mandlik & Gagare, 2025). *Jarann* extends this trajectory by turning the ghost story inward, locating horror in the mind rather than in the supernatural world. Through its exploration of motherhood and superstition, the film portrays fear as the afterlife of unresolved guilt.

This paper situates *Jarann* within the broader philosophical turn in Marathi horror, examining how it employs the aesthetics of minimalism, silence, and emotional realism to transform fear into reflection.

Cultural and Thematic Context

The world of *Jarann* is rooted in rural Maharashtra, a space often characterized by the coexistence of modern rationality and inherited superstition. The film opens with Radha and her daughter, Saie, arriving at their ancestral house to visit it before it is sold. What begins as a domestic journey soon becomes an exploration of psychological unrest. When Radha finds an old doll linked to her childhood fears, she experiences hallucinations intertwined with local folklore about black magic.

Marathi cinema has historically emphasized social realism and moral responsibility. From V. Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane* (1937) to Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha* (1982), filmmakers have focused on the conscience of ordinary people (Rajadhyaksha & Willemen, 2014). *Jarann* continues this tradition by framing fear as an extension of moral blindness. The village and ancestral home serve as metaphors for buried memories.

The film's engagement with superstition reflects Maharashtra's complex relationship with rationalism in two ways. Gupte portrays belief not as ignorance, but as emotional inheritance.

The doll functions as what Blake (2013) calls an “affective object,” one that carries historical trauma. For Radha, it is a symbol of her unresolved childhood experience with Ganguti, a village woman accused of witchcraft. This dynamic recalls Creed’s (1993) notion of the “monstrous feminine,” where the mother or woman becomes a site of projection for societal fear.

Jarann explores three intertwined themes: memory, motherhood, and superstition. Motherhood is the moral axis of the film. Radha’s fear of passing her trauma to her daughter embodies what Dwyer (2022) describes as “ethical horror,” where emotions become a medium for moral introspection. By merging superstition with psychiatry, Gupte turns horror into a discourse on how the past survives in the present mind.

Literature Review

The academic study of horror cinema encompasses a range of perspectives, from cognitive theory to psychoanalysis. Carroll’s *The Philosophy of Horror* (1990) explains the paradoxical pleasure derived from fear, a concept relevant to *Jarann* that invites empathy rather than revulsion. Reyes’s *Horror Film and Affect* (2016) argues that horror operates through sensory and bodily experiences; Gupte’s use of silence, minimal sound, and confined spaces exemplifies this affective power.

Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993) offers insight into Radha’s dual role as a victim and vessel of haunting. Her maternal anxiety represents both love and danger in the film. Similarly, Blake (2013) explores horror as an expression of national and personal trauma, a framework that aligns with Radha’s confrontation with superstition as collective memory.

In the Indian context, Dhusiya’s *Indian Horror Cinema* (2017) situates horror within discourses of gender and nation, while Ingle (2024) highlights how Marathi cinema integrates psychological realism with cultural morality. Mandlik and Gagare (2025) expand on this by identifying Marathi horror’s shift from folklore to psychology. Their study recognizes *Jarann* as emblematic of this evolution, where the ghost becomes an allegory of guilt rather than of punishment.

Gordon’s *Ghostly Matters* (2008) and Negi’s (2025) work on trauma in Indian film further inform this analysis. Both describe haunting as the repetition of what society refuses to

acknowledge. In *Jarann*, the spectral figure of Ganguti and the speaking doll signify the persistence of repressed suffering within modern consciousness.

Together, these theories establish an interpretive foundation for reading *Jarann* as an exploration of memory and fear through the intersection of feminist psychology, cultural superstition, and moral philosophy.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative textual and thematic analyses, integrating visual interpretation with theoretical frameworks. Following Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) definition, qualitative research emphasizes meaning and context over quantification, making it suitable for such cultural analyses.

Primary data were obtained through repeated viewings of *Jarann* (2025) during its theatrical and digital releases. Supplementary materials include interviews with Hrishikesh Gupte and Amruta Subhash published in *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* (2025), as well as critical reviews from *Scroll.in*. Secondary data were drawn from scholarly works on film theory, horror, and Marathi cinema.

The analysis was conducted in three stages.

1. Textual Analysis: Examined cinematography, sound, and mise-en-scène to interpret how form expresses psychological instability.
2. Thematic Mapping: Recurrent motifs such as confinement, silence, and memory were identified and interpreted within the frameworks of trauma and motherhood.
3. Philosophical Interpretation: Related findings to broader theories of fear, conscience, and superstition to position *Jarann* within the ethical tradition of Marathi cinema.

Triangulation between primary and secondary data enhances the reliability of the findings. This approach allows the paper to treat *Jarann* not simply as a horror narrative but as a moral and emotional one.

Analysis

Jarann constructs fear through emotional realism rather than spectacle. Sanjay Jadhav's cinematography uses natural lighting and confined framing to mirror Radha's internal suffocation. The ancestral home becomes a physical and psychological labyrinth. The doll, discovered by Radha and later played with by Saie, triggers suppressed memories. Reyes's (2016) theory of affect helps explain how this object evokes unease through tactile familiarity rather than shock.

Amruta Subhash's performance embodies Creed's (1993) concept of the "monstrous feminine." Maternal care is intertwined with fear, producing tension between protection and danger. Saie becomes both a source of comfort and a reflection of Radha's unresolved guilt. The absence of overt supernatural manifestations reinforces the film's psychological realism.

Ganguti, played by Anita Date-Kelkar, is pivotal. Her presence symbolizes the historical persecution of women through superstition. Cloete (2022) interprets cinematic witches as metaphors for the suppression of female agency. Ganguti's spectral role challenges the audience to question whether she is a hallucination or the return of a repressed truth.

Sound plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions. Rather than relying on orchestral cues, Gupte employs silence and ambient noise to externalize psychological conflict. The whispering voices Radha hears are layered with echoes, creating what Gordon (2008) describes as the "acoustic residue" of social haunting. The soundtrack functions as moral memory, reminding viewers that fear is an echo of conscience.

The narrative structure reinforces this psychological recursion. Through flashbacks and circular editing, the film collapses past and present. Radha's therapy sessions with Dr. Rashmi (Jyoti Malshe) and Dr. Dhananjay (Kishor Kadam) frame her haunting within the conflict between psychiatry and belief. Foucault's (1994) critique of medical rationality clarifies this tension: modern science diagnoses what culture cannot forgive.

Discussion

Jarann deepens the evolving discourse of Marathi horror by situating fear in the psychological and ethical realm. The film challenges the traditional binary between science

and superstition, and reason and emotion, by portraying both as incomplete responses to human suffering. Radha's haunting is not an external curse but a symptom of inherited belief systems and trauma suppression. This complexity positions the film within what Dwyer (2022) calls the "moral cinema of fear," where horror becomes an instrument for ethical reflection.

Gupte's decision to intertwine psychiatry and black magic creates a philosophical paradox in the narrative. The psychiatrists, Dr. Dhananjay and Dr. Rashmi, embody rational inquiry, yet their explanations fail to dispel Radha's fears. The haunting persists because it exists not in the external world but within Radha's consciousness. This ambiguity echoes Avery Gordon's (2008) definition of haunting as "a state in which the past is neither dead nor fully visible." *Jarann* thus articulates fear as an act of remembrance, not illusion.

The film also reimagines motherhood as a site of healing and horror. Barbara Creed's (1993) framework of the monstrous feminine provides insight into Radha's transformation. Her maternal instinct is suffused with terror; she fears not only for her daughter's safety but also her own capacity to transmit fear. When Saie begins speaking to the doll, Radha's guilt materializes through her child, demonstrating how trauma migrates across generations.

The use of rural spaces reinforces this thematic duality. Ingle (2024) notes that Marathi cinema often uses rural settings to dramatize moral conflicts. The drought-scarred village of *Jarann* operates as a liminal space between tradition and modernity. The ancestral home, simultaneously decaying and sacred, embodies the tension between memory and rationality.

From a sociocultural perspective, the film critiques patriarchal systems that stigmatize women through superstition. Ganguti's persecution as a witch reflects a historical continuity of gendered violence. By reinterpreting her haunting as a memory of injustice, the film transforms fear into an expression of moral empathy.

Conclusion

Hrishikesh Gupte's *Jarann* (2025) redefines Marathi horror as a cinema of introspection and moral realism. Through its synthesis of superstition, psychiatry, and maternal emotions, the film reconfigures the relationship between fear and understanding. It portrays haunting as the persistence of guilt, memory, and silence in the human psyche.

The film's restrained visual style and emotional precision align it with the broader movement of psychological horror in world cinema while remaining uniquely rooted in Marathi cultural memory. By grounding the supernatural in social and psychological realism, *Jarann* continues the trajectory of films such as *Maati Maay* (2007), *Lapachhapi* (2017), and *Bali* (2021).

Radha's confrontation with Ganguti's ghost is not an exorcism but an awakening. The act of remembering becomes a form of moral redemption. Ultimately, *Jarann* positions Marathi horror within the realm of philosophical cinema, where fear becomes a reflection of the human condition.

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