

ROOHI: BUILDING AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD WITH AN ALTERNATIVE FEMALE SELF

- Shatabdi Mondal

Abstract

The film, Roohi is triggering in multiple ways while posing the female question. It features a young woman suffering from dual personality, one is of a normal submissive girl, the other is of a witch with marriage obsession. While one-self of her impotent, submissive, the other is formidable, assertive, rebellious, as a result stronger both physically and mentally. Hailing from a primitive village, she finds it hard to give voice to her rather manly qualities. The toughest problem of her life is solved when she decides to own up both her binary opposites. The paper looks into the process of building of an alternative female world where the absence of any male does not necessarily create a crisis rather births a self-contained, self-sufficient female self by subverting heteronormative definition of family.

Keywords: *Split personality, Alternative female world, Submissive, Rebellious, Self-acceptance.*

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Roohi is originally a Hindi-language comedy horror film, directed by Hardik Mehta, has been in discussion for a while for its feministic approach, incorporation of human monster, endorsing lesbianism etc. Though, a basic commercial film, still it is able to stimulate myriads of critical aspects. The film, actually the second of a project of three comedy horror films. It is starred by Janhvi Kapoor(Roohi, Afza), Rajkumar Rao(Bhawra), Varun Sharma(Kattanni) is a tale of a human monster or split personality in a more scientific sense or term. Though it's feministic appeal is unmistakable, for that matter starting from feminism, gender studies, to existentialism everything rings a bell at some point of time. And the feministic approach is much more nuanced than it seems on the surface.

The story starts at Bagadpur, where there is a tradition of abducting the bride and marry her of with the groom who wishes to marry her, be it against her will. Locally the tradition is known as 'pakdaishaadi' i. e. catch marriage. Bhawra and Kattani are two stuffs of such a gang who does the job of kidnapping. They abduct Roohi to be married to a certain guy. When the marriage is delayed forcefully both of them falls for two different selves of Roohi. Roohi is possessed by a witch, Afza. Bhawra falls for Roohi whereas Kattanni is wooing Afza. This Afza is preoccupied with marriage; she has to have marry someone while Roohi resents the idea. The two of the beaux makes a lot of fuss to get their intended but Roohi and Afza marries each other and leave the male companions.

The very beginning of the critical analysis should start from the title of the movie itself. The word 'Roohi' is a homespun Hindi version of the original Arabic word, 'rooh'. 'Afza' is also a word of Arabic origin which means 'augmenting' or 'increasing'. Whereas 'rooh' means the soul and also a flower. Joined together, 'rooh afza' means 'refresher of the soul', very famously the name of a rose flavoured drink popular in India and Pakistan.

All the meanings are very relatable and meaningful in terms of the titular character. Roohi, the protagonist, is timid and sensitive, all through the movie her quivering body and trembling voice is perfectly comparable to a frail flower. Another meaning of the word is soul. The alternative self of Roohi, is Afza, the 'mudiyapyaari'(twisted-feet-witch), the witch can very well be treated as her own self her soul. If so, then she is a curious mixture of her social self and her private self, where each overlapping and occasionally overshadows the other. A split self-bewildered between public and private. Her public or social being is frail,

easy to be frightened, abducted, forcefully married but also marriage-phobic not only because of her previously broken marriage. But deep down she knows she has to marry sooner or later because she cannot protect herself either physically or mentally in a hellish phallogocentric society like Bagadpur. So, her private self is marriage-maniac yet potent and tough to dominate. The woman of this side is actually 'the madwoman in the attic' trying to compose her own destiny. Much like Catherin Earnshaw of *Wuthering Heights*, she is trying to challenge the men dominated society depending on her hysteric self, breaking boundaries, crossing borders set by male chauvinist social structure. Roohi's socially conscious being is aware that a strong-willed, strong-armed woman is simply unacceptable in society. She has been fighting long with this ultimate other, after all, annihilation of a manly woman self is only desirable and perfectly normal in a society where she belongs. That created the breach, the splitting of personality. She is not complete, because she is trying to let go or forsake her half even though it might be the better part. She is under the assumption that owning up Afza would alienate her, deprive her of her woman identity, but what she fails to see is that she could make herself complete by doing so.

Again, a question arises that who resents whom? Roohi resents Afza or it's the other way round. It goes both ways. While Roohi is rich in perception and understanding, Afza is deterministic. The possible reasons why Roohi is not ready to own up Afza is considered. Now, why Afza never considered Roohi to be best of her company is a question worth wondering too. She is all for having her ways, she will not compromise. Accepting Roohi's mental capabilities would only result in being weaker, giving away. She would rather kill this side of her than obeying male domination. To be acknowledged and owned by Afza, Roohi has to uplift herself a tad more. That would happen only after Roohi will have had enough.

There are only two conversations between Roohi and Afza in the whole movie. Both are essential and significant. At the first conversation Roohi, the weaker self, accepts the stronger one, Afza. If this can be put in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's terminology then 'the angel in the house' accepts the 'the madwoman in the attic'. In the second or last conversation Roohi makes Afza, the stronger one, accept her i. e. Roohi, the weaker one. This reconciliation can be interpreted as the birth of the new woman, the liberated woman, free from obligations, she accepts herself as she is. She embraces her strength and weaknesses equally. She condemns patriarchal society which judges her as a weakling or a freak or a tomboy and so on so forth. She asserts her femininity proudly.

There is a scene in the movie where Roohi is looking at herself in the mirror and meanwhile she changes into Afza. Looking at self-image so intently itself bears narcissistic connotations. Obsession with looking glass or love for self-image is an immensely critical aspect for ages. Starting from Greek and German mythology down to postmodern studies it has a long history. And a woman's obsession with mirror has a significance of another level

altogether. One can easily relate to the rhyming chant- "mirror, mirror on the wall/ who is the fairest of them all?". Drawing on the same idea it is not illogical to conclude or at least apprehend that Roohi imagines herself in her other self and gradually comes to reconcile between them. And eventually each falls in love with the other. Simone de Beauvoir in her seminal text, *The Second Sex* elucidates how a mirror constructs the greatest portion of a woman's narcissism. It is through mirror-doubling a woman falls in love with herself. Beauvoir claims: "every woman drowned in her reflection reigns over space and time, alone, sovereign; she has total rights over men, fortune, glory and sensual pleasure." And not coincidentally in the film whenever the mirror image takes over the physical self, she is unstoppable and invincible.

Literary history has many example of this mirror-doubling of woman. At first this is done by the patriarchal male writers. They used this as a means to show women are unrecognizable coaxing creatures. They framed women as they appeared to them without actually knowing women. Women are a complicated being. This is the inevitable repercussion of age-old suppression. The real self is forever buried underneath a socially constructed agreeable image. But as psychoanalysis has it, subconscious can be suppressed temporarily but never be erased completely. Looking at the mirror is the moment of self-contemplation. The real self of woman often peers through it. Gilbert and Gubar see it as the place where her creativity she kept hidden. Thus, they concluded mirror is to women what pen is thought to be men's. As pen was denied to them, a tied down woman impregnated with creativity, had to find her alternative. So, mirror became the means to allure out the other self the fierce creative self of woman. No wonder Roohi writes a new story herself after she confronts and reconcile with her alter ego.

On a different note, there is a phrase in Urdu 'rooh afza' which means 'refresher of the soul'. Drawing on that it can be said that the alterities, Roohi and Afza were bound to get together from the very first, and when it actually happened, they endowed and equipped with each other ventured on a rebellious new life. Together they built an alternative female world unforeseen at Bagadpur.

The film also portrays the journey of Indian male lover and it's future prospects. At first there is the one who tries to forcefully kidnap Roohi and marry her. That portrays the bestial primordial patriarchy where women are treated as no being at all rather an object to be achieved. The second phase is represented by the companionship of Bhawra and Roohi. He is loving, caring, accepting. He can withstand that Roohi has some mannish behaviour. She eats a lot, she is athletic type, creative also, he acknowledges her atypical female world. But he thinks only he is responsible for her welfare. He has taken into his hands every big decisions of Roohi's life. He doesn't even coil from marrying a dog for some rituals to execute so that he can have a happy life ahead with Roohi. However, Bhawra rules Roohi's life. May be he also wishes or expects inwardly that once the witch exorcised she

will be a typical Indian wife. This is a phase of passive patriarchy, of which the educated Indian families are strewn with. Then, there comes a phase where the male has accepted the female for what she is. All the positive and negative traits of her nature are accepted whole heartedly. There is no specified rule or norms for women's conduct, no scale of beauty to meet. Here men and women live in perfect harmony without anyone's judgement. This phase is represented by the companionship of Kattanni and Afza, the female monster.

The next phase is a feminist utopia represented by the union of Roohi and Afza and their self-sufficiency. There is many worlds of men where women are banished from or even if they stayed, had no right to have any say or were almost non-existent. War, politics, literature, medicine, sea voyage to quote a few. The film has a hint of building an alternative female world where there will be no place for males; women will be self-sufficient as it is in Begum Rokeya's short story *Sultana's Dream*. In the same short-story it is shown that females have taken up each and every task which are traditionally considered male's; here the males are the ones who are subjected to wear *pardah*. Similarly in the last scene of the movie Roohi, the typical Indian woman is seen to wear her dress in a mannish way and to drive a man's bike on which she gives a hard start and off she goes. One more question naturally arises here that has one of the major reasons of women's suppression been their frailty or physical weakness then? In a lot of ghost movies, it is shown that women are tortured then murdered then she returns to take her revenge empowered by supernatural might. As for example: *Bulbul, Chhori, Stree* ... so on so forth. Starting from Indian household habit of feeding the men first down to innumerable e-literature bears the testimony that women are deprived of the most basic need such as food. Even a present day advertise goes like: the mother asks rather states to her daughter why the women be needing protein? In the movie also when Roohi gobbled down plate after plate, the men are at a loss as to how being a mere woman she can eat so much. After all, "Health is wealth", and on every kind of wealth women's right is denied. No matter how much protest it faces but that lack of physical strength is one of the foremost reasons that man could bring himself to think that this race is inferior to them, henceforth, could be made into slaves.

Roohi, as a person has every virtue to survive in the world of Bagadpur. She has strong will, intelligence, determination, decision making faculty, she is a full-fledged individual, yet, guess what she lacked terribly, that, she had to gone through the tortures shown in the movie? And why Afza is feared? Why none ventures to offend her even the slightest? It's strength, physical strength (though it's actually magical strength but it can accomplish physical tasks), the only thing Roohi is found lacking, always pushed and pulled by those who don't lack it, the males. She is timorous and shaky all through. She expresses her mind only towards the end when she tells Bhawra, to let her decide what to do with her destiny. And that is when, we can well imagine that she has already made a mind to speak to her other self and get her heart and mind, strength and weakness in unison. Let's say the

girl picked up her gym routine and increased her protein intake. Thus, when womanly virtues met manly strength it made up a perfect union. It has potential to constitute a true independent individual. Hence, Roohi and Afza together construct their own world different from the world outside.

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Filmography:

Roohi, Directed by Hardik Mehta, Maddock Films, Jio Studios, 2021.



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