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## THE TROUBLESOME QUESTIONS OF CRIME AND PUNISHMENT IN *SHUTTER*

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**Abstract:** Crime is a behaviour either by act or omission, defined by statutory as deserving of punishment. In layman's language, the direct involvement of a person in an unlawful action makes him a criminal. However, the terms crime and criminal are not as simple as they seem. Likewise, the retribution too is a troublesome concept for debate; whether a crime, not necessarily according to the system of law, has to be punished and if the punishment meted out is right or not. The quite common tendency in literature and even films is to represent crime as a harm to the body which prominently includes killing. However, when gender is brought into consideration, the nature of crime itself undergoes a change. In case of women, body itself is a site of crime, which cannot be confined to just killing or blood spill. Rape attains the position of being an important crime and punishment against body, as virginity or the purity becomes an important question pertaining to women. This paper details on the concepts of crime and punishment in the film *Shutter* directed by Masayuki Ochiai.

**Keywords:** Crime, Punishment, Body, Rape, Paranormal.

### INTRODUCTION

*Shutter* (2008) is an American horror film based on the 2004 Thai film of the same name. The plot revolves around the life of a newly married couple Ben Shaw and Jane and their constant encounters with the spirit of Megumi. The film begins with the couple coming to Tokyo for their career advancement. While driving, Jane accidentally hits a girl and runs over her. From then on, Ben and Jane feel something strange surrounding them and finds its eerie presence in every moment of their life. Troubled by the paranormal activities occurring around them, they do their utmost to find out the hidden truth. Megumi's decayed body is found in her home and with the cremation done, everyone feels that all is well. But unknown to Jane, Ben hides a dirty truth which slowly gets revealed as Jane finds the photos and camera hidden away in a trunk. When confronted, Ben reveals the fact that Megumi was in fact his ex-girlfriend, whom he wanted to get rid of. To escape from her constant pestering, he had tried to capture some compromising pictures of Megumi with his friends Adam and Bruno, which turned into rape. However, instead of feeling guilty, Ben points out the fact that he had not touched Megumi and therefore should not be blamed for whatever happened. Disgusted by the attitude and doings of her husband, Jane leaves him. The last scene of the film shows Ben at a mental institution and Megumi's ghost draped over his back.

At the very first outlook, the film may seem as "another lame Asian horror remake" (Rotten Tomatoes) but an in-depth analysis shows a mechanism of power operative in the individual's body, especially, the female body. The topic of crime has troublesome definitions in this film. On one hand the viewers along with Jane are able to realize the fact that what Ben did to Megumi was nothing short than a heinous crime. They have sinned against her body according to the patriarchal conventions and snatched her off her purity. Even when it's found disgusting by Jane, her husband is not bothered and justifies the fact that he is not a criminal. He is strong in his belief that as he was not an active participant in the rape, he does not have to shoulder the

responsibility of it. He also makes his stand clear when he says that he does not feel guilty of anything as he just wanted to hold of some compromising pictures of Megumi. He did not think that it would eventually turn into a rape. Here the question arises; what can be considered a crime? Can a passive participant be considered as a criminal as well? Well, the law clearly states that a person need not actually have to commit the crime to be held responsible for it.

The policy supporting accomplice liability is the idea that an individual who willingly participates in furthering criminal conduct should be accountable for it to the same extent as the criminal actor. A principal in the second degree was present at the scene of the crime and assisted in its commission. An accomplice under most state and federal statutes is responsible for the same crime as the criminal actor or principal. (2)

The law clearly states that a person who is a passive participant is also equally responsible as an active one in a crime. Even when Ben clears his side of the story saying that he did not rape Megumi, he is the one who brings her to the place giving false promises and creates a situation suitable for rape. Hence, the troublesome question of crime gets answered.

The next bothersome question is that of punishment. Like the case of crime, punishment too has dual faces here. The rape of Megumi is considered a punishment by Ben. Even though he did not plan for the cruelty to happen, he wanted to take some compromising pictures of Megumi. This correlation of body and punishment is based on the patriarchal construct. We do not find this correlation in the case of male body. But in a woman's case, her body is the embodiment of her purity. The society makes her (a common notion irrespective of the gender) believe that her worth as a woman is in safeguarding her purity. The question of great importance is why the purity of the body (woman's body) is connected to existence? Why is that a woman has to believe that a crime towards her body is a stab in her moral character and dignity as well? Who made them believe that death is preferable to dishonour? The questions are many while the hands point towards the patriarchal construction of society. Ben, a product of the patriarchal norms, believed that a taint in Megumi's character will be achieved through the compromising photographs. He wanted to punish her for the nuisance she had become in his life. It is this belief that rape can be a form of punishment towards women, that makes the rape attempts abundant.

The concept of punishment also includes the paranormal presence. In the film, the viewers find the ghost of Megumi striving for a sort of revenge. She kills Ben's friends who raped her and constantly troubles Ben and Jane with her presence. But what is noteworthy here is the fact that she is not in fact troubling Jane, but instead trying to show her the truthfulness of the things. Megumi's ghost is present to make Jane realise that Ben is responsible for her death and is not what he portrays. Jane is seen recollecting the incidents that happened and she realises that Megumi has never hurt her. She was just caught in between the crossfire. Jane finds out the truth in an illogical manner, but feels disgusted for the things Ben had done. Towards the end of the film, the viewers find that Megumi's ghost is still troubling Ben and is a millstone round his neck. It is his life long punishment form which it would be impossible to escape from.

## CONCLUSION

The film *Shutter* gives its viewers an insight into the questions of crime and punishment. For the critical viewers the film is an experience beyond the ghostly presence. The female body as a stigmatized find its presence in the film. Apart from the earlier analysed issues of body, crime and punishment, the film gives an important message of the wheel of karma to the common folk. Bringing gender into consideration, the paper has attempted to analyse the mere horror film beyond its regular paranormal effects. Crime and punishment have troublesome definitions, and with the changing scenario, it has to attain differential importance. The long held traditional patriarchal beliefs have in a way given too much importance to the virginity and purity of women's body. These ideological constructs have knowingly or unknowingly led to the brimming cases of cruelty and violence against women. It's high time that we deconstruct and reconstruct these traditional beliefs.

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