

## **Sympathy for Lady Vengeance: Feminist Ghosts and Monstrous Women of Asia**

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Female ghosts of Asia are oppressive, monstrous, judgmental; they are being punished; they are examples; they are feminist. There is a sameness to their representation, their goals and the outcomes of their objectives that has traditionally been interpreted as punishments for their monstrosity and their daring to deviate from society's norms. It is this very deviation that gives the monstrous female ghosts of Asia their power; the ability to punish their aggressors and the patriarchal society that has left them to rot. Modern interpretations of these women have simply highlighted these abilities, adapting them for modern centuries without diluting their power, or society's fear of them.

The feminism of the Asian ghost is so great that it can destroy not only its own patriarchal spaces, but the Western colonial spaces that have been forced upon them. Western interpretations of Asian ghosts see the same features – the long black hair, the pale skin, the white clothes, and the young woman attacking all around her. They are coming for vengeance, and that vengeance is almost always towards a man who has wronged them. And, despite being products of a western remake system, they still conform to their feminist Asian origins: the monstrous woman overcomes, leaving perhaps only the Western woman who uncovered her (though all the men in her life die).

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### **Bangladesh / India / Sri Lanka**

The Churel (or Chudail) can be bound to her burial grounds by affixing four nails to the corners of her burial site, with red flowers planted on them; by nailing her house's threshold. She can also be bound by nailing her corpse's hands and feet, with her feet shackled and red chilli across her eyes.

She can be distracted by the spilling of mustard or millet seeds on her grave (which she stops to count); by the scattering of mustard seeds or cotton wool through her funeral procession to the burial grounds outside of the village's boundaries (she stops to collect them); by taking her corpse out of the back or side door of her house rather than the front door, so she is confused when she tries to find her way back into the house (usually through the front door). These are all home-focused remedies: reminders of the woman's role as cleaner, as homemaker.

From India, Churel is a pregnant woman who died when she was mistreated or lacked the proper care, and then cremated (per her Hindu tradition) as opposed to being carefully buried. The burial – a pre-emptive effort to keep her in her grave - would stop the Churel from forming. Once she arrives she is difficult to remove, so efforts are made to distract or bind her.

She is well worth this fear and caution; she is punished and bound because she is a threat to continued society. If she rises she lures young men, draining their virility and transforming them into old men whilst she, herself, continues to prey upon them. She especially preys upon those who treated her ill, and it is for this reason that men are her primary targets, as it is her patriarchal village, often, that led to her death. Her 'true form' is hideous, though she can appear beautiful for the purposes of vengeance, a marker yet again of society's expectations on a woman and how she changes herself to pass and serve its needs (or subvert them, as the Churel does).

The Mohini devva is from South India, where she preys on men. She is a woman who commits suicide before having sex or romantic love; that is, before being fulfilled by society's expectations. She has long hair and sings romantic songs, dancing and alluring her male victims with her bangles and anklets and her white sari. The man she attracts, tempted by her beauty and her food and her scent like incense, having given in to her charms, withers away, growing thin and losing interest in life. By the time he dies he is spitting blood, as are his walls. Mohini, like the Churel, has punished men for leading to her taking her life – sometimes forcibly, through abuse – and placing expectations upon her that she was unprepared to meet, and she continues on as he

withers away. It is important to remember that the Mohini devva is different from the Mohini avatar – a form of Vishnu, and the two should not be confused.

In the mountains of Kashmir is the Rantas, a djinn with long toenails, backwards feet, long hair that reaches to her knees, and breasts that drape over her shoulders. She is feared by the wolves in the hills who hide from her; she is ugly and at night steals young men to be her husbands in the hills. She takes the best of men – the brothers and the newly-wed husbands, and those whose losses are particularly feared. This is a reversal of society's allowance for men of all values to pass judgment on the beauty of women and, famously, for ugly men to get beautiful wives. Here, the ugly woman steals the beautiful men, and she is happier for subverting society.

The only way to capture her is via grabbing hold of her backwards facing feet, which make convenient handholds; though some Pir (Sufi teachers) are able to repel her.

Yakshi died violently, and in her afterlife she floats through the air and thirsts for blood. At night she passes as a beautiful woman, seducing men and taking them to her palm tree, which they see as an ancient Keralan home. There she kills him, and his bones are found come sunrise. She is the product of the violence in society, of the dismissal of women, and of the power they can take, as exemplified by the tale of Mangalathu Chiruthevi. Mangalathu Chiruthevi lusted after a man married to another woman. She had the wife killed, and in return her lover killed her. She returned, reincarnated to a couple but with the powers she gained upon her death, as a Yakshi who sought vengeance over her ex-lover, taunting and haunting him, and on the way killing and eating many other beautiful young men.

Shaakini are women who die early in their marriages, often killed by their in-laws. Daakini are women who die an untimely death. In life they are subject to the people who have power over them, primarily their families and their in-laws. These women return to seek their vengeance on those who have betrayed them, in whom they had trusted, who have been complicit in society taking their lives. Shaakini and Daakini both primarily take their vengeance via haunting of those who wronged her. They are considered to be not so dangerous as other monstrous ladies of South Asia.

In Bangladesh, as in India, is the Pretni, a woman who died with desires unfulfilled - she was not married, usually. She may, in fact, have been a terrible person, but she died without power and now, as well as being cursed to walk the earth, she has the power to viciously attack and to seek her vengeance.

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## **China**

Nu Gui wears the usual white dress - or occasionally a red dress; she has the traditional flowing black hair, and the pale skin. She often appears as a beautiful woman in order to seduce men and then take their blood, or sometimes their yang, as their punishment for straying, for their desires, for their participation in Nu Gui's subjugation.

In particular, the injustice against Nu Gui comes from sexual abuse or being personally wronged. There is a story of a funeral ceremony where a murder victim was dressed in red, the colour of vengeance and rage for ghosts (as opposed to humans, for whom it is lucky). Her family hoped that it would induce her to become a Nu Gui, and seek vengeance on her murderer. It is in this way that Nu Gui becomes a vehicle for women who have been oppressed by the patriarchy and by society. It is notable that Nan Gui, the vengeful male counterpart, is rarely spoken of or depicted in tabloid or traditional texts.

By contrast, Ba Jiao Gui takes her vengeance upon those who betray her in her current, ghostly form. She lives in a banana tree, and can be trapped using a red string and nails; when she's trapped she works as a good luck charm if she is promised her freedom at the end of her captivity. Of course, if her captors don't release her, she takes her vengeance upon them, ensuring they end horrible, often violent deaths for their betrayal. Although it seems logical to release a demon after promising to do so, but the greediness of humans means Ba Jiao Gui is often able to exact a

vengeance she would not be able to were she truly a human woman, trapped for real by these societal mores, and unable to shake herself free of what the patriarchy truly calls for (the captivity of women).

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### **Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore**

Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia share the Pontianak, the spirit of a woman who died in childbirth. She is beautiful when she wants to be (often when she is preying on a man), but is always pale-skinned. Like the Onryo and the Nu Gui, she dresses in white and has long, black hair; popular imagery show her with her nails long and her hair dangling as she digs into the guts of her prey. She eats human organs, which she removes with her long fingernails (beautiful and functional). She sometimes also eats the sex organs of a man when she desires revenge against him, and it is this, perhaps, coupled with the beautiful plumeria fragrance she wears (masking the natural stench of the drains that she emits), that indicates her readiness to fight against the patriarchy. Similarly the Kuntilanak has her long black hair and her pale skin and her white dress, and she is beautiful - at times as beautiful as a bird, into which she can transform before flying off to suck the blood of virgins and young women.

The Pontianak spends her days in the pokok pisang, the banana trees of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore. The banana tree is an important image in South East Asia, not just for its delicious fruit and its Pontianaks, but also for its ability to host a variety of good and evil hantu, the king prawn banana, and its use as a building agent. Its multilayered elements add an extra layer to its role as the home of the Pontianak, considered perhaps the most dangerous of Malays ghosts.

At night, the Pontianak tracks her prey by his scent, sniffing clothes left out to dry - a scolding, perhaps, of chores left incomplete; even a punishment of the man who strips his clothes off to have an affair out of the home. In her horrific form, coming for the man, she has her long claws and sometimes her long teeth. The Kuntilanak especially, in her female form, is hollow in her back. In her bird form, she may injure a woman and make her sick - specifically, she will make her victim bleed vaginally. This attack, too, can be seen as a form of punishment - perhaps for not becoming pregnant, a tale of the patriarchy over a woman. Paul Theroux, in his short story collection *The Consul's File*, suggested that the Pontianak was invented by Malay wives to prevent their husbands from random sexual encounters at night; this shows his fear of the lady, and his desire to put her back in her place by reframing her as the fabrication of a jealous wife.

She is defeated, in the end, by a nail plunged into her head. If done right, the pontianak becomes a beautiful woman and a good wife for as long as the nail is lodged in her head. The kuntilanak is merely defeated by a nail to the point of her head (no wife-salvation for her).

The name 'pontianak' is possibly formed from *perempuan mati beranak* ('woman who died in childbirth'), or possibly *puan + mati + anak* (woman + die + child). These naming conventions are not insignificant, as it demonstrates how critical these elements are to her formation; and also to how she is seen by society.

The demon tamed as good wife is nothing new and hardly unique. It is evidence that no woman is too unsalvageable - even the evil one who sucks your blood and attempts to be nonconforming can, if punished correctly, be brought around. Pontianaks have been known to bear children, even; but the true story of the Pontianak is how she is never truly tamed. She is always waiting to be unleashed, at which point she will visit her vengeance upon her jailor, or at the very least escape; as a woman can, when given the opportunity to flee from the society which places a man over a woman's own desires and goals.

Related to, and commonly confused with, the Pontianak is the Langsuir, a woman who died, along with her baby, during labour. If proper precautions (glass beads in the mouth) aren't taken, she reanimates 40 days after her death. Sometimes her baby is with her, and sometimes her baby is not, but often its cries are heard.

The langsuir has no beautiful form, having died at her most vulnerable. She has the traditional

long nails and white dress and, supplemented by bright red eyes, she preys on pregnant woman, whom she either kills or causes to miscarry. Like the Pontianak, she may become human through intervention - in the langsuir's case, if her nails are cut, or if her hair is placed into the hole in her neck through which she drinks blood. When there are no humans around, she eats fish, because she lives near a river or the sea. She is the manifestation, as are many South East Asian ghosts, of woman's bucking of society. In this instance, though, the objects of her vengeance are not those who caused her harm, but those who propagate the system through conforming to it.

The Balianese Leyak are humans who practice black magic. Their queen is Rangda, a widow-witch. Leyak haunt graveyards and feed on corpses, and cause illnesses and deaths. Revenge against Leyak is discouraged, in part because she can never truly be contained. Though in daylight she appears human, by night her head and intestines fly through the air. She has very long tongues and sharp fangs, and can shape change into animals. Similar to the Leyak is the Penanggalan, who detaches her head to fly around with just her entrails and her stomach trailing after her. During the daytime, with her head attached to her body, Penanggalan is a woman; at night she too uses her tongue and sharp fangs to eat the blood of a new mother; this will give the woman a wasting disease.

One way to kill or wound Penanggalan is for her to be spied on by a man as she flies around at night, or for men to burn her body. Regardless, it is always men who must destroy the Penanggalan, reinforcing the societal and male-centric boundaries of society.

Penanggalan may have originally been a young woman or an old woman who dabbled in dark magic; she may have been a beautiful priestess meditating in a bath of vinegar, and when a man came into the room with no warning, she jerked her head in surprise. In doing so, her head and entrails were ripped from her body. Enraged, she flew after the man, leaving her body in the vinegar - it is this scent that is associated with her. Most commonly, however, Penanggalan is a midwife who has made a pact with the devil, and when she returns home after flying around she dips her entrails in vinegar to shrink them back into her body. She is the story of a woman whose outrage at a man has given her power; she is the story of a woman who seeks to help other women through the childbirth and society that has killed many a woman before her. Either way, she is woman-centric.

Lesser known but still locally very powerful, Wewe Gombel resides on Java and Sunda in Indonesia, where she kidnaps children and brings them to live in her palm tree. Long ago, in Semarang, Wewe Gombel lived with her husband, but when he realised she was barren he started having affairs. She caught him and killed him, and the village drove her out; following which she committed suicide. Upon her death she became Wewe Gombel, the vengeful spirit. She was driven to suicide by the misogyny and patriarchy in her village, and the importance placed on having children. A cautionary tale for children, the children forget to leave her, or don't want to leave her, and it is here that the tales differ. Some say that she cares for and loves the children, and that the children she kidnaps are mistreated or neglected children. So basically she's the best, ensuring that children are loved and supported within a system that fails them. Others say that the children she kidnaps hallucinate that trash is their favourite food, and then after eating they forget to ask for help or to try to go home, and are enchanted into staying.

The ways to find the children are the same. Wewe Gombel must be made to dance, but gently, so that the children don't fall out of the tree. Her tree must be found, and the gentle music made from kitchen tools of bamboo, tampah and coconut lures her into dancing. When she dances, the adults can see her, and then Wewe Gombel runs, leaving the children behind to be rescued by the people.

The story of Wewe Gombel highlights the patriarchal and constricting systems within communities, with her defeat by being seen by men, and her punishment for deviating from the community strictures - even though she deviates in order to provide for children who are being abused. It is her otherness, however, and her other-worldliness, that gives her the power to provide for these children who would otherwise fall through the cracks in their current community systems.

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## Japan

The Onryo is stronger in death than she was in life, and a figure of vengeance in Japanese mythology and, frequently, in Kabuki. Though she has at various times had a variety of appearances, since the Edo period (1603-1867), due in part to the rise of Kabuki and the rise of the representation of the onryo in Kabuki theatre, she is now considered to have a more consistent appearance. She has wild, long black hair (often, though not always, wet). She wears her white burial kimono. And her face is pale, white.

She is the foundation of many enduring feminist ghosts of Asia, with her pale skin and her long hair and her white clothes, images seen in Mohini, Nu Gui, Pontianak, Gwisin. She is the image of revenge and the image of regret, and in many ways she is the fear of reality and the fear of grudges. Onryo is the manifestation of woman's punishment of men for betraying her; of woman's attempt to remove herself from a society that binds and pressures her.

The Onryo is vengeance. She is driven by her rage and the betrayal against her, and the power of her rage allows her, although she is dead, to influence the living. An early tale of female vengeance is found within the Kojiki, the Record of Ancient Matters, where it is recorded that the goddess Izanami dies unjustly and sends a curse to the land of the living from Yomi, the land of the dead. Yomi is where all go when they die, human and god alike, and from there, there is no return; though if their rage or power is strong enough, a resident of Yomi can influence the land of the living – which is how Izanami-no-Mikoto curses. Also known as Izanami-no-kami, she is an early Japanese divine being, who was brought into being to create. She died giving birth, and her husband wanted her back, descending into the land of the dead; until he saw her current form, rotting and riddled with maggots, at which point he rejected her and enraged her and trapped her in Yomi. She was incredibly unimpressed at being rejected for her appearance, sending 'foul women' after him, and threatening to destroy the living if she were released.

And as with this goddess, it is her strong emotions that give Onryo the power to affect the living. She seeks justified, personal revenge (often of abusive husbands or traitorous lovers), but she can also bring about larger disasters such as earthquakes, fires and pestilence, depending on the power of her rage. Though significant in scale, these impacts can still affect society just as revenge upon a man can.

There is the tale of 'How a Man's Wife became a vengeful ghost and how her malignity was diverted by a Master of divination', wherein a man abandons his wife 'for no particular reason' and she wastes away. She remains, though, even in death, with her hair growing longer and her skin growing pale, as the Onryo she becomes, and she haunts her village until the villagers force the husband to return and take care of her. He does this by riding her body like a horse using her hair as reins, whilst she flies about the countryside. He remains astride her until dawn, when her body disintegrates and she is put to rest. That's a tale of the patriarchy right there, a woman neglected by domination and the society that supports it, left to rot until she is put down by a man who colonises her body in order to do his duty to the village who refused to support her. This story, in its way, is another take on the tamed demon wife; and is evidence that the power of the female Asian ghost can not always reign over her oppressors.

Yotsuya Kaidan, or the Ghost Story of Yotsuya, is a well-known, possibly definitive, interpretation of the Onryo. Oiwa is a beautiful woman who is scarred when her Oume, who is in love with Oiwa's husband Iemon, sends her a topical facial cream with a poison inside. Unknowingly she continues through the world with her scarred face whilst her husband, repulsed, attempts to have her raped in order to be able to divorce her. Enraged, particularly as up until this point she has had no idea she is scarred, Oiwa flies after her husband with a sword, only to cut her own neck during the struggle and die. Her strong desire for vengeance, as per tradition, brings her back to the land of the living. She wears her white burial kimono and has long black hair and a white face (which as a character in kabuki, marks her immediately as a ghost). She haunts her husband and, on his wedding night to his new wife Oume, tricks him into killing Oume and Oume's grandfather. She is also a Macbeth of sorts, with Yotsuya Kaidan performances being riddled with injuries, deaths and mysterious accidents.

Although it is Oume and Oume's grandfather whose deaths she initiates, these acts (along with

her psychological tormenting) drive lemon, her traitorous husband, to delusions and madness prompted by her as she continues to haunt him in his isolated mountain retreat. He is ultimately killed by Yomoshichi, Oiwa's sister's husband, partially in an act of vengeance for his sister-in-law, completing the cycle and Oiwa's vengeance, and revealing Oiwa's ultimate power as a monstrous woman even within a community that was complicit in her destruction.

There is the story of Okiku and the Nine Plates, where Okiku, a beautiful and virtuous servant, is tricked through duplicity into remorse and guilt by her master, who wants her to feel so guilty and remorseful that she will have sex with him. She refuses, again and again, no matter how guilty she feels (though she has done nothing wrong, and he is lying to her); he becomes so angry at her refusal to submit to his demands that he throws her into a well where she drowns. Her spirit returns to psychologically torment him, screaming constantly; punishing him in a way she never could when she was living and powerless to his demands.

There are other beautiful, monstrous Japanese ghosts. Yuki-onna the snow woman is also a beautiful woman with long black hair. She kills travellers, particularly men – whom she may also take as lovers before she kills them. She is winter, and she cannot be trusted, and she is powerful. And the kitsune, who are beautiful maidens, intelligent, and mischievous – well known to use their powers to wreck havoc upon men, and looking none too kindly upon interlopers and foreigners.

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## **Korea**

Gwisin are occasionally male but usually female. She wears the white Hanbok for funerals, has long black hair and occasionally she is faceless. She is the soul of someone who cannot go to the other side because she is full of deep resentment or sorrow, or because she has failed to fulfil her life's purpose. She is often the victim of something terrible that needs to be revenged or appeased; and Gwisin is aggressive about it. There is cheonyeo gwisin ( 처녀귀신), the virgin ghost girl, who died before fulfilling her life's purpose of serving her father, her husband, and her son. By dying without completing these tasks assigned to her by the patriarchy, she becomes Gwisin.

Korea also has the fox sprite, the Gumiho ( 구미호). She is the nine-tailed fox, and she enjoys preying on men in her beautiful woman form. Sometimes Gumiho feeds on human livers in order to become human. Often these human livers belong to men, and can be considered a commentary on how women must walk, perhaps, over men, in order to bring themselves higher, or to make themselves able to be seen as human by a society that condemns them as unnatural and unacceptable.

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## **Philippines**

Manananggal bisects; eats men and sucks blood; uses bat-like wings to fly into the night. With a proboscis-like tongue, the manananggal sucks the blood of fetuses and can be defeated by crushing garlic or salt into the bottom torso and the top will dissolve in the sunlight. In the day she can appear as just a human woman if her body is attached together, hiding her monstrosity behind society's trappings.

Aswang are often female, and live their daylight lives as shy townspeople. At night they shape shift. They eat unborn fetuses and small toddlers, and adults as well. They are thin so they can hide behind bamboo stalks, and are fast and silent. They may replace their live victims with a clone or doppelganger made from plant materials - the doppelganger will return to their home and wither away, another commentary on hiding the monstrosity of women behind what society expects to see.

They are a lesson for the monstrous woman, too: they rarely hunt at home in their villages, instead going away to hunt. "Better an aswang than a thief" is the saying, though their nobility is

in doubt – people will still attack a suspected aswang rather than risk their lives.

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### **Thailand**

The Krasue was a Khmer princess, burnt to death for loving a man she was not engaged to. Before her execution she had a witch cast a magic spell to keep her body unharmed by the flames; but it didn't arrive until she was nothing more than a head and her entrails. This was enough, and with her face and her intestines she haunts and devours the flesh of the living. She may also have been a woman trying to learn black magic, or a woman who aborted or killed in a previous life, or who ate or drank something flavoured with krasue saliva or flesh. This bifurcated set of opinions is indicative of this very argument - are monstrous women being punished? Or is becoming monstrous part of their strength, giving them the power to break free of society's strictures and enabling them to have the power and independence that their patriarchal society has prevented them from wielding until they became monstrous?

The Krasue preys on pregnant women, eating fetuses with her long tongue, and in the process infecting pregnant women in rural areas: a cautionary tale about hygiene, but also evidence of Krasue's power to impact things in a way she couldn't when she was alive.

Like Manananggal, Krasue can re-join her body before sunrise and live like a normal woman, encouraging people to see beyond her monstrous mask. Or hiding before she can wield her power again.

Phi Tai Hong is usually a woman who died suddenly and violently and unnaturally - that is, from being murdered or from drowning. Phi Tai Hong is the most feared of ghosts, especially in her Tai Tong Klom form - that is, the ghost of a woman who died while pregnant. Tai Tong Klom is a very powerful spirit - some suggest this is because of the power of two spirits. Sometimes these women were abandoned by their men, and commit suicide and then wander around getting vengeance. Getting rid of Phi Tai Hong is difficult and complicated.

Mae Nak died in childbirth whilst her husband was at war. He came home from war and she was dead, but her sense of vengeance and of her incomplete life was so strong that her spirit remained and fooled him into thinking she was alive. The villagers knew but were unable to tell him, much as society may often identify the broken stair or the abuse in their midst. Here, our vengeful woman is subdued by the society that will not out the problem. The village helps her husband push her out, and part of being pushed out is to become the goddess worshipped: but at the same time it is pushing her into a mother/protective/nurturing role, giving up the role she chooses for herself for the one people can be content with. This in a way reduces her. Some of the things she does are condemned by Thai (and Chinese) society, including the act that has her seen for the ghost she is - when she drops a lime through the floorboards of her high house and reaches her hand with extended arm to the ground, rather than descending the stairs to retrieve it. This is considered a sign of her laziness and it reveals her for who she is - rather than being indicative of her using the skills and powers she has as a woman for her best outcome.

Mae Nak best illustrates the ambivalence in Thai society towards the role of a woman. She stays at home and gives birth to her husband's child. Even through death she maintains her husband's home, but her community shuns her. She makes her husband dinner and uses her skills as she has them – but this condemns her.

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### **The Untrustworthy Woman**

The traditional interpretation of these monstrous female ghosts is that they are untrustworthy women; that this is what happens when a woman throws off her correct position and role within society. When a woman separates herself from society, from meeting her desires (having children, having a son, supporting her husband), she becomes monstrous, and her objectives and her purpose fully reflect the woman that she truly is. No woman, this theory suggests, can ever truly be trusted.

That her face is missing or covered by her hair means she is no longer human; that she is missing her body, or must live off children, or seeks vengeance means she is not human. She is the symbol of the destruction of society, and she must be controlled and put in her place. And these are universal views, with the representation of Onryo and her long, wet hair; with the head and intestines of Krasue, Leyak and Penanggalan; with the propensity for pregnant women to become figures of unfulfilled vengeance. The geographical proximity of Japan to China and Korea; the proximity of Thailand to Malaysia and Indonesia; the relationship between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh and India, may explain the similarities in these monstrous women. Or they may simply be a sign that all women are monstrous, and must be controlled. But this is a misogynistic, short-sighted, selfish view.

There is another interpretation.

Instead of a monster, see a woman who is fully her own. Instead of a lack of humanity, embrace her humanity for all that it is.

All women are at the mercy of the patriarchy, and they require some method of seeking reparations. She needs the power and the agency that embracing her monstrosity fully awards her. She can be fully trusted – to seek what is best for herself, to control her future and her outcomes and discard society's out-dated models.

The monstrous woman is a threat to society, and cannot be trusted within society. But it is only because society has long abused her. Those who have not abused her have always been safe – though not necessarily in expected ways. Those who have indirectly harmed her may yet be punished, as she punishes the community and the society who put her there. See the children Wewe Gombol kidnaps, safe and happy and warm in her tree. See Nu Gui, who after being abused and assaulted by men, attacks only men in turn. See Ba Jiao Gui, who attacks only those who betray her now, in her current form. See Churel and Shaakini, who specifically seek those individuals who caused them harm. See the wife in 'How a Man's Wife became a vengeful ghost and how her malignity was diverted by a Master of divination', who felt no ill-will to her village until her husband left her to rot and her village shunned her for being alone; only then, after she had died, did she play tricks on them and become a ghostly nuisance in their lives, because they were the community that had allowed her husband to abandon her. See

See Pontianak whose story, as Theroux implies, might be an old wives' tale to discourage husbands from straying outside the home. A tale of misogyny, that women would make up this tale, a myth, to laughably fail to control their husbands. Instead understand her story as that of a woman who has found her way to misandry, who understands that if a man betrays a woman for no greater reason than that society says he can; then, he must be punished.

See Pontianak, Mae Nak, Yakshi, Onryo, as women who only seek to control their own bodies. Denied for so long, it is not about being untrustworthy within society – it is about trusting the self.

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### **The Ghost as independent and owner of her own power**

It is only after her death that the Asian female ghost is truly free. Despite attempting freedom in life, it is the powers granted to her through her rage and unfulfilled desires that allow her to become independent and regain ownership of the power that was taken from her by society.

Wanglund, in her article *The Vengeful Feminine: "The Asian Female Ghost is a True Feminist,"* mentions a series of novellas which in 15th century Korea were banned due to their depiction of "strong-minded, independent female ghosts who had a strong sense of identity", proving that some ghosts are so feminist they can be a risk to the patriarchy even whilst being completely decidedly fictional. It is this ghost, with her strong sense of self and her unwillingness to leave the mortal realm due to her desire to not conform to the relevant social constructions, who highlights the importance of the Asian female ghost to feminist discourses.

As is by now obvious, sometimes the feminist ghosts of Asia are the spirits of women who have

been driven to suicide and have returned, with the power they lacked in life, to torment their oppressors. Sometimes these women leave their oppressors alone. At times they attack everyone, even those who had nothing to do with their oppression. At other times, they harm nobody until their tragedy escalates and they are forced to retaliate. And sometimes they allow themselves to be bound. The important element here is that, as monstrous women, they are arbiters of their own destinies.

It is for this reason that stories of monstrous women have, on and off, been banned. During the Cultural Revolution ghost and fairy tale literature was banned in China in order to control the dissemination of revenge, escape and change narratives. China has a long history of the hungry and vengeful ghost, and these narratives are always about unfulfilled lives, of ghosts controlling their independence and their destiny.

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### **The feminist ghost as socio-political response**

That so many of these women die in childhood is significant in contributing to her monstrosity, but form a significant part of the socio-political response. Although pregnancy can be consensual, it has traditionally in many of these cultures been imposed: by the external cultural and local situation; by the family; and also by the widening political situation. It can in many ways be a reflection of colonialist influence and forces within Asian history, as well as being a reflection of what women have been forced to endure within their ever tightening social binds.

The image of woman as victim of colonialism is hardly revolutionary. There is the traumatic history of Japan's comfort women, women from China and Korea whose bodies and countries were colonised in WWII. There are the colonised women of South East Asia, with priority given first to white women, and then to local women who bettered themselves through marrying British men when they arrived in Singapore and Malaysia. There are the women of Hawaii, who were exoticised as beautiful Pacific Islander women with their bare breasts there to share with the colonising men of America. Many of these ghosts are anti-colonial ghosts, embedded in a fear of the violation of boundaries. Ba Jiao Gui, who revenges herself when you break her trust. Krasue, who revenged herself on her fiancé (who burnt her for being unfaithful to a promise she was compelled to make). Churel, who will not be contained.

Pregnancy is a logical confusion to this colonial image, and the woman dying in childbirth is a motif that extends it further. Subject to the demands of the colonist, the Asian woman is forced into a situation she may not want, and subsequently her body suffers and she wilts dies, having had at no point any control over her own body. She, understandably, then rebels, wrecking havoc over the colonisers with her newly born powers.

The viral nature of many of these ghosts, such as the infecting abilities of the krasue's blood, is a reflection of deep rot in society, and it is for precisely this reason that they have great potential as socio-political commentary.

This infection narrative can also be considered less metaphorical, as a tale of staying safe, particularly around points of disease, hygiene, and health. With the influx of Western diseases along with Westerners, and with the vectors for transmittable diseases around issues tackled in these stories such as sexual promiscuity and sexual abuse, this narrative allows monstrous women to both perform a service in their monstrousness at the same time as blaming her for the infection within society.

She is also an image of fear of social repercussions. The Asian Female Ghost is what happens when the colonized or oppressed gains power against her oppressor, and is granted the opportunity to punish the oppressor for the wrongs he has knowingly, sometimes with noble intentions, pushed upon her. But noble intentions don't detract from the result of removing her integrity and her sovereignty; and it is in this way that the dream of colonized nations rebelling is revealed.

The vengeful woman in Otto Feng's *Bitter Suites* highlights the emphasis on judgment and

punishment over mere revenge, though vengefulness plays a significant part. Women who are overcome by the patriarchy are often failed by the systems in place and the communities who are supposed to support them. The spirits and entry to the realm of judgment is then, after the end, the only system left by which a fair outcome can be met. Though it takes place in current times, *Bitter Suites*, set in Singapore and heavily influenced by Daoist and Chinese Buddhist myths, is an excellent example of this.

A bitter, betrayed woman, Feng's monstrous woman is beautiful, with long black hair and pale skin. But in the end she lacks the true power of the Asian ghosts who have come before her, because she exercises her powers unfairly, rather than through fair judgment.

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### **The Modern Ghost**

Traditionally, the onryo was limited to seeking vengeance or haunting those directly connected to her hurt and downfall. In more modern texts, particularly in movies, the scope of her vengeance has widened to include the entirety of the patriarchal and colonial society that made her its victim.

*Ringu* (1998) and *Ju-On – The Curse* (2000) can be considered the modern leaders of this trend. Both of these Japanese movies are consciously explicit subversions of society, and commentary on the role of women and how women are judged when they deviate from those roles. Good wife, wise mother, horror of the failed mother, barren woman; and the threats that these women pose to society. In *Buppah Rahtree* (2003), the maligned and abused modern woman takes her vengeance not only on those who betrayed her, but on those who are using her death to their own benefit, such as the false exorcist and Muay, a local woman.

This commentary can be translated in two ways. A woman must not deviate from society's norm, otherwise she will become a ghost; or that women become who they need to in order to get stuff done, in the past and here as modern Asian women. To view these narratives merely as vengeance tales is to limit these women and their possibilities. In *Visible Secret II* (2002), both September and Ching must embrace their monstrosity in order to gain power and their own individual autonomy as women. And in Otto Fong's *Bitter Suites*, it is an agreement rather than an acknowledgement that moves each woman into her monstrosity, and allows her the power to enact her revenge (though she, too, becomes caught up in it).

Phi Tai Hong is often part of the plot in erotic films, where a man spends a night (of pleasure) with a woman who is later found out to be Phi Tai Hong. This is in part a narrative that a beautiful woman can never be true; it is at the same time a narrative that says women can be monstrous and still loved.

Ultimately, at the heart of these stories is the same thread: that the modern woman is, in her heart, terrifying. There is nothing wrong with this translation: it is an affirmative interpretation. The modern monstrous woman has power and control, and bodily autonomy, and will wrest it away if necessary. And sometimes this will bring a man (and the society he stands for) down; and sometimes she won't.

These stories in the end see society as the true threat. A woman in these tales of horror cannot deviate from society's strictures without being punished, and so she takes her retaliation in the power she is given or claims for herself.

More modern tales of leftover women, such as in Yangsze Choo's *The Ghost Bride*, reinforce the stories of damage wrought by this patriarchal society damaged by colonialism. In this tale Li Lan is wedded off in a ghost marriage to a dead man in order to bring fortune and favour to her family. At first she agrees to the marriage, whilst a human, but by herself temporarily becoming a ghost, she steals for herself the power she needs to maintain her independence and integrity whilst still saving her family. Rosa, brought to Singapore from the Philippines to work as a family's maid in *The Maid* (2005), is set to be killed by the family in order to become a ghost bride for their dead son. Although Rosa remains human throughout the movie, it is only through the assistance of

Esther, previously murdered by the family, that she is able to escape (and in the process, enacts revenge upon the family by killing them and dooming them to ghost lives). And in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam (Fragrant Night Vampire)* (2004), Meriam is a woman murdered who returns as pontianak, to seek revenge on those who betrayed her trust and left her in her shallow grave.

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### **The translated threat**

The powerful and omnipresent Dead Wet Girls (a phrase suggested by David Kalat in his 2007 book *J-Horror*, to talk about the modernized Onryo) feature heavily in the translated threat of feminist ghosts of Asia seeking vengeance over patriarchy and colonialism. In *Ringu*, Sadako uses modern convenience (the ability to record) in order to exert her power over those who left her to rot. The American remake, *The Ring* (2002), translates this story completely out of the Japanese context whilst still maintaining the same themes of ambivalence towards motherhood, role of adapting to threats, and the use of modern technology by ghosts as a threat to society. It extends it into a look at the damage of colonialism – seen in its ending, where Rachel must copy the tape and pass the infection on, in order to keep herself safe.

In contrast *The Grudge* (2004), a translated *Ju-On*, maintains the Japanese context whilst drawing in a foreign audience through a reframing of an ex-pat family. *The Grudge* is particularly notable is that it reframes the monstrosity from the shared Kayako and Takeo threat (where Takeo kills Kayako for breaching social norms and becomes the final ghost seen in *Ju-On*) into a greater focus on Kayako's control and monstrosity, revealing that despite Takeo placing the curse, it is Kayako who remains the final threat.

Originally based on the Thai film *The Shutter* (2004), the US remake (*The Shutter*, 2008) sees a move from tai thong klom to yurei, and questionable suicides potentially driven by the X to outright murders by our monstrous woman. Despite using (like in *The Grudge*) ex-pats to reposition the monstrosity, this reframing only further highlights the control of the monstrous woman and her ability to enact revenge after her death. The explicit inclusion of the rape and its cover up in both of these versions, rather than detracting from the theme, merely emphasises the right of the monstrous woman to harm those who have harmed her.

The ghostly elements of *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003) are reframed as mundane and merely human in *The Uninvited* (2009), but the monstrosity of the female remains intact and is, in fact, enhanced, through the redistribution of all the blame and also all of the power from the shared activities of Su-Mi and her step-mother; to the single activities of Anna, who is later re-committed to the mental home in which she started the movie.

The monstrous women in these foreign remakes maintain their original monstrosity, threatening society with their power, whilst also adding a dimension of otherness to their villainy. The monstrous Japanese woman in *The Grudge* suggests a level of malevolence towards the colonisers and foreign interlopers, moving the focus of her vengeance from her own society to the society that allows this foreign influence. *The Ring's* threat manages to maintain that theme of otherness and colonialism, with its extended copying threat. This colonial theme is continued in *The Shutter*, with the threat that ignites Megumi's monstrousness coming from the imposed takeover and betrayal of the incoming colonisers. *The Uninvited* maintains this other through the centring of the mental home to which Anna returns. These themes invite viewers to understand female monstrosity, whilst simultaneously warning against it.

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### **The Monstrous Female Ghost as Identity**

These monstrous women; these Asian ghosts; these harbingers of society's downfall beg the question: how does a society retain its humanity? To other the monstrous woman, with her pale face hidden by her long hair, with her head detached from her body, and her need to hide from society, is to falsely position her as unattainable and undesirable. As she is seeking to balance the

world in her vengeance, or protect abused children, or threaten society so it changes and stops harming women, this is, in many ways, the very definition of humanity. So what does othering her mean for society?

The woman has long been marginalized within history, whether it be in historical texts, in fantasy tales, or in the reality of the village, town, city, nation or home.

The situation of the monstrous Asian female is a reflection of that reality. Cheonyeo Gwisin is a ghost who conforms to the traditional long hair, white funeral garb, pale skin, vengeance-seeking. But her hair is down because as an unmarried woman, she was not allowed to put it up. Her white funeral garb is because her life was taken from her too soon. She seeks vengeance because her life was taken. And her life was taken because as a young Korean woman, she was marginalised her whole life. Mohini's life is of betrayal and a lack of fulfilment because she has never been loved by a man, and it is this that leads her to vengeance. Nevermind that perhaps she did not need to be fulfilled by a man.

What does it say for a society that a woman must become a monster in order to protect herself and, often, to gain an identity?

The Monstrous Female Ghosts of Asia give an avenue through which a woman's identity, and a society's boundaries, can be played with, stretched, realized and destroyed. She can maintain her monstrosity, and so can society; but it is a reflection of where she has come from and where she is going, and her society can get on board or it can change so that she doesn't need to wreck havoc quite so hard.

Unless she really wants to.