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Devi or Demoness: A Journey of Transformation through *Bulbbul*

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Abstract:

Bulbbul, a movie directed by Anvita Dutt, exhibits the typical patriarchal Renaissance setup. A docile image of a woman was exhibited through Bulbbul, who gets married to an elderly Zamindar -Thakur, as a child. After a lapse of twenty years, circumstances take a mysterious turn and Bulbbul becomes a 'Thakurain', with no sign of Thakur in the background. Bulbbul was subjected to violence in a patriarchal system, and she bears it with silence. The joy from her life seems to have vanished. Simultaneously; in the village, mysterious incidents occur where some witch seems to be killing men. For ages, the women who could not be controlled or restrained were branded as witches in order to be crushed. The movie also exposed that there is a limit to sustain pain and exploitation after which the oppressed revolt and take revenge. The movie is replete with metaphors specifically the metaphor of feet and Philomela myth could also be deciphered. The image of a woman has been exemplified first as the goddess who was conventional, docile, sacrificing, devoted and the other demonic that was bold, strong, fierce and revengeful.

Keywords: Patriarchy, devi, demoness, violence, myth.

Introduction

Women have been stereotyped in a patriarchal framework; they are considered either a divine figure who are eulogized as the goddess (devi) or condemned as demoness (witch or chudail). Feminist scholars explored two images of women that fall into two antithetic patterns. On one hand, it suggests the idealized projection of man's desire i.e. 'angels at home' like Madonna, Beatrice, Muses of Arts and on the other side the demonic projection of men's sexual resentment and terror like Eve, Pandora and Dalilah. Anvita Dutt has directed a supernatural thriller titled *Bulbbul* which was set in typical Renaissance ambiance. The setting was of nineteenth century Bengal where a child bride (Bulbbul) was married to a Zamindar (Indranil) who was twenty years elder to her. Bulbbul and Satya (Indranil's younger brother) bonded well, being of same age group, they played together and knitted the stories of horror. However, their friendship was questioned by Binodini (Indranil's sister-in-law) which led to the departure of Satya to London for higher studies. This made Bulbbul sad since her only friend was gone. Twenty years later, things took an enigmatic turn, and Bulbbul turned into a "Thakurain" with no trace of Thakur in the background. Bulbbul endured violence in the patriarchal society while remaining silent about it. She seems to have lost the joy in her life. At the same time, mysterious incidents occurred in the village where a witch appears to be murdering men. For centuries, women who were unruly or uncontrollable were labelled witches and then crushed. The movie indicated that there is a limit to sustain pain and exploitation after that the oppressed revolt and take revenge. Here, Bulbbul's journey highlights that she was never allowed to be herself or live freely as an individual human, but was either treated as devi (naïve, silent, and obedient woman) or as demoness (witch or aggressive force as goddess Kali)

"Creed writes, Feminist New Wave films are directed primarily by women, and tell stories about women who are in revolt against male violence and corrosive patriarchal values including misogyny, racism, homophobia, and anthropocentrism ... Their journey is feminist in that they

have the courage to revolt and enter the dark place to see the corruption at the heart of the symbolic order. Feminist New Wave films tell their stories from the point of view of the female protagonist — it is her story told in her voice.” (2)

Domination through Patriarchy and Violence

Women are suppressed and exploited in a patriarchal setup to keep them within the four walls of the household, and it is a measure to control them. In the beginning of the movie, feet of a young girl were shown dangling from treetop which represented her freedom however after marriage the freedom was curbed. “The metaphor of a woman’s feet is used throughout the film. The feet of a woman in the film is symbolic of the main protagonist of the film, Bulbul, and her desire to walk free from the normative structure of the society (she is married to Indranil but longs for his brother, Satya).” (Roy) When an aunt puts a ring on Bulbul's toe, the young girl screams. She informed that the act was conducted to maintain women's authority. Her husband, Indranil believed that she was in a romantic relationship with his brother, Satya therefore he attacked her feet to control her and limit her power. Later, much focus was given to Bulbul's feet, when she was raped by Mahendra-her mentally challenged brother-in-law and her bandages on feet turns red. Here, her feet have a symbolic representation which exhibits that the feet of a woman should stay within the boundaries created by men. It also indicates that dominance and power lie in the hands of male who wants to control the life of women by showing them their subaltern position in the society. Men considered this weak and fragile image of women (as goddess) meek and silent who unquestioningly adheres to the rules and regulations created by patriarchy. However, when they revolt or rebel symbolizing shakti, they brand them as ‘witch’ or ‘demoness’.

Physical and sexual violence have been displayed both at individual and collective level. Bulbul as an individual was physically and sexually exploited by thakur brothers, however;

womankind in general was physically and sexually abused in the village. Binodini, the sister-in-law of Bulbbul was entangled in the shackles of patriarchy and was its agent. She accepted her fate of being a wife of mentally challenged man (Mahendra) simply because she would be wedded in a Zamindar's family, she even looks up to Indranil for the fulfilment of carnal desires. "*Haan thoda pagal hai, par gehne milenga, resham milenge..., uss se nhi to uske bhai se milenge...Thakur hai rona kaisa?* (Yes, your husband is retarded but you will be compensated in jewels and clothes...it is a thakur family what is the hue and cry about?) (*Bulbbul* 1:11:37). Subjugation of women seems an old practice rooted in Indian society. "Women are married to rich men even when they are abusive, womanizers, or alcoholic." (Bhalerao and Wingkar)

When Bulbbul was raped by Mahendra, Binodini consoled Bulbbul and said "*Badi havelion mei bade raaz hote hai. Chup rehna* (Big houses have big secrets. Stay Silent)." (*Bulbbul* 1:12:41) This scene was impactful as it exposed the oppressed status of women in the patriarchal system like a caged bird.

When Satya returns home after a lapse of some years, he was captivated by the tale of a witch with inverted feet who lives on trees and hunts the village men at night. To his utter surprise, the same witch has also devoured his older brother, Mahendra. On his return, he finds Bulbbul as the thakurain, the centre of authority. As more and more men die in the village, Satya begins his quest to unravel the mystery of Chudail, which would change the life of the people in the village. He even noticed the changes in the personality of Bulbbul as she became strong, determined and authoritative; shedding the personality of a weak, fragile and underconfident girl. He was even jealous of the bond between Dr. Sudip and Bulbbul. Finally, it was revealed that Bulbbul was blessed by Goddess Kali and was killing the men who were exploiting the women of their house in the village. She was considered as a Chudail because she had twisted feet. Satya, finally sets the forest on fire in which Bulbbul dies and

astonishingly Indranil (Bade thakur) who abandoned everything, returns. The spirit of Bulbbul comes in front of him and scares him.

“In the visual plane, Dutt and cinematographer Siddharth Diwan drench *Bulbbul* in hues of red and yellow, heralding a reckoning of fire and blood in the film’s most revelatory scenes. They set up a colorful smokescreen and invite viewers to discern the difference between good and evil. Both the ululating and the colors, I would say are not just art for art’s sake. I hope it is perceived as something beautiful and evocative, but it is actually an inherent part of the story and storytelling, says Dutt.” (Xalxo)

Narratives regarding Demoness or Chudail or Witch

“Monstrous women elicit wonder and fear not only through their phantasmagoric appearance and aberrant behaviour but also the threat they pose to the social order.” (Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*). They are the epitome of malevolence, depravity, and evil. Chudail is one such figure that is widely featured in Indian folklore. “A hostile, female spirit, the chudail is alleged to use its supernatural powers to bring death and misfortune onto unsuspecting humans, particularly men.” (Kundu and Rajan) The patriarchal system that aims to control and discipline women becomes the foundation for the construction of the chudail as the monstrous feminine.

“The legend of the churel originated in Persia” (DeCaroli 271), from where it made its way to north-western India. In Persian mythology, the chudail is described as the spirit of a woman who died with unfulfilled desires, and one who would come back to haunt the living. Even today in various parts of India, the term Chudail is used for a female spirit in search of vengeance. She is a woman who, having suffered a traumatic death, either at the hands of her in-laws or during pregnancy or childbirth, returns to seek revenge. A characteristic feature of the chudail is her twisted (backward facing) feet indicated in Indian folklores.

Philomela myth can be explored through *Bulbbul*, as per the Greek mythology, Philomela was Procene's sister. Procene was married to Tereus of Thrace. Procene after five years of her marriage, insisted Tereus to call Philomela, her sister to visit them. However, Tereus fell in love with Philomela at the first site. When they completed the journey and started overland for the Palace, Tereus tricked Philomela by saying Procene had died and forced her into a pretended marriage and raped her. In a short while Philomela became aware of the truth and threatened Tereus to tell the reality to the society, Tereus in fury gave commands to cut Philomela's tongue so that she cannot reveal the truth in front of anyone. Tereus became comfortable that the secret would not be divulged since Philomela could not utter a word. However, Philomela was a brilliant artist who knitted the entire story of the atrocity inflicted on her on the loom and sent it to the queen. Procne understood the entire story and secretly went with the messenger (an old woman) to rescue her sister. Procene in fury and anger killed Itys (Tereus child) in order to take revenge from Tereus. She killed Itys with one stroke of dagger, cooked the limbs and served Tereus. Its only after he finished his meal, she told him the reality of the meat served to him. Tereus in rage ordered to kill both the women however, God transformed all three of them into birds. Procne turned into a nightingale, Philomela into swallow and Tereus into hawk. However, Roman writers considered Philomela as the nightingale. When compared to the movie *Bulbbul*, one finds that Bulbbul was exploited similarly as Philomela and pressurized to keep the secret and suffer silently. Ironically, Bulbbul is the name of an Indian bird which is known as the nightingale.

Expanding on Creed's notion of the monstrous feminine, scholars like Devaleena Kundu and Benson Rajan "take the idea of revolt further and challenge sociocultural notions pertaining to the binaries of the divine and the monstrous, Good and Evil, Order and Chaos recasting the malevolent witch as a divine goddess emancipating women through supernatural justice. They claim that the Chudail's act of inflicting death on its prey functions as a folkloric

system of justice whereby evil is punished and the destitute offered divine sanctuary.” (Kundu and Rajan)

In order to satisfy their desire for passion and power, lecherous men forcefully mount on inferior sex in an attempt to demonstrate their masculinity and control. This leads the weaker sex to slap such rapists, kick their phallus or bite their hands as a kind of self -defence. Consequently, the rapist becomes even more enraged, and his lusty pursuits take on violent dimensions. “The disturbing visuals showing a rape scene are often picturized in a multicamera setup where some preexisting cultural signages associated with the violation of female honour such as the bangles getting crushed or forehead tika being swooshed off ... are some of the signifiers of female honour getting trampled upon by one or the other forms of penetrative forceful sex.” (Hasan 43) Based on psychoanalytic feminism, the feminist new-wave film employs drastically different cinematic techniques to represent women's narratives ethically. It challenges the traditional rape-revenge genre, calling out its voyeurism and misogyny. Creed in *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* wrote that in these films, “although the female protagonist seeks revenge at a personal level, directors depict her goal, not as revenge, but as revolt, that is, revolt against the universal and entrenched practices of rape culture which is a crucial power structure of the patriarchal symbolic order. These films are more accurately described not as rape-revenge but as rape-revolt films.” (51)

“It was pointed out that the term *daayan* has only been a distortion of the Greek Goddess Diana, who was worshipped as a Wiccan goddess.” (Anil) According to her, Indian Goddesses such as Kali have also been the epitome of the definition of witches pertaining to Wicca.

In *Bulbbul*, Devi or "devi maa" (mother goddess) has been alluded for the goddess Kali. Usually portrayed with a lolling tongue, a girdle of disembodied arms around her waist, and a

garland of human skulls around her neck, Kali stands for the primordial power of justice, order, and female sexuality. Finally, Bulbbul also represented Maa Kali as Kali the Liberator. However, instead of the devi possessing and liberating her, Bulbbul herself gets liberated on her own and starts killing all the paedophiles and abusive men of the town which resulted in the liberation of more women. So, what makes it, “a feminist, revisionist tale” is its novel treatment of the themes of horror and its subversion of the victimhood identity of women. “Here a female protagonist takes up a role reversal of the classic hunter-hunted hierarchy and becomes the source of abjection and horror, by taking up the narrative space in the active pursuit of justice. In the given context, the monstrous is brought forth through the medium of divine feminine rage which holds a peculiar space in cultural representation both in traditional folklore as the ‘evil witch with twisted feet’ and in mythology as the bloodthirsty goddess supreme ‘Maa Durga / Kali.’ The character of Bulbbul in the film subverts as well as ventures into a carnivalesque celebration of the blurred lines between goddess and witch, deriving home, the point that historically, the women who have been persecuted or outcasted as witches were, in fact, women who were either abused, too powerful or who stood outside of the patriarchal structure and did not subscribe to asymmetrical gender norms.” (Khan and Javid 175)

Bulbbul loses consciousness after she was sexually assaulted by Mahendra. Her innocence was metaphorically killed in this incident. Then the red aura of the blood moon shone on her lifeless body, and a zephyr of wind from the Kali temple rushed towards her, bringing her back to life with a startling scream that symbolized her monstrous reincarnation. She was “surrounded by the same kash phool (kans grass, a white flower native to India also associated with the season of Durga Pujo) that envelops the Kali temple in the woods. This rebirth is not just any spirit but the spirit of Kali, the goddess of destruction and revenge herself; her bedroom, thus, transforms from the site of violation into the seat of divinity. Through a clever fusion of the deified and the demonized, the film imaginatively pays tribute to divine feminine rage using

the monstrous feminine. Besides this, Bulbul also employs the characteristics of a cannibal female, which is a new face of 'monstrous feminine' for Creed." (Khan and Javid 176) Cannibalism is an "act of female revolt against male power and violence, corporate and institutional oppression, and the destructiveness of anthropocentrism." (Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine* 127). Bulbul is also depicted drinking the blood from her victims' jugulars, challenging the taboos surrounding the consumption of human flesh. Drawing upon the new wave of feminist cinema, she symbolically consumes the body of the law, her male victim, in order to destroy the patriarchal order. The themes of horror and monstrosity are introduced early into the film with the recurring images of anklets, toe rings, twisted feet (pointing backwards) and other symbols associated with the folks and myths of witches.

Conclusion

Patriarchy considered women as devi or demoness as per their own convenience. They consider women as nurturer; docile and the silent image of a woman is appreciated making them a devi and the aggressive women who are authoritative, dominating, rebellious and difficult for the society, they brand them as witch or demoness in order to control them. However, through the movie, it has been exposed that women take revenge and rebel against the unjust treatment meted out to them. When goddess Kali, the primordial force; an aggressive energy blessed Bulbul to put an end on the exploitation and atrocities inflicted upon women in the village, justice and order prevails. Both energies exist in a woman and it is the society which makes her to show either the best or worst side of energy. The movie has alluded the narratives of the devi or chudail from folklores and myths to indicate the difference between good and evil, harmony and chaos to establish order through justice.

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