

Politics of Fantasy as a Manifestation of Female Agency in *Bulbbul*



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Abstract: *This study explores the significance of the poetics of fantasy in feminist politics that preserve a crucial life-sustaining part when it comes to understanding the struggle of women. Throughout history, literature and cinema have often painted the role of women in a highly artistic manner. Films have become very powerful tools for portraying erotic images related to the female gender. However, in the contemporary age, cinematic representations of women delve into the question of how and why women are portrayed as objectified figure on screen. Therefore, the film *Bulbbul* serves as an exemplary embodiment of feminist notions achieved through the fantastical means, depicting women living within the patriarchal domains. Through qualitative cross-sectional research, the study collects data from textual analysis of the movie *Bulbbul* which aims to identify the struggles of women and the popularity of the fantasy genre in attaining autonomy and female agency. Through the interweaving of articles related to Fantasy, Feminist Film theories and Auteur theory, the research focuses on the competence and strength that the female gender possesses in rebelling against the patriarchal world. However, the outcome of this research is to examine the core reasons which empower *Bulbbul* to challenge patriarchal dogmas and how violence act as a justifiable mean for subversion and Agency. Consequently, the amalgamation of the two different approaches i.e. patriarchal dystopia and fantasy, will allow us to investigate how fantasy is employed by feminists to break patriarchal conventions.*

Keywords: Fantasy, Feminine Agency, Counter Cinema, Auteur Theory, Patriarchal dystopia, Feminist Film Theory

Introduction

Bulbbul, the film, can be seen as a re-imagination of socio-cultural and cinematic subversion of the feminist histories. Cinematic representation, magical realism, and the dichotomy of Devi vs Witch play a very captivating role in providing a new rostrum to female entities, reclaiming her agency in oppressive and patriarchal dystopia.

All over the world, to this date, numerous social and revolutionary campaigns and movements have taken place in order to illuminate the issues

related to different aspects of life, for example, Communism, Abolitionist movement, American Civil Rights movement, Animal Rights movement, 9/11 Truth movement, Anti-corporate movements. Likewise, the Feminist movements also prevail to develop the radical goals for its members in order to refute the ideals of patriarchal dystopia. It formally began in 1848 at Seneca Falls convention. Moreover, it is very important to note that Feminist movements are the embodiment of different waves and types. Hereafter, each wave and type bring a new and admiring perspective with it. Hence, we can

understand the fact that Feminists speak for women liberation and female competence, and they also encourage women to fight for their fundamental rights. Therefore, different researchers put forward their notions regarding the chaotic conditions of women in a very impressive manner. Likewise, Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher, in 1658 mentions, “Humans are the glory and scum of the universe” (Pascal). From his perspective it is figured out that this cruel universe builds and defines boundaries among genders in which one tries to suppress the other. Consequently, it leads toward the problems of gender taboos, gender binaries and identity crisis. Therefore, humans especially women have to adopt various strategies and mechanisms for the sake of getting power. Furthermore, they have to work hard in order to remove the marks of inferiority complex stamped on their gender. Similarly, an artist Marina Abramovic in one of her interview’s states, “If women ruled the world, they would stop being fragile, they would stop being dependent, they would never be the victim, they would never be abused. I want women to be warriors. When women are free and happy, they will know how to rule the world” (Abramovic). The portrayal of feminist perspectives allows the people to take notice of the ongoing problems and it renders them to stand against challenges and knots.

Likewise, *Bulbbul*, a 2020 Netflix web film set in the backdrop of the 1880’s Bengal presidency, is a social tragedy that depicts broken dreams, lost childhood, different tropes of emotional and sexual abuse, and unrequited love. However, the series also portrays the motifs, norms, and values of the patriarchal society, while highlighting the struggles of women, entangled in the web of patriarchal ideals. In the movie, *Bulbbul* is one of the leading characters who proceed to rebel against the brutal conventions and codes that put women in a position of disadvantage and subjugation. Therefore, the story of the movie revolves around the life of *Bulbbul* as a child bride and depicts her journey from innocence to gaining power in a male dominant society. She is a mysterious woman (Witch/Devi) who exacts revenge only on men

who abuse, rape, or torture women. This enables *Bulbbul* to not only fight for herself but also for other oppressed women. With the help of an agency, she gains her feminine witch persona, finding the strength to challenge the presupposed cultural traditions and norms. As Anouskha Sharma, producer of the film, states, “Here’s your first look at #Bulbbul, a fantastic tale about self-discovery, and justice, wrapped in lore, mystery and intrigue.” Along with this, the director of the movie sketches the fantastic representation and imaginary spaces in the movie just to represent the ideal picture of a woman who refutes patriarchal culture in a very awe-inspiring manner. “Director Anvita Dutt mixes the feudal with the supernatural, the spooky, the mythological and the fable-esque in a thoughtful, engaging and moving manner” (Joshi, *The Hind*). Consequently, it is evident that the manifestation of power through magical realism plays a very captivating role in offering a new perspective and platform for women to reclaim their agency within oppressive, and patriarchal norms.

The purpose of the study is to analyze the role of fantasy and feminist notions in challenging the conventional dogmas within the movie *Bulbbul* by using the framework of Fantasy, Feminist Film theory proposed by Laure Mulvey, and Auteur theory. However, the representation of fantastical and cinematic events in the film plays a very captivating role in the manifestation of female agency and makes *Bulbbul* very strong in order to achieve her desires and concerns. It allows her to fight against the presupposed patriarchal norms of women’s objectification.

Literature Review

Lindsey Fiorelli describes in her article “What Movies Show: Realism, Perception, and Truth in Film” that all forms of art i.e. sound, language, images and narrative techniques act together and play a very significant role in providing complete meaning to a plot throughout film viewing. Therefore, in the movie, all the perceptual and the representational contents are dependent on each other to give meaning to the story in order to uncover the hidden realities. Her (*Bulbbul*’s) ability of taking revenge is complemented through fantastic representation.

The moments of dread that are portrayed in the film are not about female demon. These events are the exploration of the consequences of males inflicting violence upon females. It is very essential to figure out that the violence demonstrated in the movie *Bulbbul* is done under the approaches of autonomy, freedom and moral authority in order to provide space and independence to women. Therefore, the element of Agency allows her to rebel against the so-called norms of the time.

In addition to this, Brian Attebery concurs, some strategies of fantasy. He claims that “fantasy is a genre of “structural completeness” due to which the problems proposed in the beginning of any film or narratives are solved by the end of the movie. And the task of fantasy narratives which are structured around fulfilling quests or aims are successfully completed” (Attebery p.15). From the given demonstration it can be predicted that the only aim of fantasy is to continually strive for self-direction and self-realization. Fantasy films work as a vehicle for wish fulfillment through the portrayal of magical solutions to serious problems in order to defy the reinforced traditional ideas about masculinity and used for the manifestation of female agency. However, the frequent notions of prophecy in fantasy narratives can complicate the achievement of agency.

Research Methodology

The research methodology employed in this study is textual analysis. It is a type of qualitative research “where questions are under continual review and reformulation” (Creswell p.71). In order to identify the perspectives that work for women’s emancipation, analytical methods associated with historical and descriptive approaches are applied to investigate the origin of the issue and offer a systematic way to overcome the patriarchal ideals and conventions. Furthermore, the research embodies the method of qualitative research, which employs fundamental principles and methodologies to uncover insights into the changing status of female filmmaker’s in modern age. It aims to identify the emotional requirements of the spectator and the influence that directors exert over the content of the

movie. Therefore, for the collection of data, secondary sources have been used including research articles, books, newspapers and journals, etc. with the interweaving of Feminist Film theories, Auteur theory and theories related to Fantasy.

First, this study interfuses the **Feminist Film Theory** in order to highlight the film criticism that arises from feminist politics. The feminist lens allows the director to make her protagonist emerge as a strong and powerful woman who defies the subjugating and exploitative norms by using her feminine agency, in addition to critically challenging the old traditions of cinemas that favor the concept of female objectification and subjugation in one way or the other. As Diana T. Meyers concurs in her article “Philosophical Feminism: Feminist Theories of Agency” that “agency manifests a well-developed force of skills in self-discovery, self-direction and self-realization” (Meyers). Therefore, the portrayal of feminine agency tries to highlight the feminine competence and the struggle for individualized choices. Moreover, the concerns regarding feminine representation and male gaze are widely debated in feminist film circles by not only the critics but the viewers as well. As Laura Mulvey in her Feminist Film Theory “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” concurs that “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/men and passive women. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey p. 6). Therefore, it can be figured out that her notions reflect that the female characters are no more than the objectified entities in relation to males. Typically, feminine characters are designed in a specific way by employing erotic images from which masculinity derives visual pleasure. These critical viewpoints concerning classical-cinema assist filmmakers to understand and capture the fundamental aspects of the debate on how femininity is portrayed in classical cinematic works. The glimpses of classical cinema and the feminine struggle to refute cultural identities and norms work side by side in the movie *Bulbbul*. It explores that *Bulbbul*

living in a male-dominant society, being a victim of male abuse and violence; but only the feminist perspectives and political representation of fantasy allows her to assert her free will and adopt strategies against violence, even if it involves using violence herself. Likewise, Muniza Murtza in her article, "Representation of Women in Film Literature: Application of Feminism Film Theory on 'The Princess and the Frog'" employs the Feminist Film Theory proposed by Jane and Laura Mulvey to reveal the women projection while living in the male-dominant world.

Secondly, it is very significant to mention that in the film industry it can be hard to give whole credit to only one person for the production of the whole film as it is a collaborative effort. "The film of tomorrow will not be directed by civil servants of the camera, but by artists for whom shooting a film constitutes a wonderful and thrilling adventure" (Truffaut). Therefore, **Auteur theory** resolves this dilemma by stating the importance of director's perspectives, expressing their notions in a distinct way to the rest of the world; Sarris states that "a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content of the material" (Sarris p.562). Therefore, this research also incorporates the Auteur theory. With respect to the critical analysis of the movie *Bulbbul*, we can discover that the director of the film, Anvita Dutt, has very cleverly challenged the classical household system and societal conventional ideas by painting the movie around the framework of feminist norms and values. Along with this, Elizabeth Chesley in 2017 in her work titled "Female Auteurs and their Perceptions of Gender, Sexuality and National Identity" explicitly talks about the responsibilities of auteurs to replicate their ideologies through cinematic representations.

Thirdly, the study aims to disclose some articles related to **Fantasy**. The movie is an embodiment of the re-imagination of a witch as a Devi with a mission and a cause of subverting the practices of an oppressive world; only the fantastic representations allow *Bulbbul* to rebel against the misogynist world. As Attebery concurs in his

book "Strategies of Fantasy", "Fantasy is a genre of 'structural completeness': 'the problem initially posted' is solved by the end of the narrative, 'the task successfully completed'" (Attebery p.15). In addition to this, Adla in her article "The Role of Fantasy Fiction in Promoting Feminism: Study of Ilona Andrews' Heroine Kate Daniels" proposes that contemporary literatures use the supernatural elements to promote feminism through the personality traits of their characters. However, it can be firmly mentioned that fantasy is a genre that helps the characters to overcome the normative obstacles and achieve their goals while refuting the patriarchal culture and norms.

However, different researchers have studied the visual narratives and feminist perspectives in different ways. Some have discussed the propaganda of politics with reference to the patriarchal world; other critics have talked about disability in fantasy. None of them has studied fantasy in the form of violence and a desire to identify one's self and promote one's flourishing with respect to the film *Bulbbul*. Since this is a recent film, the research regarding this movie is not available, which leaves room for this research. However, there is some research available that draws links among Feminist notions, and perspectives regarding Film and Fantasy. Therefore, the literature review will be based on that.

Discussion, Analysis and Results

Chapter 1:

Fantasy as a Technique of Emancipation from Patriarchal Ideals

Male supremacy remains a powerful force that still exists in the 21st century. Therefore, socially constructed roles in the societies confine the social practices of women. It is true that now the condition of women is not as bad as it used to be. But unfortunately, their lives are stuck within the conventions of patriarchal customs and norms. They have to overcome a lot of obstacles and undergo tremendous struggles to reach their full potential. They are targeted by the customs and values of their families and society. Due to these reasons, different artists, writers, authors, researchers, and film makers portray the pictures

of harassment, violence, abuse, and torture inflicted upon women through their works in a very artistic manner. For instance, the feminists of the 1970s pointed out the fact that “historical academic writings have always been about men at higher position” (Connell p. 27-28). However, the major concern of the feminist filmmakers, even in the 21st century, is to portray women in the roles that manifest agency without invalidating the trauma and violence that they deal with. This lacuna of agency when it comes to the position of women, furthers patriarchal dominance and violence. Hence, we find that in the movie *Bulbbul*, the feminine agency is achieved through the fantastic and artistic representation of radicalized violence as a tool for resistance. It eventually serves as a means of emancipation against the ideals and motifs of patriarchal oppression and injustice.

Over the years, it seems that most of the works in Fantasy genre are given the formulaic reputation i.e. they are considered conservative. William Irwin, writes in 1976 about the concept of fantasy, he states, “these others and others brought fantasy to its highest execution and left us with a body of fiction that deserves to be known and understood, even though its kind has all but disappeared from the literature in the past eighteen years” (Irwin p. 5). It is because the literary critics and philosophers put together the perspectives that the fantastic tasks are solely the embodiments of same storylines. They do not serve any ultimate purpose except giving pleasure and engage the readers in the idealist and utopian world. Consequently, these assumptions prevent the Fantasy works to gain worldwide critical acceptance under the literary genre. That is why in the earlier centuries, they did not change the worldview within the literary circle. On the contrary, in the contemporary literary landscape, it is very interesting to acknowledge that works in the fantasy genre challenge generic conventions by replicating patriarchal structures and narratives. As, Attebery concurs in his book “Strategies of Fantasy”, “Fantasy is a genre of ‘structural completeness’: ‘the problem initially posted’ is solved by the end of the narrative, ‘the task successfully completed’” (Attebery p.15).

However, it can be asserted that fantasy enables characters to overcome challenges and attain their objectives. For instance, in the movie it can be seen the emergence of the witch legend as a Devi with the purpose of rebelling against the patriarchal and oppressive society as exemplified, “*Bulbbul: Why not a woman*” (*Bulbbul* 0:26:58). Hence, the fictional representations of events in literary or cinematic creations provide characters, especially women, with the means to resist entrenched subjugated and oppressive ideas.

The concept of patriarchal dystopia is considered one of the earliest and most widespread forms of inequality throughout human history. It can be argued that patriarchy has served as the predominant system of political organization responsible for the unequal distribution of power between genders i.e. women and men. As Therborn states, “In the beginning of our story all significant societies were significantly patriarchal. There is no single exception” (Therborn p.17). However, Therborn directly uncovers concealed truths within the socio-political framework. For instance, the mistreatment of women by men when they find them vulnerable and weak is also evident in the movie.

“*Bulbbul: When will that master mend his ways?*”

Satya: Which master?

Doctor: Master Dinkar

Satya: He is a fine man.

Bulbbul: His wife's broken bones tell another story.

Doctor: She is also of no help. She keeps saying... "I fell off the stairs"

Satya: So maybe it's true.

Bulbbul: There is only one house in this place that has stairs” (*Bulbbul* 0:21:02).

From the given example, it can be stated that through the socio-political institutions, men as a social category, individually and collectively oppress women. Hence, the amalgamation of the two different approaches i.e. patriarchal dystopia and fantasy, allows us to investigate

how fantasy is employed by feminists in order to break the patriarchal conventions. This research also highlights how these aspects work for feminine emancipation and how encounters of fantasy set off on the quest for emancipation and self-realization.

The patriarchy takes firm roots in society, becoming an integral part of the consciousness for both genders. Women are victims of the brutal and inhuman attitude of the society. They have no freedom of speech and they are obliged to follow the brutal conventions of the society. For example, the real name of George Eliot is Marry Anne Evans but she uses George Eliot as a pen name just because of gender discrimination, inequality, and prejudice. Therefore, many cinematic and literary works shed light on the male-dominancy and patriarchal mindset. As Mulvey introduces the concepts of “Male Gaze” and “Scopophilia” (Mulvey), which create a power imbalance and women’s real-life sexual objectification. She mentions, “The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing in its narcissistic aspect” (Mulvey p.5). Through a critical analysis of Mulvey’s Feminist Film Theory, we develop the notion that patriarchal society has formed the structure of films, based on the premise of female inferiority and males objectifying women. For example, in the movie, the rape scene depicts that the director places Bulbul in the oppressor’s world to represent the conditions of women who are entangled in the web of patriarchal values and codes. Rohan Naahar states in Hindustan Times, “The second scene, involving a rape into a problematic trope that in order to blossom, a woman must first be violently broken” (Naahar, Hindustan Times).

“(Flashbacks from the scene when Milord/, Indranil beating and scowling her. She is in severe pain lying on the bed. Mahendra comes into her room)

Mahendra: Doll

Get up! Get up!

(Bulbul helplessly lies on the bed. At the moment, Mahendra comes into the room and he rapes her. Binodini asks Mahendra to keep his

mouth shut and don’t talk about this to anyone)” (Bulbul 1:06:07).

Furthermore, in the movie, we find out that Bulbul as a young or adult, in all the stages of age, is tortured and abused by men. Nobody is ready to take steps against the sexual, psychological and physical violence; rather they promote the so-called patriarchal motifs. For example, when Mahendra comes into Bulbul’s room and he rapes her, she is shown in a helpless light. When Binodini sets out to know about it, instead of doing anything, she silences Bulbul. After this brutal act of violence, Binodini asks Mahendra (her husband) to keep his mouth shut and not talk about this to anyone. At the same time, she constantly asks Bulbul to keep quiet.

“Binodini: You have married into a Royal family. Why the tears? Keep quiet. He is a little... insane. But he will get better after getting married. He is a little insane, but he is of royal blood. Keep quiet” (Bulbul 1:11:29).

From the monologues of Binodini, we can infer that in a patriarchal domain; women are neither treated equally nor humanistically, and they are excluded from the conventional spaces and power. It is proved from the review given in The Hindu News “The women inside it- Bulbul and Binodini _ are competitors, always in the game of one upmanship and insinuations, giving it back to each other with wordplay” (Joshi, The Hindu News). This strategy of different treatment promotes the lack of solidarity and competitiveness among women. Hence, they become competitors and enemies instead of allies. Accordingly, sometimes women out rightly betray other women in order to ensure the loyalty and faithfulness to the male values. Mary Coolidge suggests, “A successful woman must be what men approved of, and for that reason women have always conformed to the standard set for them” (Coolidge p.85). Hence, we can conclude that the patriarchal sets of mechanisms, beliefs, practices, myths and relationships are so closely tied with each other that they transmit conventional ideologies regarding women from generation to generation. Due to which women are entangled in the web of patriarchal institutions that do not render them to consider themselves worthy of helping other

women.

Art and Literature provide a platform to portray an idealized vision of feminine liberation, allowing women to engage in various institutions of the society. The representation of patriarchal leitmotif can only be shattered by displaying the fantastic constituents in the cinematic or literary works. Likewise, Tolkien discusses in "On Fairy Stories" that "Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. It does not matter by whom it is said to be practiced, fay or mortal, it remains distinct from the other two; it is not an art but a technique; its desire is power in this world, domination of things and wills" (Tolkien p.48). Therefore, the connection between portraying classical etiquette and dark fantasy helps people to come across the hidden realities of the world. Fantasy and Reality may seem inherently contradictory but they can work together to reveal truths as factual conditions can now also be highlighted by painting fictional scenarios or magical realism. "Magic realism is a combination of fantasy and reality in which the magical elements rise in the story; blend naturally with the reality portrayed" (Sirkanth.) For instance, movies like the Harry Potter and Olympian series are the embodiment of fictional characters and fantasy. But when we take a critical and analytical look at them, we come to know that these movies somehow left the viewer's mind with very dominant or chief meanings. Similarly, delving into the fictional events portrayed in the movie unveils the women's quest for individualism. The narrative mirrors the material and psychological conditions, and historical constraints encountered by women. However, their determinist behavior that seeks freedom and rebels against conventions can be understood through fantasy. In the movie, Bulbbul is a weak and dependent woman before getting supernatural powers. When she is known by the name of "Demon- Woman" (Bulbbul), she becomes powerful and takes revenge from those who abuse women. Crucially, her invective behavior is directed only at men who are abusive, justifying the violence as a means of protecting women from their oppressors. This is

why the violence is justified. For instance, she helps a teenage girl by saving her from harassment. When Satya and the officer investigate the case, the girl mentions a "goddess" (Bulbbul), killing the man. The word "goddess" (Bulbbul), is symbolic in meaning as it reflects the genuine concerns and purity of Bulbbul's soul. "Rape revenge films, such as *Monster* and *GWTDT*, fall within the justice genre, which includes themes of justice, injustice, revenge and retribution, and these themes are governed by moral criteria that many people share" (Carroll pp 11-12). Therefore, it can be seen that in the movie, fantasy affirms the possibility of achievement and the potential for the recognition of women.

In addition to all these aspects, it is very crucial to note that the film-viewing and movie scenes provide a unique aesthetic experience with the combination of some elements. Different theorists and philosophers present their different views and notions regarding this. For example, cinematic realist's claim that the visual and aural representation of information portrayed in a film has a strong tie to reality and viewers can easily relate their perceptual experiences to a plot. On the other hand, there are semiotic theories which focus on the conventions and codes. According to these, forms like syntactical, and grammatical structures, and conventional meanings are required for the understanding of a movie rather than perceptual presentations. They prioritize sign-based medium over perceptual presentation. Furthermore, in contrast to these theories, narrative theorists present how viewers cognize fictional films. Apart from that, all of them do independent analysis or study on films. As, Lindsey Fiorelli summarizes in her article "What Movies Show: Realism, Perception, and Truth in Film" that all forms of art i.e. sound, language, images and narrative techniques act together and play a very significant role in providing complete meaning to a plot throughout film viewing. Therefore, all the perceptual and the representational contents are dependent on each other to provide meaning to storyline and define truths that exist in movies (Fiorelli p.1). So, it can also be interpreted with relation to the movie that all the fictional events

depicted in the movie untwine the level of curiosities and the web of hidden realities. For example, Bulbbul condemns the culture of silence in which women are overpowered by muscularity.

“(Next morning, Bulbbul deals with the issues of the family of one of the villagers)

The Man: Please don't be upset, milady.

Bulbbul: Too late for that. And what will your poor wife do?

The man: They will live together like sisters.

Bulbbul: Get out. If she suffers in any way, you will have to answer to me” (Bulbbul 0:13:01).

In the backdrop of a patriarchal world, history has continuously shown the pervasive influence of patriarchy on societies. Through a feminist approach, the director positions Bulbbul as an agent of subversion, challenging the classical narrative of films. The erotic signs within the narrative show that Bulbbul is living in a male-dominant society, where she and other women are subjugated. It is through feminist perspectives and fantastical representations that allows her to assert her free will and adopt strategies against violence, even if it involves using violence herself.

Chapter 2:

Female Agency and Autonomy as an Embodiment of Individuality

The representation of womanhood through the lens of cult expounds not only the marginality, but the subversion as well in order to draw attention towards the often-debated issue of the violent exploitation of the femininity. This thematic exploration becomes a significant trope in the feminist fantasy genre. In conventional “melodramas” women are typically represented as the embodiments of virtue, piety, purity, domesticity and submissiveness. Similarly, in the movie “Bulbbul,” a notable pattern emerges where most of the women portrayed choose to remain under the supervision of men instead of challenging and refuting the misogynist codes. Consequently, the female characters on the screen are found proactive in the propagation of the aforementioned misogynist codes, while

staying within the bounds. For instance, it is crystal clear from a scene in the movie that portrays the system that blindly follows the ideals and conventions of the classical misogynist era.

“(Auntie makes Bulbbul get ready for her wedding)

Bulbbul: Auntie, why do I wear toe rings?

Auntie: Because there's a nerve here. If it is not pressed, girls tend to fly away.

Bulbbul: Like a bird?

Auntie: No. It is to control you.

Bulbbul: Auntie, what's “control”?” (Bulbbul 0:04:42).

However, the word vash (control) and the image of bichhiyas (toe ring) convey a lot about the gendered expectations that were seminal to the controlled upbringing of the women.

The artistic portrayal of voyeurism and male gaze in visual media highlights the patriarchal and misogynist ideologies. These representations underscore women to mere objects of sexual gratification, setting a sense of inferiority complex in the minds of women by reducing their existence to mere sexual objects. Due to this, women sometimes confine themselves within the four walls of the house instead of showing rebellious gestures against sexual and erotic signs. Mulvey points out, “Voyeurism linked to disparagement, has a sadistic implication. Usually it is involved with pleasure through control or domination and also with punishing the women” (Mulvey pp.6-18). Moreover, the film not only delves into the societal impact of voyeurism imagery but also comments on the broader issue of masculine control over women. This dominance is not only indoctrinated through social meanings attached to certain traditions and items, but also reiterated through the expectations of negating the woman's own personhood in the institution of marriage. For instance, the husband of Bulbbul always asks her rhetorically, “how can a wife has anything personal that her husband doesn't know about.” Similarly, Smelik in Feminist Film Theory argues that “the female subject [...]

is made to bear the burden of the lack [...] to provide the male subject with the illusion of wholeness and unity” (Smelik). The film skillfully portrays patriarchal institutions that offer viewers to explore the harsh customs, traditions and values of the time. Likewise, the glimpse of sexual gratification with reference to Voyeurism and “male gaze” in one of the scenes of the movie where Mahendra finds Bulbbul as a sexual object and he tries to manipulate her in front of her husband.

“(Family is on the picnic... Bulbbul takes the swing)

Milord/Indranil: Bulbbul.

(Bulbbul is about to leave and at that moment Mahendra appears and he tries to hurt her)

Bulbbul: Please don't (requesting Mahendra)

(Indranil witnesses all the happenings going on among Mahendra and Bulbbul)

Indranil: Mahendra (stops him in a very pleasing way)” (Bulbbul 0:35:51).

However, “The International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity”, volume 04 depicts the notion of N. Friday who mentions that “For men, the “I” of identity remains central. The tremendous numbers of male fantasies are centered on the expression of the male’s excitement in arranging for his women to expose her, or even given herself to other men, while he watches” (Friday). As a result, it sets a sense of inferiority complex in the minds of women by reducing their existence to mere sexual objects. Due to this, women sometimes confine themselves within the four walls of the house instead of showing rebellious gestures against sexual and erotic signs.

The placement of the artistic portrayal of conventional system in the movie is to highlight the hidden truths about the brutal and abusive attributes of men who inflict violence upon women. The film’s exploration of erotic signs and the artistic portrayal of patriarchal culture provides an opportunity to the feminist researchers to exhort for strategies in order to engage young women in feminist discourse, debates and information sharing. These

initiatives empower women with tools to establish effective techniques to fight against discriminatory practices. In response to this imperative, the movie “Bulbbul” generates discourse that may provide the impetus to uncover and fight against the violent albeit misogynist practices. These misogynist conventions, on the one hand, are violent and exploitative in nature and on the other hand, expect the women to behave in a kind goddess-like manner. They are not expected to show their aggression or have any violent tendencies. By leveraging fantastical modes, the director breaks the witch/devi dichotomy and establishes a liminal space where the feminine can be both simultaneously while putting up a fight against the violent misogynist practices. Likewise, Sarah Grand coined the phrase “New Woman” in order to describe the new generation of women who seek independence and refuse the traditional confines of marriages and other conventional ideals. With regard to this call, it figures out that the movie *Bulbbul* is considered as one of the appropriate tools to fight against the conventional ideals of masculinity and to promote the discussions on feminist values. However, like other feminist directors, the director of the movie *Bulbbul*, while living in the modern world, uses social media or film as a trope in order to bring awareness regarding sexual harassment, violence against women and rape culture. “It (social media/ film) encourages more level of playing field and allowing for the voice of women from a wider array of backgrounds and countries, with or without traditional power, to be heard” (Powell). As a result, the workout of the cinematic representation within the domain of feminist ideals plays a very vital role in improving the legal position for women and gives them self-governing foundations, and the implementation of these strategies enable women to act like freedom fighters. The prominent example is found when Bulbbul rhetorically asks a question “Why not a woman” (Bulbbul 0:26:57) when the police are investigating the murder of a man and suspecting only men for the crime, when in reality, the murder was executed by a woman to avenge the violence against her fellow women. By doing this the creators of the film portray the

feminine defiance against the existing gendered expectations. It allows Bulbul to unleash the defiant and rebellious personality, challenging the brutal and conventional codes that seek to constrain her. Through such storytelling films become a powerful medium of promoting resistance against oppressive gender roles.

The questions of whether violence can be justified and used as a subversive tool against the existing forms of oppression, or how the fantastic and the violent come in conversation with each other when the existing systems of systemic oppression are in question, are complex and have been a subject of debate. Emmeline Pankhurst concurs, "I have made speeches urging women to adopt methods of rebellion such as have been adopted by men in every revolution" (Pankhurst) reflects the idea that adopting rebellious methods, which may also include violence, can be a strategy to discard oppressive system. Correspondingly, it can be discovered that a couple of scenes in the movie particularly revolve around the violence done by women that is questionably staged. And these questions of violence become seminal for women in order to demolish the codes of patriarchal institutions. In the movie, it can be discovered that "goddess" does not harm anyone without purpose; she only harms those men who are abusive towards women. It is because the word "goddess" is symbolic in meaning as it reflects the genuine concerns and purity of Bulbul's soul. Therefore, the violence in the movie is used as a subversive tool to reclaim autonomy and female agency. By introducing the sublime figure of "Devi/goddess" Anvita tries to put forward the notion that only a woman who is powerful and subversive can take up a fight against the brutality of men, while she is living under conventional modes. She manifests her power and subversive personality through the use of churail/devi (witch/goddess) fantasy. As Le Guin proposes a notion that Fantasy is 'reassuring [...] as it offers a world large enough to contain alternatives and therefore offers hope'" (Le Guin).

Feminist theories play a significant role in reshaping the ideals and motifs of female gender and feminists. The main cause of the emergence

of feminist theories is the political and ideological feminist movements. Their main focus is to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles. The discourse regarding the existence of counter and classical cinema is a prevalent theme within feminist film theory. Claire Johnson, a feminist film theorist, tries to extrapolate the argument that female cinemas inherently are counter cinemas. In classical cinema "women are presented as what she represents for man rather than represent for herself" (Johnson p.33) and in the beginning of the film, the viewers can see the representation of a woman from the patriarchal lens for the patriarchal gaze. As the story unfolds, however, we see the feminist opines where a woman rises to a position of power and subverts the notions that reduce women to mere objects for the masculine gaze. Laura Mulvey in her feminist film theory "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", proposes an idea that women directors should destroy traditional structures or narratives of films and obtain new experimental practices with the help of "counter cinema" (Mulvey) in order to reclaim the feminine agency. This transformation represents a departure from classical cinema, aligning more with the principles of counter cinema. For instance, Bulbul does not remain the spirited young woman that she used to be, she has now acquired a social agency and reclaimed some of the social power by becoming Thakurain (milady) and her use of power and violence to counter the systemic oppression on women can be seen as the next step in her journey of an empowered individual working for the systematically marginalized collective. At the same time, the movie also portrays the female agency and the flight of women in order to achieve their concerns. Diana T. Meyers in an article "Philosophical Feminism: Feminist Theories of Agency" mentions that "the concept of Female Agency seems more striking for feminist philosophers. It is because practices and knowledge of institutions subordinate women and shape their lives. In this condition, agency manifests a well-developed force of skills in self-discovery, self-direction and self-realization" (Meyers). The film embraces a feminist narrative that disrupts the traditional

values of cinema and empowers women characters to free themselves from the objectification imposed by patriarchal gaze.

Along with all these dimensions, it is very significant to mention that in the film industry it can be hard to give whole credit to only one person for the production of the whole film as it is a collaborative effort. Therefore, Auteur theory solves this dilemma by stating the importance of writers expressing their notions in a distinct way to the rest of the world. As Elizabeth Chelsey states, "Auteur theory, when looked at continuously with other supporting film theories such as feminist film theory or genre studies, can help to illustrate how marginalized directors utilize the medium to express their own understanding of subject and storytelling" (Chesley p.49). However, the importance of auteur theory in which the director is considered as one of the important and paramount of creative voices throughout the film. With regard to the critical analysis of the movie *Bulbbul*, the director continuously talks about the competence of women and struggles for their empowerment by breaking the patriarchal structures, stating, "Why not a woman?" (*Bulbbul*). Therefore, we can discover that the director Anvita Dutt very cleverly challenges the classical household system and societal conventional ideals by painting the movie around the framework of feminist norms and values. Similarly, Akhil Arora while reviewing the movie mentions that "Dutt erases the misogynistic and patriarchal overtones of witch (*chudail*) to put a feminist spin on the story" (Arora).

Female directors find more of a market in independent cinemas where conventions are more readily broken. As an outcome, it will render the directors to keep control over their films and develop an essence of hope for more success within the mainstream cinema markets. "Auteur theory, when looked at continuously with other supporting film theories such as feminist film theory or genre studies, can help to illustrate how marginalized directors utilize the medium to express their own understanding of subject and storytelling" (Chesley p.49). Therefore, the directors or artists should display

the feminist perspectives and notions in their artistic works just to represent the ideal and independent image of women in front of the world, women should work together as a whole to provide mutual support against patriarchal oppression. As Sarah Projansky argues, "Rape narratives in films help organize, understand, and even arguably produce the social world; they help structure special understandings of complex phenomena such as gender, race, class and nation" (Projansky p.7). Consequently, these strategies promote specific reforms in the areas of matrimonial law, freedom, individual identity, work and interpersonal opportunities, and government regulation of sexual morality for women.

Conclusion

In the nutshell, the director of the movie artistically paints the treatment of women, while using the classical backdrop and concepts such as toe rings, child marriages and sexual subjugation to portray the position of women in a society that is essentially male supremacist. The use of the fantastical witch-goddess trope offers a liminal space where the formerly oppressed women exercises her agency not only for her own sake, but for the sake of other suppressed women as well. However, it becomes imperative to note the complex female companionship in a patriarchal society where most women, while realizing the exploitative nature of their relationships with men, choose to remain in a codependent dynamic with them i.e. the men. So, the portrayal of women as frail and submissive creatures who accept abusive marriages as their fate, is not only realistic, but also concerning. Hence, *Bulbbul*'s relentless retaliation, embodied in her fantastical witch goddess persona becomes crucial to the narrative of feminine resistance against misogynist tradition. The portrayal of *Bulbbul* as a female character under the background of historical fiction gives us insight into the emerging image of women and recreates the foundation in which women are permitted to develop the sense of self. And her (*Bulbbul*'s) journey from the innocent *Bulbbul* towards *Thakurain* displays women's potential and their struggle for emancipation. The artistic portrayal

of the power of fantasy is significant since the fantastic representation seems as a power tool for the accomplishment of female agency and emancipation. Thus, we can deduce that by developing the tropes of affirmation and fantasy, the characters struggle, strive and risk their life for a worthy cause.

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