

Article

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Metamorphosed into Kali, a Witch: Reading the Representation of Uncanny in Anvita Dutt's film *Bulbbul*



Abstract:

The movie *Bulbbul* (2020) demonstrates the stigma attached to the rebellious women and their 'strange' behaviours. This is a horror movie that produces fear, agitation and uncanny. Archetype images are the recurring images that are repeatedly used in the literary or visual texts to promote a theme. Anvita Dutt's movie shows the life of Bulbbul, the child bride, her marriage to a wealthy lord, her friendship with Satya, her sufferings and her feminist voice challenging the patriarchal norms. This movie also mirrors what may happen if a married woman tries to speak, to take revenge against her oppressors. This paper examines the politics of representation of a witch, the symbol of kali as the archetype figures of subversive women and its relation to the production of uncanny and abjection.

Keywords:

Uncanny, abjection, subversive woman, witch, kali, patriarchy, subjugation, resistance

The current trends of Bollywood breaks away from the boundary between parallel cinema and commercial cinema. Most of the directors are experimenting with the language and execution of the subject/ theme by maintaining its fascination towards box office. They are

making aesthetic subject oriented cinemas which are proved to be successful commercially. Anvita Dutt is one such female directors who takes the steering of her female centric films in her hand only to portray the struggles, suffering and feminist voices of her deeply layered characters. Anvita Dutt is one of the critically acclaimed directors whose sheer brilliance lies in narrating a story with realism and naturalism. Her film *Bulbbul* apparently is a horror movie employing the elements of supernatural, grotesque and uncanny. This essay attempts to examine the representation and performance of other, subversive women and uncanny.

This movie celebrates the story of a girl who becomes a woman only to defy patriarchy. Her challenge is not only against the misogynistic system, but also against herself. In the film, *Bulbbul* is given a new life to create her extravaganza like aura which itself is a spectacle to watch. From a child bride to a chudail, an empowered woman, she undergoes a transformation. This transformation happens in her psyche as well as in her body which seems to be the battle ground of conflicting opinions, fear, hatred and contesting ideas. She loses her innocence to become a spirited, rebellious woman, a Goddess - a metaphor of Kali's rage and power. Her new existence destabilizes peace in the society causing concern among all. While people are busy looking for the witch, she continues her mission - to take revenge against exploitation. She becomes the symbol of all women who have been subjugated, raped and meet domestic violence. Her metamorphosis into a witch is an unfamiliar thing, strange occurrence as it erases her past, familiar state. Her kali like anger creates a

sense of otherness and a feeling of uncanny as she does not carry the image of a conventional, shy, naive woman. This movie also tells the story of the dominant examples of the culture of witch hunts that cause the death of Bulbbul. Though she dies, her death as well as the ending of the film produces agitation, emptiness and fear. Her aura tries to be alive even after her physical death.



In the patriarchal society, women are treated as other in relation to the male counterparts. It is believed that without the existence of the male counterparts, women are non-existent. Their bodies specifically menstruous, diseased bodies create fear, a sense of unfamiliarity and witnessing these bodies is a queer, strange experience. This film centres on the life of *Bulbbul*, the protagonist who happens to be the chudail. Her character excels all the male characters in terms of its intensity, gesture and volume. In one scene, she is depicted as bedridden, blood flowing out from her legs. This scene creates abjection and a sense of uncanny. According to Freud, the strange or once familiar objects now returned as unsettling, unfamiliar create

a psychological fear in the mind as it is treated as other. Our eyes are not habituated to seeing and believing in such images and imagery. Therefore, the figures of ghosts which is again non-existent in reality, creates fear. This can only be felt through senses. This fear is synonymous to uncanny for the unfamiliar states of the objects. The subject 'I' fails to relate with the object and the dividing line between them gets erased resulting in the collapsing down of the meaning. It also causes the loss of the identity and form. Borrowing the theory of Julia Kristeva, it is argued that the encounter with the witch or the kali like figure of Bulbbul in this film, creates abjection and the psychological, emotional result of the abjection is uncanny. Abjection is a feeling caused by the erasure of the meaning, identity, law and reason. It is the sensation caused by death, violence and dystopia. Bulbbul's initial image does invite sympathy while the audience feel deeply for her later image. The image of witch even the death of the witches cannot demand sympathy of the society but in the film, the chudail, Bulbbul dies. Her death softens the hearts of the audience and they probably shed tears for her demise. It gives them a shock. Her death demands sympathy as well as empathy and it shatters the nerves of the audiences emotionally. The psychological as well as the emotional appeal of the movie is so profound that the intensity of uncanny lasts even after her death. This movie questions whether her spirit after her death is alive or not. Thus, it also questions whether a rebellious woman though being assumed as an other culturally can speak or not. This essay does not examine woman as an other or a figure of subaltern, instead it attempts to read the politics

of production and representation of uncanny in this film.



The movie is also unique for its usage of colour template, dialogue, gestures of the characters, music, cinematography and sound. All these ingredients are deliberately used to tell the story of a metamorphosis, a journey from innocence to experience, a journey into inwards. This movie does not promote the absurdity of existence or Kafka's philosophy. This metamorphosis happens internally. The focus is on mind and on the production of uncanny. If anyone does a psychological sketch of her character, that person may find episodes of silences which are usually her cries, loud shriek. There lies the inability of translating her cries and this inability intensifies the fear for the other, a feeling of uncanny. As the movie leaves its ending open to the audience, it does not provide a conclusion, a straight jacketed meaning as well. This is the politics of representation and the failure of grammar as well as the language of the cinema to depict uncanny and these kind of politics are played and invented by the director herself. It is the silence that gives the profound answers, the loaded meaning. It is the gaps, pauses that creates the climax of the story followed by the arousal of the uncanny. There is continuity in celebrating the uncanny and for the portraiture of the uncanny, the movie falls

under the domain of horror genre. Here, uncanny itself is a character that makes the audience afraid of its arousal and existence. The name of the movie is metaphoric as bulbul is a name of a songbird. Bulbul, the bird is small, lovely and delicate. This bird does not frighten us. In the movie, the audience gets to know a totally different Bulbbul. Even, in the name, Bulbbul, there is an extra 'b' to highlight its extremist anger and hatred for patriarchal oppression. The image is of a totally different character whose existence occupies the position of in-betweenness. She falls between good and evil, saint and venomous, goddess and witch. Her position is complex as the feminist women's position are generally difficult to locate in the society's status quo. This in-between existence and the deviance from the conventional idea of a song bird, act as a cause behind the germination of abjection and uncanny. Therefore, there also lies the politics of creating an image and the reason is simple- to frighten the audience, to create an other entity, to arouse uncanny.



Horror is the genre of the movie, *Bulbbul*. Genre means the types of the movie. All the genre oriented movies follow certain images and characteristics. In this case, this movie is not an exception. This movie is envisioned and executed from a female director's perspective thus making it a

feminist story of struggle, survival and death. Cinematography is the art of the camera and how it narrates a story. Throughout the cinema, a sense of suspense prevails. This suspense intensifies the ambience of the movie but it is hard to catch and locate in the context for its abstractness. There lies the problem of translation, contextualization and deference as the abstract thing like suspense or uncanny always finds itself in flux, in plurality. The absolute meaning cannot be pinned down. Thus, Bulbbul remains an 'other' character till the end of the movie. In this regard, colour template acts as a catalyst to capture the mode, feelings of the movie. Here, the audience can find the usage of red colour as red generally symbolises fiery passion, anger, hatred, jealousy. Through the metaphor of red colour, Bulbbul's aura has been painted and how red colour accessories her ghastly behaviour, strange temperament. In some scenes, she is depicted as a witch sitting on the branches of the trees. The interplay of light and shade in the movie especially in the dark jungle scene, makes the movie a perfect fit into the category of horror genre. Initially, she wears sarees with soft pastel tones. Later, her way of dressing becomes unusual. The camera's focus on her face to capture her 'otherly' emotions, plays a part in promoting the story of uncanny. In the film, there is a dialogue or an explicit use of a word "fly" to stress on the rebellious behaviours of the women. Birds fly away so does bulbul, the song bird. In this film, Bulbbul, the witch happens to be have supernatural powers like jumping from one tree to another and getting disappeared into darkness, oblivion like lost meaning. It can be said that the main intention

of the film is to depict the atrocities done onto women's bodies following the trials of witch hunt in the society through this fictitious narrative of rise and fall of a woman. But, it can also be argued that *Bulbbul*, the witch carries the sensibility of friendship and platonic love for Satya that gives her a sense of womanliness. There is another woman character who is elder to her. She is the flag bearer of misogyny and patriarchy. Her character is sketched to examine the stark contrast between her and *Bulbbul*. Her husband is mentally retarded who rapes *Bulbbul*. This act of a woman getting beaten by a mentally retarded 'male' shows how fragile women are and how they can be taken advantage of for their helpless condition. The name of Satya is also metaphorical as Satya means truth. Nothing is absolute true in this movie or atleast the search for the absolute truth is a work in progress. Satya is a grey

character who also carries the slight tendencies of patriarchy just like his brothers.

The character, *Bulbbul* is played by Tripti Dimri who becomes the hero as well as the villain of the movie. Usually, in the movie, the hero does not die and the ending happens with the victory of the hero. In this case, Tripti aka *Bulbbul* transcends the expectation of the audience by heaving a last sigh. It shows that she is a culprit, an anti-hero to the eyes of the society but her death symbolically shows the death of a hero. This movie is a celebration of the ambiguous position, otherly position held by *Bulbbul*, both a hero and a villain. The monstrous woman, bleeding woman go hand in hand with the theme of abjection and uncanny. Thus, the loss of the grand narrative welcomes plurality in terms of image production of a witch, the Goddess Kali and how these archetype images produce fear in the audience's mind.

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