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Spectral Justice: Gender Trauma and Ecofeminist Agency in *Bulbbul's* Gothic Narrative

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Abstract

Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, is a feminist tale of trauma, revenge and spectral justice against the haunting backdrop of a crimson-lit colonial Bengal. Pushing the boundaries of conventional horror tropes, Bulbbul situates itself as a regional Gothic tale where the lush forests of Bengal become a witness to the violence and trauma inflicted upon the female body. The film evokes a distinct eco-gothic sensibility wherein the suffering incurred by the female body is reflected in the wounds endured by the natural world, both shaped by the oppressive forces of patriarchy and colonialism. This paper aims to explore Bulbbul as not just a tale of gender trauma but as a powerful story of reclamation of agency and justice. Bulbbul's metamorphosis into the supernatural figure of the 'chudail', that is simultaneously demonized and deified, can be seen as a powerful response to trauma, affording her the power and agency to exact revenge on the abusers in society that are complicit in silencing and dehumanizing women. The supernatural, thus, is positioned as a means for marginalized women to reclaim power and deliver justice otherwise denied in a colonial-patriarchal society. This paper also aims to illuminate the ecofeminist elements that pervade the film's narrative focusing on Bulbbul's affinity to the natural world. Nature, at once, becomes a refuge as well as a site of horror showcasing the intertwining relationship between women, nature, and the supernatural.

I. INTRODUCTION

Horror stories have had a long, intertwining history with human civilization. So much of what classifies as horror is what makes us uncomfortable, what we can't completely understand, triggering our deepest fears and anxieties. H.P. Lovecraft famously said in his essay "Supernatural Horror in Literature", "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (12). With its origins in varied religious and folkloric tales across the world, horror stories have played an enduring role in the rich cultural tapestry of India. Indian folklore's preoccupation with the horror genre is visible in its diverse supernatural figures such as 'churail', 'rakshasa' or 'bhoota'. While initially these stories were focused on themes of superstition, fear, and darkness, contemporary horror stories have taken a more personal turn often focusing on issues of identity, power, agency, and justice. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita D

utt, also establishes itself as one such story that deals with gender trauma, reclamation of agency and justice

by the powerless. It forces us to confront our own notions of horror. Does true horror lie in the lurking shadows, haunted mansions, and supernatural figures, or does it lie in all that a man is capable of doing to women and to nature? In true carnivalesque fashion, the film subverts the Indian myth of 'chudail' turning it into an empowering symbol instead of a horrifying one, highlighting how indigenous women, when denied justice, must become supernatural, spectral figures to assert their voices and protect themselves and others from abuse. The film's backdrop of nature, especially the lush forests of Bengal, become Bulbbul's refuge from the trauma inflicted upon her by the patriarchal society. However, at the end of the film, both Bulbbul and the forest are burnt down and destroyed by the callous and irrational actions of men like Satya which echoes the destruction wrought upon women as well as nature by the colonial-patriarchal forces of the society. Bulbbul, thus, stands as an exemplary film where gothic elements and cultural myths are skilfully blended with gender trauma, ecological loss and retrieval of power and agency.

II. ISOLATION, TRAUMA AND LACK OF AGENCY

The term 'trauma' finds its origins in the greek word 'τραύμα' meaning 'injury'. Initially, the word was used to constitute a physical injury but it was only after the two world wars that the world started to pay attention to the psychological impacts of trauma on an individual. It is important to note, however, that the causes and context of trauma is shaped by one's gender. While men experience trauma due to accidents, physical assault, natural disasters, and wars or conflict, women experience a more insidious, systemic, and continuous traumatization in the form of subjugation, sexual, physical or emotional violence at the hands of a spouse, a family member or a stranger. Notably, women's experiences of trauma in Colonial India were not monolithic but shaped by a complex interplay of colonial policies, indigenous patriarchal structures, caste hierarchies and communal violence. The experience of gendered trauma was further complicated by the social practices of Sati and Child Marriage that were prevalent in Colonial India. Rife with power struggles between colonial legislators and indigenous patriarchs, India under British rule became a site of power negotiation where women were rarely the beneficiaries. Though at the outset, legislations such as the Sati Regulation Act and Age of Consent Acts were framed as efforts to protect women, the colonial state often allied with local male elites to maintain social order and reinforce colonial-patriarchal authority.

Bulbbul serves as a poignant cinematic exploration of systemic trauma inflicted upon women within indigenous patriarchal structures under colonial rule. Set in the late 1800s Colonial Bengal, the film opens with Bulbbul's forced transition from a young child to a child bride married to a significantly older man Indranil under the guise of familial duty and tradition. This betrayal by her family and society at large is further exacerbated as she's isolated from her only ally, Satya, Indranil's younger brother who was Bulbbul's only companion in the haveli and the closest to her age. As the film progresses, we witness a complete breakdown of Bulbbul's personhood as she undergoes violent physical traumatization by Indranil, who in fit of jealousy beats her legs bloody with a steel poker symbolically destroying her limited mobility and freedom. This violent trauma is further compounded by the sexual assault she suffers at the hands of Mahendra who takes advantage of her immobility. Furthermore, this double trauma is rendered invisible by the very social fabric meant to protect her — Pishi Maa, who witnesses and keeps silent, Satya who is sent away, and a patriarchal household that collectively chooses complicity over accountability. Cathy Caruth's seminal formulation of trauma given in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* defines trauma as "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available" resonates profoundly with Bulbbul's condition: her trauma is unspeakable within the available social language, and it is only through the Gothic register of the supernatural that her wound finds its ultimate, violent articulation (4). The film thus positions gendered trauma not merely as personal suffering but as a structural outcome of the colonial-patriarchal order, one that requires an equally radical rupture, in the form of spectral transformation, for its resolution.

The film makes no attempts to hide that Bulbbul has no agency whatsoever in the decisions that impact her

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life. Whatever agency she has is at the mercy of the men around her. It cleverly employs the recurrent motif of 'bichiya' to signify patriarchal control and denial of female agency. It is first established by Pishi Maa that Bichiya are beneficial adornments but the subtext reveals that they work as instruments of control and ownership. Traditionally, toe rings were worn as a symbol of a woman's entry into wifehood, a symbol of their marital status and commitment to their spouse. As the narrative progresses, a grown Bulbbul is chastised by Vinodini for wearing loose bichiya, which have come to represent her weakening subjugation. Vinodini's insistence that Bulbbul purchase new toe rings is not merely about propriety, but a deliberate attempt to reassert patriarchal norms and sever Bulbbul's last remnants of freedom- her connection to Satya, which serves as her sole link to innocence and authentic companionship.

Another important motif employed by the film is the motif of legs and feet. In patriarchal iconography, a woman's feet are simultaneously symbols of her groundedness in domesticity and her capacity for movement and escape. When Indranil destroys Bulbbul's legs, he is not merely inflicting physical injury; he is severing her from the earth itself — from mobility, autonomy, and the natural world she loves. The broken legs confine her to the haveli, literalizing the symbolic imprisonment that defines the lives of women within colonial-patriarchal structures. Critically, this same site of destruction becomes the locus of her transformation: as the chudail, Bulbbul's feet are inverted — a key marker of the figure in South Asian folklore — signifying a violent but definitive inversion of her subjugation into power. Her reversed feet, once a sign of horror, become a symbol of agency reclaimed from the very body that was broken to deny it.

III. THE CHUDAIL AS SYMBOL OF SPECTRAL JUSTICE AND RECLAIMED AGENCY

The figure of the chudail occupies a complex and ambivalent space in South Asian folklore. Traditionally conceived as the vengeful spirit of a woman who dies an untimely or violent death — particularly one who dies in childbirth, during menstruation, or as a victim of injustice — the chudail is simultaneously a figure of dread and of transgressive power. Her inverted feet, her nocturnal dominion over forests and crossroads, and her targeting of predatory men mark her as a being who has stepped outside the sanctioned social order and, in doing so, acquired the capacity to punish those who operate within it with impunity. Anvita Dutt's film works within this folkloric tradition while fundamentally reorienting its ideological valence: in *Bulbbul*, the chudail is not a figure to be feared by the innocent but a force of justice for the wronged.

The film's narrative logic positions Bulbbul's metamorphosis as a direct consequence of the legal and social vacuum that surrounds her suffering. Judith Butler's theorisation of precarity is instructive here: certain lives, Butler argues, are rendered ungrievable by the social and political order, excluded from the frameworks of recognition that would make their suffering legible and actionable (*Precarious Life* xiv-xv). Bulbbul's trauma — the child marriage, the domestic violence, the sexual assault — is rendered invisible by the very institutions that should address it. The supernatural, in this reading, is not an evasion of the social but its shadow: the spectral form taken by justice when all sanctioned channels have been foreclosed. Bulbbul as chudail targets exclusively those men who abuse women: Mahendra, the rapist; the village men who prey upon women with impunity. Her violence is selective, purposeful, and legible as a moral code. The film thus constructs the supernatural as a mode of ethical agency unavailable through legitimate social means, echoing what scholars of postcolonial Gothic have identified as the genre's distinctive function in contexts of structural oppression — the return of the repressed, the haunting of the present by unresolved historical violence.

The carnivalesque dimension of this transformation, as Mikhail Bakhtin theorizes it in *Rabelais and His World*, involves the temporary inversion of social hierarchies — the low becoming high, the subjugated becoming sovereign (10). Bulbbul's chudail form literalizes this inversion: the woman denied mobility walks the forest at night; the woman denied voice commands terror; the woman denied personhood becomes mythic. Yet the film refuses to render this inversion as a simple triumph. Bulbbul's supernatural agency is also a form of tragedy. She exists in a liminal space, neither fully alive nor fully dead,

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simultaneously protector and monster in the eyes of those she guards. Pishi Maa's awareness of Bulbbul's identity, and her dual role in both sustaining and concealing it, introduces a further layer of female complicity and solidarity that complicates any simple reading of victimhood or heroism. The film insists on the ambivalence of spectral justice: it is real, it is necessary, and yet it is the symptom of a world in which women have no other recourse.

IV. ECOFEMINISM, ECOGOTHIC, AND THE POLITICS OF NATURE IN BULBBUL

Ecofeminism, as theorized by Val Plumwood and Karen Warren, identifies a structural parallel between the domination of women and the domination of the natural world, arguing that both are products of the same logic of mastery that defines patriarchal and colonial epistemologies. In the ecofeminist framework, the feminization of nature and the naturalization of women are twin operations of a dualistic thought system that positions culture over nature, man over woman, reason over emotion, and civilization over wilderness (Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery* 3; Warren 24). Bulbbul is deeply invested in this parallel. The lush forest of Bengal that surrounds the haveli is not merely a backdrop to the narrative but a co-protagonist, a living entity whose fate is intertwined with Bulbbul's own. As Bulbbul is progressively confined, violated, and diminished within the domestic space of the haveli, the forest persists as a space of relative freedom — one she visits as a child with Satya and to which she returns, transformed, as the chudail.

The film's visual language consistently articulates this ecofeminist correspondence. The famous crimson palette — the red that saturates the forest scenes, the blood-red flowers that frame Bulbbul's supernatural appearances — operates as a chromatic grammar linking the wounded female body to the natural world. The red blooms that appear at the sites of the chudail's violence are simultaneously beautiful and deadly, recalling the ecogothic tradition's interest in nature as a site of sublime horror. Simon Estok's concept of "ecophobia" given in the essay "Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia" which is the fear and hostility directed at the non-human natural world, is relevant here: the men in the film who abuse women are also, systematically, those who regard the forest with contempt or indifference (208). The natural world in Bulbbul is not a passive backdrop but an active moral register, one that mirrors and responds to human injustice.

The film's ecofeminist logic is most powerfully realized in the figure of Bulbbul as chudail — a being who is neither fully human nor fully natural, who inhabits the interstitial space between culture and wilderness, domesticity and forest. Val Plumwood's concept of "the shadow place," the space that sustains the privileged center while remaining outside its moral accounting, maps onto the forest's function in the film (Plumwood, "Shadow Places" 146). The haveli is the space of patriarchal order; the forest is its constitutive outside, the space where what the haveli cannot contain — Bulbbul's desire, her rage, her identity — persists and eventually returns with fatal consequence. Bulbbul's affinity with the forest is also an affinity with the non-human, with a mode of being that escapes the taxonomies of wifely duty, familial obligation, and female propriety that structure the haveli's social world. In this sense, her transformation is not only a supernatural event but an ecological one: she becomes, in the fullest sense, a creature of the forest.

Yet the film does not allow this ecofeminist vision to survive unchallenged. Its tragic ending — in which Satya, newly returned and unable to process the truth of Bulbbul's transformation, burns the forest and destroys her — performs the same double destruction that colonial-patriarchal violence enacts in history: the simultaneous annihilation of women and of nature. The burning of the forest is an act of ecocide and femicide at once. Satya's action, born of love distorted by patriarchal epistemology, literalizes what Rob Nixon has described as "slow violence" in its sudden, spectacular form — the accumulated, invisible damage of gendered and ecological oppression made devastatingly visible in a single conflagration (Nixon 6). The film thus refuses the consolation of a triumphant ecofeminist resolution, insisting instead on the continuing cost of a world that cannot accommodate female power or non-human agency on their own terms.

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V. CONCLUSION

Bulbbul is a film about the unbearable weight of silence: the silence imposed on women by child marriage, by domestic violence, by sexual assault, and by the social order that makes all of these invisible. Anvita Dutt's achievement lies in transforming this silence into a voice — not a domestic, accommodating voice, but a spectral, forest-dwelling, justice-delivering one. Through the figure of the chudail, the film articulates what a colonial-patriarchal society cannot: that women's rage is legitimate, that their suffering demands accountability, and that the natural world is not merely a backdrop to human drama but a participant in it, with its own wounds and its own eloquence.

This paper has argued that Bulbbul operates at the intersection of three critical frameworks: trauma theory, ecofeminism, and postcolonial Gothic. Understood through Cathy Caruth's lens of trauma, Bulbbul's story maps the impossibility of containing gendered suffering within available social grammars, and the spectral eruption that results. Understood through Val Plumwood's ecofeminism, the film insists on the co-implication of women and nature as twin objects of colonial-patriarchal domination, and the ecological dimensions of female reclamation. Understood through the regional Gothic tradition — rooted in Bengali folklore, colonial history, and the hauntological residue of unaddressed violence — the film situates individual trauma within a broader cartography of spectral justice. Together, these frameworks illuminate a film that is both formally beautiful and politically urgent, a work that refuses to let horror be merely atmospheric and insists, instead, that the truly terrifying thing is the world that makes a chudail necessary.

The film's tragic conclusion, in which both Bulbbul and the forest are destroyed, does not diminish its feminist vision but deepens it. The ending refuses the comfortable catharsis of a defeated patriarchy and insists on the ongoing, structural nature of the violence it depicts. What survives is not Bulbbul's body but her legend — the story that Satya carries and that the film transmits to its audience. In this sense, Bulbbul participates in a long tradition of Gothic narratives that locate the subversive power of the genre not in the defeat of the monster but in the refusal to forget that the monster was made, and by whom. The chudail of colonial Bengal — like the spectres of Gothic fiction across traditions — haunts not because she is evil, but because the world that created her has never been fully called to account.

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