

Supernatural Justice Through the Monstrous Feminine: Reading *Bulbbul* (2020) as a New Wave Feminist Film

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Abstract

Gaining traction after Barbara Creed's publication *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (2022), the term "monstrous-feminine" is used in feminist theory and cultural studies to examine the representation of women and femininity in film, literature, and other popular media. Drawing upon Creed's conception of the monstrous feminine this paper analyses *Bulbbul* (2020) as a new-wave feminist film and examines the film's subversive use of the myth of the *Chudail* (a nocturnal demon-woman within Indian folkloric traditions identified through her twisted feet) as a mode of terrorising the phallogentric symbolic order and securing justice for women. Creed observes that horrific portrayals of women are rooted in cultural anxieties about women's agency and sexuality. She argues "Determined to discover their own identity and desires, the female characters embark on a journey into the dark night of abjection, where they engage with the underlying horrors of the patriarchal order."¹ Analyzing the film's different cinematic components, this article shows that the monstrous feminine can be seen as a site of resistance and transgression, subverting the dominant discourses of feminine malevolence. It traces the journey of the female subject from oppression to defiance of patriarchy and recasts the evil witch into the emancipatory goddess of liberation.

Keywords: abjection, feminism, monstrosity, patriarchy, revolt

Introduction

In recent years, the discourse concerning feminist film theories has moved beyond its initial aim of exploring the cultural representations of women in cinema. Theoretical frameworks drawing on critiques of ideology, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction now examine the deep structure of the film to see how meaning is constructed and sexual difference and sexuality are articulated through films. While feminist film studies in the 1960s and 1970s continued to focus on the misrepresentation of women in the classical oedipal narrative and the construction of the female subject for the male gaze, some female filmmakers responded to the underrepresentation of women and the absence of women directors, producers, technician as well as the lack of women-centric narratives in western cinema.² This response heralded an avant-garde movement in Western cinema called the Feminist New Wave Cinema. In the 1990s with the impetus of psychoanalysis concepts like voyeuristic gaze, narcissistic identification,

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¹ Barbara Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine: Feminist New Wave Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2022), p. 2.

² Karen Hollinger, *Feminist Film Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

and pleasures of spectatorship gained currency in feminist film studies and broadened the scope of experimentation in genre by manipulating the three core elements of filmmaking; namely, camera, character, and spectator. These filmmakers experimented with narrative structures, visual styles, and storytelling techniques to challenge conventional phallogocentric cinematic norms and explore the nuances of female subjectivity. Women directors across the globe like Chantal Akerman, Agnes Varda, and Laura Mulvey, now explore and utilize different genres to show the awakening of the female subject and multiple practices of revolt against patriarchy.

While the feminist new wave is different from traditional filmmaking in that it is a woman-centric narrative presented from a woman's point of view it offers freedom to experiment with themes, characters, plots, genres, and cinematic technique. Horror is the preferred genre among many New Wave directors like Karyn Kusama, Roxanne Benjamin, and Annie Clark, used to depict the surreal qualities of the human struggle. Within this context of experimental genres is situated Barbra Creed's notion of the "monstrous feminine" which is a unique practice in feminist new-wave cinema. It attempts to revisit traditional horror cinema which presents female figures as the monstrous, dangerous, and "Other" and reflects socially engrained patriarchal anxieties about women's bodies, sexuality, and power. 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.³

This differs from classic horror genres; the monstrous feminine relies on the stark portrayals of asymmetric power structures that govern a patriarchal society and juxtaposes them with the atrocities and violence committed on the female victims to bring out the sheer horror of women's lived realities. Deriving her argument from Kristeva's concept of "abjection" Creed reconceptualises horror and monstrosity seeing it not as a source of revulsion but as a positive aspect of abjection. The abject marks a state of transgression that exists on the boundaries of the self and society. Using the example of "food-loathing"⁴ she states that the abject marks a blurring of boundaries between the conditions that are necessary for the existence of the self and those that threaten it. Rotten food, filth, excrement, corpses, and other taboos commonly displayed in the horror genre are classic examples of the abject that threaten order. Situating the abject in the social context Creed explains how female sexuality and the female body by its very nature becomes the ultimate 'other' the 'abject' and a threat to the symbolic order.

The state of transgression in the horror genre is used by the female monster of the new wave as a medium of carnivalesque subversion and revenge against patriarchal violence. This revolt can take many forms.⁵ Creed analyses these feminist practices in films like *The Babadook* (Monstrous Mother), *Promising Young Woman* (rape and revolt), *A Girl Walks Home*

³ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 2.

⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 2.

⁵ Shohini Chaudhuri, *Feminist Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

Alone at Night (vampires), *Trouble Every Day* (female cannibalism and eating the other), and *Mad Max: Fury Road* (eco-horror and monstrous feminine) among others. Drawing on these films, she asserts that new-wave feminist cinema situates the female character who must face her worst nightmares in the face of a violent father, shameless rapists, sexist friends, and heterosexist legal apparatuses. In negotiating with these unspeakable atrocities, these women characters rediscover their feminine rage and matrilineal powers and subvert entrenched male supremacy. The central strain of these new filmmakers is the appropriation of monstrosity as the defining characteristic of their female protagonists. Creed contends that these new-wave feminist films have been written, directed, and broadcasted across the globe voicing dissent against the abuse of women, bringing in local realities of women and their multiple ways of self-articulation. Drawing upon the frameworks of second, third and fourth-wave feminism, and “augmented by the #MeToo movement, Black Lives Matter, and eco-feminism, Feminist New Wave Cinema has a rich and diverse theoretical background that has deepened its engagement with radical alterity, inter-sectionalism, and the politics of revolt.”⁶

Situating the supernatural gothic-thriller *Bulbbul* within this framework, this article explores the folkloric tropes of the myth of *Chudail* in light of the monstrous feminine. 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.”⁷ Following upon the characteristics and cinematic strategies of new-wave feminist cinema this paper intends to unpack the film and its feminist practices of dissent and revolt. Exploring the intersections of feminism, spirituality, and the socio-historical constructions of the female body as the “other,” this article illustrates the complex connections between horror, female body/female sexuality, and supernatural justice via the divine feminine as reflected in Indian folklore and mythology.

Elements of the Feminist New Wave in *Bulbbul*

Hailed as a “strike at the putrid core of patriarchy”⁸ debutant director Anvita Dutts’ *Bulbbul* is a gothic thriller with an IMDb rating of 6.5/10 streaming on Netflix. Set in 1881 in the erstwhile presidency of Bengal, with an ingenious blend of quintessential Bengali aesthetic sensibilities and a fablesque narrative style, the plot follows the eponymous protagonist Bulbbul over a span of twenty years from the time that she is married off as a child bride into a wealthy Thakur family to her spectral transformation into a demonic witch who uses her supernatural post-mortual powers to horrify the symbolic order, seek revenge and establish justice for women.

With its female protagonist, the feminist theme of rape-revenge, and the ingenious revisiting of the myth of *Chudail*, the film serves as the perfect example of a new-wave feminist film employing the “monstrous feminine” to express rage and address a patriarchal society that

⁶ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 18

⁷ Devaleena Kundu and Benson Rajan, “From Chudail to Devi: Analysing Death, Evil, and Monstrous Femininity in *Bulbbul*”, *Revenant*, no. 8 (2022), pp. 64-81.

⁸ Namrata Joshi, “*Bulbbul* Movie Review: Strikes at the Putrid Core of Patriarchy,” *The Hindu*, 24 June (2020).

grants impunity to perpetrators of violence against women. This expression of rage is a key feature of the feminist new wave as it portrays women's agency. As William Vernon Harris notes, "to be angry, it has been argued, is to put oneself in the position of the judge, which for a woman in a patriarchal society means to be insubordinate."⁹ For years women's rage has been delegitimized in Hindi cinema by reducing it to tropes of hysteria or malevolence as can be seen in *Raaz* (2018), *Veerana* (1988), and *Krishna Cottage* (2004). However, *Bulbbul* framed within the feminist new wave situates this rage of the *Chudail* within a larger discourse of abuse and suffering absolving the monstrous-feminine of its malevolence.¹⁰ Besides legitimizing women's anger, it also elevates it as the divine feminine rage by invoking the figure of *Kali* (a Goddess in Hindu mythology associated with death, destruction, and apocalypse) and with the carnivalesque blending of the monstrous and the divine it uses the figure of the *Chudail* to arouse fear in the hearts of perpetrators of violence against women.

Here an intentional emphasis is laid on the terminology, as "monstrous-feminine" is not simply an indication of the gendered identity of the "female monster" as opposed to the "male monster." It refers to the representation of women in horror films as threatening, horrifying, and aberrant. Using Kristeva's "abjection" as a point of reference Creed argues that these horrifying portrayals of women reflect cultural anxieties and deeply ingrained fears surrounding female power, sexuality, and the female body. This monstrosity, therefore, is subversive and transformative; it has an emancipatory effect. As Julia Ducournau, director of *Raw* (2016) and *Titane* (2021), argues, monstrosity itself is potentially liberating. In an interview regarding her film *Titane*, she stated that:

[t]he idea was to create a new humanity that is strong because it's monstrous – and not the other way around. Monstrosity, for me, is always positive. It's about debunking all the normative ways of society and social life [The female protagonist Alexia's] monstrosity had her emancipated.¹¹

Laura Mulvey uses the lens of "scopophilia." Stressing the two psychosexual impulses, namely Freud's "castration anxiety" and Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" she illustrates that the world represented through cinema is a reinforcement of the phallogocentric values that are entrenched within the symbolic patriarchal order.

Since women are equated with "castration" or "lack," it is the man who becomes the bearer of meaning. In the cinematic world, this translates as the representation of women as "objects" to be looked at and men as the "bearer of look." Mulvey writes,

Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as an erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen.¹²

⁹ William Vernon Harris, *Restraining Rage: The Ideology of Anger Control in Classical Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 275.

¹⁰ Kundu and Rajan, "From Chudail to Devi", pp. 64-81.

¹¹ Eric Kohn, "Palme d'Or Winner Julia Ducournau on Groundbreaking *Titane*: 'I Don't Want My Gender to Define Me'," *IndieWire*, 17 July (2021).

¹² Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 62.

Conventional cinematic depictions of rape in Hindi cinema were shot with this voyeuristic intent where many films have thrived on such gory depictions of the violation of the female body catering to a specific adult target audience and their psychographics and demographics. Even the depictions of narratives that were supposedly women-centric like *Insaaf Ka Tarazu* (1980), *Damini* (1993), *Prem Granth* (1996), *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), and *Saat Khoon Maaf* (2011) could not abstain from graphic and hypersexualized portrayals of the female body. A critic, noting the Kuleshov effect used in the depiction of Bollywood rape scenes notes:

Lecherous men hell bent on proving their masculinity and dominance by forcibly mounting on weaker sex to satiate their quest for lust and power. The resultant self-defense by weaker sex involves slapping such rapists, biting their hands, or kicking phallus. The result is that the rapist becomes even more ferocious and then his lustful endeavours take 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.¹³

Sited in the practices of psychoanalytic feminism, feminist new-wave cinema makes use of radically different cinematic techniques to ethically represent women's narratives. It challenges the traditional rape-revenge genre calling out its voyeurism and misogyny. Creed writes 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."¹⁴

Creed states four defining characteristics of feminist new-wave films based on the rape-revenge genre. Based on her study of films like *Promising Young Woman*, *Revenge and Nightingale*, she argues that these films represent shameless rapists and focus more on male monstrosity than women's abjected bodies. They situate a female protagonist who seeks revenge against the rape culture and the film focuses on feminist practices of revolt against what Creed terms "aggressive phallacy." These films also utilize a new cinematic technique while depicting the rape scene. Unlike traditional depictions, the focus is no longer on female bodies or the sexualization of the assault by zooming onto the women's seductive bodies to proverbially justify the male gaze and the subsequent slip of moral judgment. Instead, it focuses on the male violence and horror on the face of women. Creed writes that "The films directed by Jennifer Kent, Coralie Fargeat, and Emerald Fennell all raise ethical questions around the representation of rape. Should the film depict the actual rape realistically to reveal the horror of rape, even if inadvertently appealing to a voyeuristic gaze? Should the director avoid depicting rape? Does it matter if the spectator is invited to derive pleasure from watching the fulfilment of a revenge fantasy in a genre film which does not need to adhere to codes of

¹³Haris Hasan, "The Depiction of Rape Scenes in Popular Hindi Cinema: A Critical Examination of Representation of Gender in Media," *Journal of Women Empowerment and Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (2021), pp. 42-46.

¹⁴ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 51.

realism? Can the act of revolt that attacks rape culture be liberating?”¹⁵ Conscious of these ethical questions, these filmmakers break away from conventional depictions of rape.

Sharing these ethical concerns, *Bulbbul* focuses on the brutality of men in its depiction of rape. When Bulbbul is being brutally beaten by Indraneel with an iron poker, the camera focuses on the mirror where the victim can see the inhuman rage of the perpetrator, the metal rod dripping with blood, then panning the camera toward the wall painting where Raavan slashes off *Jattayoun's* (a mythical bird in the *Ramayana*) feet and wings. Here the eagle and the protagonist become one, as both are wounded and lose their wings (symbolic of freedom). A confused Bulbbul can only look at the perpetrator in the mirror perplexed as to what has transpired, the sound is muted to visually amplify the horror of the woman who is hurt till she cannot scream anymore, and submits to her fate without any question. In the same sequence when Mahender is depicted raping her, the camera is focused on the face of the victim to depict the sheer horror and pain, and metaphoric death, as her body falls limp. It is a feminist lens of depiction, instead of catering to the voyeuristic male gaze the focus shifts to depicting the predicament of the woman who is helpless, wounded, and has no way of being defended. This cinematic technique follows suit to female directors like Coreal Fargeat and Kent. In her response to a question at the Venice film festival about her rape scenes Kent answered,

But I do not see those scenes as rape scenes If you look at any rape scene in cinema, you will see women's naked bodies. That, for example, for me was a no-go. I did not want to look at it from the male gaze. If you look at the scenes you are referring to, they are just close-ups of faces.

Rape, reincarnation, and revenge are central to the plot, and their cinematic presentation through a feminist lens that desexualizes the gaze and magnifies the horror of the act of rape, as well as recasts the victim as the abject source of horror, instead of a hyper-sexualised female monster are in accordance with the norms and practices of the new-wave feminist cinema.

Supernatural Justice and The Monstrous Feminine

Like many recent vampire films such as *The Moth Diaries* (Mary Harron, 2011), *Byzantium* (Neil Jordan, 2012), and *Carmilla* (Emily Harris, 2019) that subvert the classical perspectives about witches and vampires as objects of revulsion, *Bulbbul* (2020) also celebrates monstrosity as a sign of power and freedom. It explores and utilizes the *Vampire* genre and blends it with the Indian mythic tropes of witches colloquially known as *Chudail*. Creed notes, “the horror film is populated by female monsters, many of which seem to have evolved from images that haunted the dreams, myths and artistic practices of our forebears many centuries ago.”¹⁶ 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. In this regard, *Bulbbul* comes across as a regular horror film.

¹⁵ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, pp. 53-54.

¹⁶ Barbara Creed, “The Femme Castratrice: I Spit on Your Grave, Sisters,” in *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 122-38.

However, what makes it, “a feminist, revisionist tale”¹⁷ 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. The film plays with the idea of the traditional and the modern both in genre and motif. In terms of the genre, we see the classic elements of horror; old bungalows, dark settings, mysterious murders, and so on. However, the treatment of the theme is both modern and in accordance with the generical rules of the feminist new-wave cinema with its revisionist narration from the point of view of the victim/villain. We come across the protagonist, a seemingly traditional Bengali woman with her traditional sari paired with Western boots, creating in the viewer a sense of something familiar as well as strange at the same time. This peculiar sense of familiar yet strange is crucial, as traditional motifs are subverted to appropriate new symbolic meanings. Creed comments of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (directed Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014),

It plays with genre forms and subverts many of the dominant motifs of the traditional vampire movie such as the quest for immortality, bloody red fangs, full-moon mania, garlic, and the cross, as well as the classic figure of the vampire. Instead, it features a young female vampire who wears a chador and lives in Bad City, which is home to outcasts from virtually any society — prostitutes, junkies, the homeless, and drag queens.¹⁸

The character of Bulbbul, while she remains a docile and obedient wife, suffers ostracism as the “*kolankini Radha*” (an ill-reputed girl, particularly one who is noted for illicit romances). for her affectionate bond with Satya. For this, she is brutally beaten up by her jealous husband Indraneel, leaving her ankles broken and her feet twisted forever. This tragedy of fate later becomes a symbol of empowerment when she embraces her twisted feet, considered the ominous identification mark of a *Chudail*. Her acceptance/incarnation of this new self is evident not just in how she uses her new avatar as a messiah for the women folk but also in how she conducts herself socially (like the protagonist of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, who picks on misogynist and cruel husbands and spills their blood).

From the brightly draped, bubbly girl running barefoot with her anklets tinkling throughout the mansion, she transforms into a head matriarch who does not practice *Pardai* (meaning cloak, here it refers to the Indian practice of veiling oneself from the male gaze),

¹⁷ Shubhra Gupta, “*Bulbbul* Movie Review: A Powerfully Feminist, Revisionist Tale”, *The Indian Express*, 25 June (2020).

¹⁸ Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 87.

assumes discretion in social matters by taking up the role of a *Thakurian* (landlady, mistress, wife of the master, wife of the Thakur (high cast landowners in Bengal)), partakes of ‘masculine’ practices such as *paan* (refreshments made of betel leaves and used as stimulants), *beedi* (a cheap cigarette made of unprocessed tobacco wrapped in leaves), and most importantly dispenses justice outside social as well as legal frameworks. The very feet with the anklets and toe rings that were earlier symbolic of submission now become emblems of rebellion with their depiction as “twisted feet” and booted in heels.

While the villagers regard the witch as a demonic murderer, for the abuse victims she is *Devi Maa* (Divine Goddess, in this context Durga). This point is stressed when we see Bulbul lose consciousness after her assault at the hands of Mahender. This incident marks a metaphoric death, a death of her innocence, after which the blood moon beams its red aura upon her limp body and a zephyr of wind from the Durga temple gushes toward her, breathing a new spirit in her and jolting her back to life with an uncanny scream symbolic of her monstrous reincarnation. When she awakens, we see her surrounded by the same *kash phool* (kans grass, a white flower native to India also associated with the season of Durga Pujo) that surrounds the temple of *Kali* in the forests. 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.”¹⁹ 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 and is best seen exemplified in movies like *In My Skin* (2002). Cannibalism is an “act of female revolt against male power and violence, corporate and institutional oppression, and the destructiveness of anthropocentrism.”²⁰ Questioning Taboos around humans eating flesh, Bulbul is also shown drinking the blood from the jugular of her victims. Drawing upon the new wave of feminist cinema,

She symbolically eats/destroys the patriarchal order by devouring her male victim’s body — the body of the law — thereby upholding the semiotic over the symbolic in her frenzied assault on the body and its surface covering, the skin, which, unlike the skinned body, maintains bodily integrity and wholeness.²¹

These elements make Bulbul a subversive female figure, ‘a feminine terrorist’ challenging stereotypical representation of witches as she uses her post-mortal supernatural powers to seek justice and revenge. Besides, the use of the supernatural divine helps overcome the theoretical gaps in Creed’s Conception of the monstrous feminine. Creed has been critiqued for her essentialism and overarching reliance on binaries and for her oedipal “phallic panic.”²² The blending of the demon and deity helps overcome the restrictions of binaries as well as broadens the scope of the monstrous beyond the horror genre.

¹⁹ Kundu and Rajan, “From Chudail to Devi”, pp. 64-81.

²⁰ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 127.

²¹ Creed, *Return of the Monstrous-Feminine*, p. 128.

²² Craig Martin, “Phallic Panic — A Review of Barbara Creed’s Feminist Analysis of Male Movie Monsters,” *Screening the Past* (2008).

The elements of gothic horror are brought to the foreground with the use of Siddharth Diwan's conceptual cinematography and his astute use of the red glow of a blood moon that perpetually swathes the silver screen, especially in the forest murder sequence. The Haveli with its fair share of camera panning and zooming out is another extension of the gothic elements and is symbolic of the dark secrets and mysteries it hides, this idea is referenced when Binodini, to pacify Bulbbul, says, "*badi badi Havelion me bade bade raaz hote hain ... chup rehna*" (big mansions come with bigger secrets ... keep mum). Besides the cinematic technique, Amit Trivedi's haunting background score brings home the elements of horror, and the use of melancholic nostalgic notes aids the back-and-forth movement of the narrative from the past to the present. While the past is mostly portrayed brightly with the beaming mansion and sunny outdoors symbolizing the childlike innocence of Bulbbul and Satya, the sequences shot to depict the present are often shot in darker settings adding to the gloomy and ominous aura of the blood moon. The transition depicts a loss of innocence and the folklore of the *Chudail* which was earlier a bonding experience for the two now becomes a point of departure as Satya inadvertently becomes the hunter and Bulbbul takes the role of a witch (the hunted).

The horror in *Bulbbul* is brought out not just by using the aberrant, but also through the stark portrayal of asymmetrical power structures in society. Thakur Indraneel because of his position as a landed Bengali aristocrat manages to get it all, an innocent child bride, a submissive mistress in Binodini his sister-in-law, and an escape from all of it when it ceases to interest him. Yet Bulbbul is brutally battered for doting on Satya, her brother-in-law. This is a prime example of male privilege, hypocrisy, and entitlement. In patriarchy, women are held to great standards of accountability while men enjoy impunity. Supernatural justice thus acts as a *deus ex machina* (here it refers to the supernatural intervention of the monstrous feminine to restore justice) in such a society where men are unaccounted for. In the last scene, justice is finally served when Thakur Indraneel returns to the abandoned haveli and Bulbbul's post-mortem remains conjure into a spectral demon ululating its revenge. Mahender, despite being mentally challenged, is socially secure with his wife and nurse Binodini. In a patriarchal society, women experience double marginalization and the only access to power that a woman has is through a man, either marrying one or birthing one.

The predicament and marginality of Binodini are expressed after the rape scene where she repeats the lines her family had used to shush her grievances. She says, "*Arey Thakuron ke ghar Rishta huwa hai, rona kesa? han thora pagal hai par gehne milenge, kapde milenge, ... uss se nahi to uske bhai se milenge ... Thakur hain rona kesa?*" (You are being betrothed into a Thakur family, what is the hue and cry about? Yes, your husband is a little retarded but you will be compensated in jewels and clothes ... it is a Thakur family what is the hue and cry about?). These lines explicitly point out how caste, class, and gender play out in society to doubly marginalize women, keep them subservient, and consequently make them enablers of patriarchy. Satya despite his foreign education and degree in law turns out to be no different. He is progressive so far as to not believe in witches and goblins, but his education does not rid him of his male privilege and sense of entitlement as a Thakur.²³ He scoffs when Bulbbul

²³ Rahul Desai, "*Bulbbul* on Netflix is a Haunting Cocktail of History and Horror," *Film Companion*, 24 June (2020). At: <https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/streaming-reviews/bulbbul-netflix-review-a-haunting-cocktail-of-history-and-horror-rahul-desai>.

suggests that the murders could be committed by a woman, he says, “*Kaun Si Aurat aese Kisi Ki Jaan Le Sakti Hai*” (what kind of woman could kill someone so brutally?) suggesting that Satya cannot conceive of women beyond their roles as nurturers. On seeing Bulbbul share a *bheedi* with Sudeep he immediately jumps to the conclusion that they have an affair; when he confronts her about it, he constantly assumes that she has been manipulated and taken advantage of. He says “*keh denge ki aap akeli thin, nadaan thi ... apka fayda uthaya gaya ... par mujhe nahi lagta ki bhiya apko vapas lenge, apka maike vaps chale jana hi behtar hoga*” (I’ll make excuses on your behalf, saying that you were lonely, insensible ... you were taken advantage of, but I do not think my brother will take you back, it’s better for you to return to your maternal home) Bulbbul wildly laughs at all these accusations and responds by saying “*tum sab ek jese ho*” (all you men are alike).

Throughout the plot Bulbbul is ravaged at the hands of the three Thakurs. While Indraneel marries her young and robs her childhood only to crush her for crimes she did not commit, she is raped at the hands of Mahender and is physically battered forever. However, the deepest wounds are received at the hands of Satya who could have understood her better, but his masculine pride takes the better of him leaving her emotionally battered. Bulbbul however, does not succumb to her victimhood and fights back. Like other new-wave feminist protagonists, Bulbbul confronts her vulnerabilities and the realities of male privilege. Her rebirth gives her the sense of power and duty to revolt against the phallic monstrosity. She is liberated from her own vulnerable self and stands up to seek justice. These cinematic strategies make it a satisfying text of feminist new-wave filmmaking. She murders Mahender on the very occasion of *Durga Pujo* which celebrates Goddess Durga, the one who beheads monsters and establishes justice. She epitomizes the divine goddess in spirit and flesh; even after being burnt in the forest we see her spirit rise from the ashes to seek revenge once Thakur Indraneel returns to the haveli. It recalls the last stanza from Sylvia Plath’s poem *Lady Lazarus*, “Out of the ash I rise with my red hair, And I eat men like air.”²⁴ The ululation at the end of the film, a popular Bengali practice, haunts the viewers as it conveys the message that the divine feminine energy be it ominous or auspicious, is out there surviving and waiting to avenge those who are wronged and to punish those who enjoy impunity in society due to asymmetrical power structures.

Conclusion

Using methodological insights from Julia Kristeva, Barbara Creed, and Laura Mulvey this article illustrated how women are constructed as the “Other,” the “Object,” and the “Monstrous Feminine” in cinematic representations. These portrayals are rooted in deviations from traditional social expectations of “femininity” and depict women as malevolent, threatening, and transgressive. Despite negative connotations attached to such depictions, the feminist new-wave celebrates the phantasmagorical and aberrant portrayal of women, and appropriates it as a symbol of feminist revolt that challenges the male gaze; women are at the heart of all the action instead of being reduced to passive objects for visual pleasure. *Bulbbul* (2020) is

²⁴ Sylvia Plath, “Lady Lazarus,” *Poetry Foundation* (Accessed 10 October, 2023).

examined as a feminist new-wave film which challenges the traditional folklorist notions about *Chudail*. By juxtaposing the demonic and the deified it expands Creed's notion of the monstrous feminine beyond the scope of the aberrant, the deified virtues of the monstrous feminine are brought to light following the character arch of the protagonist. Bulbbul evolves from a submissive girl into a formidable spirit that avenges the wronged and uses her post-mortal form to establish justice by punishing those who enjoy impunity in the mortal realm.

Discussions of the cinematic technique, the narrative point of view, and the character arc of the *bildungsroman* illustrate how *Bulbbul* fits the normative practices and ethos of a typical new-wave feminist film. This article highlighted the aspects of feminist revolt, rebellion, and pursuit of justice that are the thematical concerns of new-wave feminist films. Blending the monstrous with the divine, our argument overcomes theoretical gaps that limit the monstrous feminine into binaries of good and evil. It takes a novel approach to the genre of feminist revenge and paves the way for a new mode of inquiry into the field of the monstrous feminine by taking insights from the divine supernatural. Hence using the text as a mouthpiece, the paper shares insights on how supernatural justice is brought about through the medium of the monstrous feminine in the film *Bulbbul*.