

**EMPOWERED OR ENSNARED:
AN ANTI-ESSENTIALIST READING OF FEMALE VIOLENCE**



Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of BACHELOR OF ARTS in English Language and Literature

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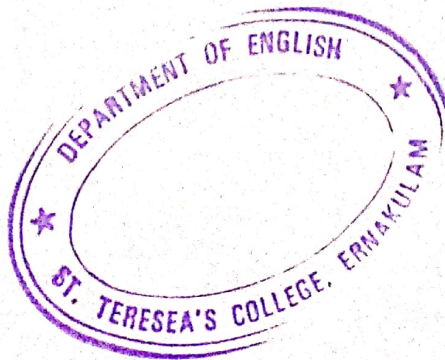
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The social phenomenon of violence has historically been intertwined with patriarchal dominance, relegating women to passive roles in society. Drawing on the anti-essentialist theory, this project seeks to decode the entrenched stereotypes surrounding female violence and its portrayal in media. The theoretical frameworks discussed illuminate the social constructs which obscure the agency of women in acts of violence and examines the real-life case of the Koodathayi serial killings to highlight the ramifications of disregarding the female capacity for violence and how societal perceptions and gender biases influence its visibility and interpretation. Through an analysis of cinematic narratives in *Bulbbul* and *7 Khoon Maaf*, the project scrutinises their portrayal of female violence, questioning whether it challenges or perpetuates existing power dynamics. This comprehensive exploration underscores the importance of adopting a nuanced perspective to understand the complex interplay between gender, power, and violence in contemporary society.

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Introduction

The concept of violence has elicited polarising views from intellectuals across centuries. Violence is commonly thought of as something harmful, negative and destructive - a vehicle of discord that topples order and births chaos. The term “violence” comes from the Latin word “volentia” which implies an intense force that aims to annihilate something completely. The nature of violence itself has been the subject of much discussion and debate. While most philosophers agree on its inherently pernicious ambitions which essentially disrupt social harmony, there have been arguments about violence being a fundamental part in the formation and maintenance of the human world. Several theories that study the relationship between power and violence have come up over the years. Michel Foucault explores in detail the association between power and violence in his essay, *The Subject and Power* and concludes that the two are interdependent. He sees violence as a derivative of power; violence plays a constitutive role in establishing power and thus becomes a tool that enables and maintains power.

In the arena of cinematic narratives and real-world crimes, the portrayal of women's capacity for violence remains entangled in societal expectations and essentialist perspectives. The reductionist tendency to rationalise and subsequently invisibilise female violence is a part of the project of the patriarchal social order to streamline the conception of femininity in an effort to domineer over women's claim to power and authority. This project embarks on a journey to decipher the complexities surrounding women's acts of violence by critically examining cinematic representations and a high-profile criminal case. Navigating the interplay of gender, power dynamics, and societal norms, it challenges essentialist views and illuminates the propensity to delimit and downplay the nuances of women's engagement with violence.

The opening chapter delves into the history of gender essentialism and the influence it has had on the formulation of the traditional ideas of the female in the reel and the real world. The idea of female rage takes centre stage as the chapter explores the tenets of anti-essentialism as proposed by Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millet. The representation of female violence in media and literature and the implications of the societal denial to acknowledge women's capacity for violence is highlighted through the examination of the real life case of the Koodathayi serial killings where the culprit eluded capture for fourteen years by subscribing to the conventional tropes of ideal womanhood.

Chapter two conducts a critical analysis of essentialist narratives in cinematic works, focusing on *Bulbbul* and *7 Khoon Maaf*, two movies that have gained critical attention for a feminist take in their production and subject matter. *7 Khoon Maaf* which translates to 'seven murders forgiven' is a 2011 Bollywood film directed by Vishal Bhardwaj based on Ruskin Bond's famous short story *Susanna's Seven Husbands*. The film traces the life of Susanna Anna-Marie Johannes, played by Priyanka Chopra, who marries and then kills off each of her six husbands in an unending search for love. The movie can be analysed as an allegory of the seven deadly sins listed in the Bible and Susanna's experience of dealing with and symbolically overcoming each of them by murdering her husbands, one after the other. Susanna is the femme fatale, cursed with a stony resolve for love and a penchant for the wrong men, who must take matters into her own hands when her husbands fail her. She is a modern Medusa, a woman of extraordinary beauty and capability transformed into a vicious and miserable figure by the callousness of her fate mandated by the men in her world.

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* is a 2020 Indian Hindi horror movie set in the Bengal Presidency in the 1880s. It narrates the tale of the eponymous heroine, Bulbbul who is married off as a child bride and her experience of navigating an orthodox feudal world poisoned by jealousy, adultery and prejudice. Married at the age of five to a man decades

older than her, Bulbbul is left friendless in the old manor house except for the companionship of her husband's younger brother who is closer to her in age. After she has grown up, the guileless Bulbbul is assailed by the scheming members of her family and must transform herself into an avenging Goddess to protect the women of her village from suffering the same fate as her. She embodies the persona of the *Chudail* of the village lore, a wild and wicked phantom who thrives off the blood of the "righteous" men and murders them in the dark of the night.

Both these movies have been praised by feminist critics for their attempt to craft a narrative of empowerment and are popularly regarded as harbingers of change in the portrayal of women in Indian cinema. However, it is important to examine if these movies reinforce or subvert existing power dynamics. A closer look at the context and motivations behind the feminine acts of violence as depicted in these films reveal an essentialist and superficial treatment of the subject that contribute to the creation and maintenance of problematic clichés. Additionally, the impact of these portrayals on the audience's perception of women and violence should also be taken into consideration. The exploration extends to the depiction of female rage, the problematic idealisation of women, and the limitations imposed on women's violence. Characters are scrutinised for reduction to one-dimensional, morally defined figures, challenging societal expectations and questioning the portrayal of women as either empowered or ensnared within the confines of essentialism

Chapter 1

Female Violence: A Theoretical Framework

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone De Beauvoir elaborates on the role of women in the patriarchal social order which adequately sums up the traditional attitudes that determine the position they occupy in society:

Woman? Very simple, say those who like simple answers: She is a womb, an ovary; she is a female: this word is enough to define her. From a man's mouth, the epithet "female" sounds like an insult; but he, not ashamed of his animality, is proud to hear: "He's a male!" The term "female" is pejorative not because it roots woman in nature but because it confines her in her sex, and if this sex, even in an innocent animal, seems despicable and an enemy to man, it is obviously because of the disquieting hostility woman triggers in him. (De Beauvoir 41)

Gender essentialism has for centuries now dictated the norms that reign over the lives of women. The origins of gender essentialism can be traced back to the era of classicism in ancient Greece. Women in the democratic Greek state were akin to chattel slaves and were considered to be the "weaker sex" who must remain subservient to men by Aristotle. This attitude which persisted over the centuries used biological differences to justify the discrimination against women.

Women or "the decorative sex" as Oscar Wilde called them, were fit to occupy only those offices that relegated them to the bounds of the household. They were by nature meant to create, protect and nurture. Gender essentialism argues for the existence of an immutable essence based on biological sex assigned at birth and that men and women have a predisposition to different roles. The concepts of gender essentialism have been used time

and again to justify the refusal to let women enter the public sphere, which is deemed the domain of their intellectual opposites, the men.

Kate Millett summarises the patriarchal prejudice that confines women to the domestic realm in her work *The Sexual Politics*:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between “masculine” and “feminine” subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences (at least in their lower or marginal branches) to the female—and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. (Millett 42)

The problematic tenets of gender essentialism extend to the non-recognition and aestheticization of female violence. Violence as a tool for agency is forbidden for the use of women. Foucault’s views on violence in his essay *The Subject and Power* explains the experience of oppression faced by women across the world. Women fall victims to physical, mental and emotional exploitation by the hegemonic masculinity that dictate and control the realities of the human world. Patriarchal society, in an effort to maintain its power, tyrannises the female population by unleashing violence. Patriarchy refuses to accord women with any sort of “subjecthood”; women are seen as inhuman objects whose “otherness” has to be emphasised and reinforced. The female body thus becomes an article for sacrifice in order to allay the collective disorder in the patriarchal society.

The violence suffered by women points to the presence of a clear gender power gap which privileges men and places them at the apex of society. Gender based violence stems from the very foundation of the hegemonic patriarchal social order that strives to alienate women from experiencing power. The history of gender based violence in India can be traced

back to the very institution of Hinduism in the subcontinent. The several works of religious literature that have been produced over the centuries all contain detailed codes of conduct that dictate the lives of women. Manusmriti, one of the Dharmasastras on Hinduism dating back to the third century BC, discusses the expectations, virtues, and codes of conduct that a “good” woman must adhere to. The composition of this text was an “agentless process”; anonymous writers simply compiled proverbial sayings, moral dictums, and legal axioms that originated over generations. The Western philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, in his work *On Women* argues that women are “big children” and hence physically, emotionally and intellectually incapable of committing violence. Traditional thought believed that it was not in the nature of women to be delinquent and disobedient. The exercise of violence, due to its inherent connection to power, was therefore considered beyond the scope of a woman’s abilities.

It was the project of patriarchy to reinforce this belief by presenting women through a divisive binary lens - she was either the Madonna of the house, piety, submissiveness and virtue personified, or the Medusa, who symbolised sexuality, sin and indulgence. Medusa’s lore serves as an active reminder of the terrible fate that awaited any woman who dared transgress the strict bounds that kept her from the employment of violence, and thereby, of power.

The late twentieth century however witnessed a rise in female violence which gained the attention of several social theorists. The mid nineteen seventies saw a boom in the number of female offenders of criminal laws. This particularly curious phenomenon was attributed to be the effect of the women’s liberation movement active at the time. Women, no longer confined to the domestic sphere, were stepping out into the public and breaking into exclusively male spaces, which included the world of crime. The huge jump in the cases of female violence did not go unnoticed by the literary world. The unbridled rage of the modern

woman found expression in the literary and media productions of the time. It is however safe to say that these works presented a very essentialist picture of the violent woman. The violent female action figures of the early two thousands were hailed as progressive creations that would break new grounds in the representation of the female power on screen when in reality they were traditional gender codes repackaged in a shiny new wrapping of “women empowerment”. These characters, who embodied typical masculine qualities (callousness, intelligence, ruthlessness), were in fact devised as mere entertainment objects that sought to portray femininity as a frailty. These representations also further served to emphasise the binaries in the conceptualisation of women - that of the inane and naive “feminine” or the stern and unrelenting “masculine”. Masculinity was championed and celebrated by these “ideal women” created apparently to democratise the stereotypical portrayal of the female in cinema.

This fundamentalist interpretation of women by the media necessitates the re-examination of the threshold of violence. What makes a “violent woman”? Not surprisingly, it takes way less to brand a woman “violent” than a man. Violence is the forte of the virile male. It is the tool of the virtuous masculine to assert his authority and is deviant when it manifests in a woman. Any woman who refuses to comply with the abusive societal standards and puts up a show of resistance thus becomes “abnormal” and “maniacal”. They were also further regarded as the site of anger, evil and madness, as per the several creation myths which pose women as the bearers of original sin. The first women, Pandora and Eve, thus become the source of all evil and temptations – women whose indulgence resulted in humankind’s fall from grace. Traditional societies relegated women to the role of mere pacifiers of custom who were denied the more sophisticated weapons. This gap in the distribution of tools and technology still exists. The persistent invisibilisation of the feminine

acts of violence is an agenda to maintain the regnancy of the hegemonic patriarchal order by refusing to accord women with the instruments for their true liberation.

The last few years have seen the production of pioneering works in literature and cinema that choose to subvert the hierarchical male point of view pushed onto the female audience by presenting a refreshingly feminine account of women's experience of the modern world. Among these include movies that deal with the theme of women's violence with a new-found sensitivity and subjectivity. These works recognise the relativity of the cases of violence in women and presents an individualised view of the same from a feminine perspective. Violence is identified as an implement that can aid the assertion of women's agency and is thus employed by filmmakers to portray the emerging sense of empowerment and conviction in women. Indian cinema, in following suit with this evolving perception of women, have departed from narratives centred on the aggressive, conceited men to focus on the recounting of essentially feminist tales of resilience and resistance.

On deeper analysis, however, one identifies the strict delimitation in the portrayal of feminine acts of violence in these movies. While apparently trying to create a new space for women's stories in the patriarchal world, most movies seem to covertly agree with the very values that they seek to contest. The "woman's violence" that they portray is a strictly controlled fury - it is never for the woman's own sake, is always productive and protective, and above all, is clearly discerning of the "limits" it must keep to in order to be socially accepted, as opposed to a "man's violence" that is all-encompassing, destructive and indiscriminate. This representation in effect sends out the message that there is a need for women to stay within the boundaries. Even something as intractable and spontaneous as violence is rigorously restrained when it comes to women. This agenda to establish control over women, often unconscious, is however shrouded by the larger appearances of empowerment that these movies put up and goes unnoticed.

It is important to understand the essentialist lens which these movies adopt in the conceptualisation of their women characters to fully recognise the depth of this issue. The essentialist ideology propagated by the first wave feminists, the problematic presupposition that women possessed a certain “essence”, a set of universal qualities irrespective of their class, race and gender, by virtue of their biological sex, which differentiated them from men, did not account for the varied experiences of life women from across the globe had. Anti-essentialists who opposed the idea pointed out the need to adopt an intersectional approach in feminist political activism to make the movement more productive, diverse and inclusive. Feminist theorists like Kimberlé Crenshaw and Bell Hooks advocated the need to account for social classifications including race, gender, sexual identity and class while formulating women’s experiences living under the patriarchal social order. Further developed from the concept of Judith Butler’s gender performativity is the idea of genealogical feminism, which argues that feminism is located within a history of overlapping practices and reinterpretations of femininity. Butler’s genealogical feminism visualises women as a group of individuals loosely connected together by their experiences of gender while also attempting to deconstruct the dualistic categories of gender as asserted by the patriarchal social order.

Several cases of female violence have gained media attention over the past few years. Most accounts sensationalise the crimes based on the gender of the perpetrator and fail to provide a true report of the happenings. Female criminals are regarded as aberrance to true womanhood and are not given enough visibility. Their stories are dramatised for effect and are often shaped to fit into the archetype of the wicked women who are the antithesis of everything “feminine”. “Normal” women are still regarded as incapable of committing acts of great violence. The initial escape of Jolly Joseph, the chief culprit of the Koodathayi serial killings that transpired in Kerala in 2019 was facilitated by these essentialist takes on women.

The initial escape of Jolly Joseph, the chief culprit of the Koodathayi serial killings that transpired in Kerala in 2019 was facilitated by these essentialist takes on women. The shock that the case caused in the public's consciousness can be accorded to the general proclivity to dismiss the study of women's engagement with violence.

The Koodathayi serial killings, which spanned a chilling 14-year period from 2002 to 2016, unfold a tale of deception and greed orchestrated by Jolly Joseph. Jolly is accused of murdering five members of the Ponnammattom family, a prominent household in the town of Koodathayi in Kozhikode - her parents-in-law Tom and Annamma Thomas, her husband Roy Thomas, his maternal Uncle, Manchadiyil Mathew and the first wife and daughter of Roy's cousin Shaju who would later become Jolly's second husband, Sily and Alphine. Cyanide was used to poison each of the victims. Financial gain was identified as the motive behind most of Jolly's murders. The case surrounding Jolly has garnered significant attention from both national and international media outlets. This heightened media coverage and the emphasis on her subversion of the expected gender roles have contributed to the public's fascination with the case and its subsequent impact on society's perception of Jolly.

One of the key factors that allowed Jolly to evade suspicion and continue her murderous activities was society's reluctance to acknowledge women's capacity for violence. Jolly embodied many stereotypical feminine qualities - she was a good wife, an attentive daughter-in-law, an excellent cook and entertainer, a mother, a successful career woman, a devout church goer and an active participant in the lives of her neighbours and family. Despite being present at the scene of death of all her victims and being the first to report their illnesses, her innocence was presupposed and never questioned. Under normal circumstances, these occurrences should have raised concerns. However, Jolly's reputation as a "good woman" allowed her to escape scrutiny. The very long time it took to uncover Jolly's participation in the murders has significantly impeded the gathering of evidence in the cases,

including the detection of traces of poison in bodies interred for a long time. The inability to confirm the presence of cyanide in the bodies of four of Jolly's victims might undermine the prosecution's case in court and potentially enable her to evade punishment for her crimes. The limited research on female killers and the low conviction rate of women murderers, both globally and specifically in India let women like Jolly get away with their crimes.

It is worth noting that the classification of Jolly as a serial killer remains a subject of debate. However, she does exhibit several characteristics commonly associated with female serial killers. These individuals often employ poison as their weapon of choice and tend to operate discreetly, targeting family members or individuals within their social circle. Financial gain is often a motivating factor, and their crimes typically span over an extended period of time. While Jolly's actions align with some of these identified traits, further investigation and analysis are necessary to definitively determine her status as a serial killer. These are still very broad conceptions and might vary greatly depending on the perpetrator's specific social reality. There is therefore an immediate need to conduct research on the violent women in the Indian context to be able to identify them early on and provide necessary legal and medical interventions. The Koodathayi serial killings stand as a gruesome testament to the capacity for deception and violence from unexpected quarters. Jolly Joseph's actions, fuelled by avarice and a complex web of lies, have left an indelible mark on the Ponnammattom family and have raised unsettling questions about social perceptions and the often-overlooked potential of female perpetrators for heinous crimes. The ongoing trial remains a stark reminder of the need for a thorough examination and study of criminal behaviour and violence, irrespective of gender.

The representation of the violent woman in art, history and culture coincide with the historical notions about the feminine and the female capacity for violence. Most cinematic ventures that have attempted to explore the nuances of female violence adhere to popular

assumptions that delimit and undermine women's potential. In India cinema, *Bulbbul* and *Khoon Maa* are two movies which have been applauded for their presentation of the subject of female violence. However, it becomes necessary to examine the movies to rightly understand if they do indeed break stereotypes as claimed or if they merely subscribe to essentialist views on women by fetishising and curtailing the scope of female violence.

Chapter 2

Beyond the Façade: Deconstructing essentialist narratives in *Bulbbul* and *7 Khoon Maaf*

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* claims for itself the title of a "feminist fairytale". But a closer look at the story and its painfully superficial treatment of the feminine brings to light its poorly masked patriarchal stances. The movie opens in 1881, when a young Bulbbul is married off to the feudal lord Indranil, a stern but loving husband many years her senior, making her the "Thakurmoshai" of his household. Bulbbul strikes an easy friendship with her husband's younger brother, Satya and the two grow up to be almost inseparable, united by a love for literature and writing. Twenty years pass by but things turn awry when Binodini, Indranil's sister-in-law married to his mentally ill twin brother, Mahendra, jealously hints to him that things between Satya and Bulbbul have progressed more than they should have. An infuriated Indranil sends Satya off to London and breaks Bulbbul's feet in a fit of violent rage, before leaving his house. An incapacitated Bulbbul, is bound to her bed and is tended to by Dr. Sudip. She is raped by Mahendra and apparently dies in the process but is brought back to life presumably by a supernatural spirit that enters her body and transforms her into an avenging goddess like figure. Bulbbul then goes on to embody the role of the *Chudail*, the demon woman of the village lore and murders men who prey on women. Satya returns five years later and is deeply unsettled by the change that has come over Bulbbul. He takes up the investigation of the murders in an attempt to dispel the myth of the *Chudail* and capture the real culprit.

Satya is upset by Bulbbul's newfound closeness to Dr. Sudip and suspects that the latter is involved in the murders. He promptly arrests Sudip and takes him away to Calcutta to be put on trial but their carriage driver is attacked and killed by the *Chudail* in the middle of the woods. Fuelled by his recent defeats, Satya sets out to kill the *Chudail* himself but is

stopped by Sudip. He accidentally sets the forest on fire as they break out into a fight, unaware that Bulbbul is the *Chudail* murdering the abusive men in the village. Shot by Satya and unable to escape from the burning forest, Bulbbul dies in the fire. A heartbroken Satya, afraid that he has turned as cruel and vicious as his brothers, leaves home. Indranil returns a year later to an abandoned house. The movie ends on a note of suspense with a sleeping Indranil woken up by the smiling ghost of Bulbbul who has come to seek her revenge.

Bulbbul is presented as a parable on female strength that delves into the realms of the doubly deviant woman and the expression of female rage. Feminine rage is women's collective anger directed at the institutions and groups that have historically vied to oppress them and take away their agency. The term was popularised by the media as the catalyst that could bring about a change in the status of women living under the patriarchal social order by allowing them to freely channel their frustrations. The portrayal of "female rage" in the movie however has subtle essentialist connotations that are often overlooked.

Unlike the status that it claims for itself, the female rage in the movie is very conscious of the boundaries that it chooses to transgress and subscribes to the expected social stereotypes. It is Bulbbul, an upper-caste, upper-class woman who has the privilege to be angry at her aggressors and not the several unnamed women in her village who are equally abused by the men in their lives as well. This classist (and equally casteist) narrative presents Bulbbul, the aristocratic baroness as the saviour of other women in the village who occupy a lower position than her, both financially and socially. For a movie that boasts of presenting an essentially female narrative, *Bulbbul* does a poor job in characterising most of its women. They are doubly marginalised and continue to remain in the shadows without ever being given a voice, hoping to be saved by a representative of the feudal aristocracy that is their biggest exploiter.

The depiction of violence in *Bulbbul* reflects a transformation compelled by a cruel society which perpetuates the idea that women turn to violence due to suffering. It is only after her apparent death and rebirth by supernatural interference that Bulbbul seeks to exact revenge on her assailants, which is a reflection of the problematic idea that the “forgiving” woman must be pushed to the very edges of her sanity before she rises up in revolt. The movie accedes to the stereotype of the “mad”, “bad” and “sad” woman. Bulbbul is the “sad” woman, the victim who is forced to take up arms due to the experience of violence that she endures. Had it not been for the immense torture she had to go through, she perhaps would have never demanded liberation. She is also the “mad” woman who is to be pitied, rather than blamed. Her cruel acts of violence are ethically justified by the trauma of her circumstance and are therefore accepted, and almost deified. She also presents a figure who is an anomaly to true womanhood and therefore the “bad” woman. The movie’s problematic pedestalization of Bulbbul removes the audience from being able to have any sense of identification with the character and the power she holds. She becomes an ideal far removed from the reality of their daily existence.

Bulbbul does not assert her power and agency out in the open daylight like your typical male hero would have. Instead, she operates under the veil of anonymity offered by the night to carry out her murders. This raises the question of the kinds of violence allowed in women. Women are commonly regarded as perpetrators of emotional and mental violence; something that does not require an outright declaration of dominance. Binodini becomes the prototype in this case. The violent encounters that Bulbbul has to face can ultimately be linked to Binodini’s spiteful speculations. As such, women are not expected to put up a visible show of resistance. Keeping in line with this, Bulbbul’s aggressiveness is calmer, colder and more stealthy. Like the Chudail, who represents the typical “bad” woman of the village’s folktales, she hunts during the night, like a phantom, and has no material existence.

There is an almost forceful invisibilisation of the alter ego of the *Chudail* within Bulbbul. As the saviour of the women in her village, she is accorded no recognition. She is denied the tool of visibility as a means to claim power. The society's refusal to let women assert their dominance and the further mystification of the feminine acts of violence contributes to the creation of problematic binaries. It reinforces the divide between the masculine and the feminine by drawing up expectations based on social stereotypes that award men the right to be direct and aggressive with their power while pressuring women to be meek and sly.

The persistent idealisation of women in the movie is another issue worth examining. Bulbbul's portrayal as an avenging goddess divests her character of all human subtleties. Bulbbul is not human when she turns an avenger of wrongs; she is blessed by some celestial energy and embodies the spirit of the Goddess Kaali herself. This creates an assumption that ordinary women are not allowed to or lacks the capacity to commit violence unless vitalised by divine interference. The inhumaneness of her character denies the reborn Bulbbul any complexity or nuance. There is a parallel demonisation of the role of the *Chudail* that Bulbbul has taken up. In their scuffle in the forest, Satya asks Dr. Sudip why he was so fond of a demon when he tries to stop him from hunting down the *Chudail*. Sudip retorts by saying that she was no demon, but a 'devi'. These two images coincide with the traditional gender roles prescribed to women based on cultural and religious expectations. Bulbbul, as the *Chudail*, embodies the femme fatale, displaying menacing sexuality and ruthless violence typical to such characters. This reduces her to the status of a mere caricature without a differentiated identity or sense of individuality.

Bulbbul's role as the defender of the wronged, when examined in the larger context of other societal issues, is seriously flawed. As a woman, Bulbbul is not expected to interfere in the bigger problems of the society. She is relegated to the solving of issues that strictly

concern her womanhood. Her use violence is clearly productive and is rigorously demarcated. It is focused on exacting revenge on the abusive men in her village, making no effort to address the root cause of the problem and reform the conditions. Bulbbul does not transgress the bounds of social and moral expectations that dictate how far women's violence is allowed to extend. The movie also displays a rather startling lack of female awareness by unfairly punishing women like Bindoini who is as much a victim of patriarchal violence as Bulbbul is.

The dichotomy in the depiction of Bulbbul's morality where her violence is valorised and vindicated as acts of protection creates a one-dimensional character that lacks depth and complexity in motives. Her incessant fixation on vengeance hurts the overall development of her character. The narrative also explores the theme of idealised motherhood, linking protective violence to Bulbbul's character. Her violent actions are driven by a quest to assert her sexuality, dominance over men and a "womanly" need to explore the territories of motherhood, all of which are tired old tropes used to justify the rationale behind a woman's act of violence.

Vishal Bhardwaj's *7 Khoon Maaf* presents the story of Susanna Anna Marie Johannes, a wealthy Anglo-Indian heiress who is unlucky in love. She marries six times in the hopes of finding the perfect husband, but is forced to murder each of them as things turn awry. Bharadwaj envisioned the movie as a parable on the Biblical sins; each of Susanna's husbands is an allegory on a mortal sin. The movie unfolds through the memories of Dr. Arun, a forensic scientist working on Susanna's case after her apparent death. As an orphaned young boy, Arun worked in Susanna's father's stables before he was sent to school by her. He recounts Susanna's life to his wife Nandini and narrates the story of each of her husbands. Orphaned barely after she turned an adult, Susanna marries Major Edwin Rodriques, a hot-headed and possessive army officer who mistreats her. After he attacks and

blinds her stable boy, Goonga, Susanna takes Rodriques on the hunt for a man eating panther and pushes him down in front of the animal, thereby killing him. Her second husband is Jamshed Singh Rathod, “Jimmy” an aspiring singer whom she falls madly in love with. However, Jimmy takes to drugs and women and is accused of plagiarising music. All of Susanna’s efforts to save him fails and he is found dead one day of a drug overdose. Inspector “Keemat” Lal arrives to investigate the death, but leaves allured by Susanna’s charm.

Susanna leaves for Kashmir where she meets her third husband Mohammed Wasillullah Khan aka “Musafir”, a Kashmiri poet who writes verses teeming with passion and love. She adopts the name Sultana and starts an intense romance with him. Much to her horror, Susanna discovers that her husband is a sadomasochist who gains pleasure from inducing pain when he takes her to bed. The situation only gets worse and Susanna plots his murder. She lures him outside on a snowy night and buries him alive in the ground with the help of her accomplices Ghalib, the Butler, Maggi Aunty, her house help and Goonga. She travels back home and meets Nikolai Vronsky, a Russian envoy at an equestrian match and is immediately charmed by him. Vronsky’s earnest and funny nature wins over her and she gets married to him, much to her reluctance. Susanna grows suspicious as she realises that Vronsky is not merely an envoy but a spy working for the Russian Government to collect information on a nuclear power plant in India. Things take a turn for the worse when Arun, now in Russia studying medicine, spots Vronsky with another woman and two children, presumably his other family, while in Moscow. He captures their pictures and sends them to Susanna. A very disturbed Susanna confronts Vronsky in a drunken fit and throws down a confidential report into the well where she kept her snake “pets”. An unsuspecting Vronsky climbs down the well and dies of snake bites.

Vronsky's death lands Susanna in messy territory and she is forced to sleep with Keemat Lal, the investigating officer, to save herself. Susanna is however, forced to marry an obsessive Keemat Lal who haunts her for sexual favours in return of his assistance in acquitting her and kills him off soon with an overdose of Viagra pills. The narrative switches back to the present day where Arun is convinced that Susanna is alive. He travels to Pondicherry where her family had a farmhouse and discovers her in a bar. The now old Susanna recalls her life after Arun's departure and how she met her final husband.

The repeated murders and the recurrent failures in her love life take a toll on Susanna's sanity. Left depressed and destitute after she is rejected by Arun, Susanna attempts suicide but is saved by Dr. Modhushudhon Tarafdar, "Modhu Da" who soon becomes her sixth husband. Dr. Tarafdar, a specialist in naturopathic medicine with an endearing personality weds a much reluctant Susanna on the pretext of making her the heir to his inheritance. She is however, shocked when she realises the financial motives behind Tarafdar's love and is scared for her life. Tarafdar poisons Susanna's butler Ghalib in an attempt to eliminate all of her aides who stand in his way towards her money. An infuriated Susanna shoots him in a game of Russian Roulette and attempts to kill herself by burning down her house. Maggie Aunty dies, buried under the burning rubble while Susanna escapes and flees to Pondicherry where she starts over with her life. Her unending search for love finally leads Susanna to seek solace in religion and she takes up the sacred vows of nunhood to finally experience divine love and peace.

Like Bulbul, the character of Susanna in *7 Khoon Maaf* perpetuates decremental tropes that picturise women through the lens of sadness, madness and perceived moral badness. She is the "sad" woman, a victim of abuse at the hands of her first husband. Her

apparent lack of remorse after the murders, as represented in the movie, hints at an unstable mental condition or psychosis, making her the “mad” woman. She is also the “bad” woman for choosing to murder her husbands when she could have easily left them to save herself. Her representation as a sentimentalist, incessantly in search of love reinforces stereotypes, and highlights the emotional vulnerability of women as argued by essentialism. These dated tropes contribute to a narrative that overlooks the complexities of Susanna’s character and reduces her to simplistic and limiting archetypes

The narrative also fails to adequately explore the motives behind Susanna's killings, often reducing them to acts of revenge driven not by the need to protect herself but by events involving her loyal servants. Susanna’s character and relationships are also oversimplified in a way that undermines their complexity. The movie misses out on the opportunity to dive deeper into her actions and decisions, which leaves the audience with a superficial understanding of her motivations. A glaring flaw in the portrayal of Susanna is her lack of a distinct personal identity. While it is understandable for individuals to evolve over the course of their lifetime, Susanna is seen taking up and discarding roles with an unexplainable ease that hints at an underlying mental health condition. The personas that she adopts, while being with each of her husbands, are tailored to match their likes and interests and do not reflect her true desires and beliefs. The movie does not take up the chance to explore Susanna’s inner world and is content with offering the audience glimpses of her external demeanour. This portrayal perpetuates the tired old tropes of womanhood and denies Susanna’s character the depth that she deserves. This reductionist representation of the female impedes the movie from dismantling the stereotypes that restrain women from exercising their autonomy and agency by rendering them as entities that depend on men for a definite existence.

The emphasis on Susanna’s sexuality leans on the femme fatale archetype that

sustains outdated and limiting views on women. By reducing Susanna's sexuality to being the origin of her problems and the tool of her violence, the film fails to present a nuanced examination of femininity, opting instead for a regressive and one-dimensional depiction that ultimately hinders the potential for meaningful character development. The narrative's failure to delve into Susanna's motives for choosing violence over peaceful separation leaves her character underdeveloped. Her violent acts are sensationalised by the absence of a proper backstory, without sufficient examination of her psyche and motivations. The movie thus leaves the audience with unanswered questions about the character's true intentions by adopting a simplistic report centred on relying the outcome of her actions and not her objectives.

Susanna's depiction as an unremorseful murderer raises concerns regarding the movie's treatment of mental health implications.. Her acts of violence, which otherwise are in want of rationality and explanation, are suggested to be the doings of a troubled mind. Mental health, or the lack thereof is used to legitimise and almost vindicate her crimes. The insinuation that Susanna had inherently maniacal drives contributes to the creation of a shallow character that reinforces damaging stereotypes. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their famous text, *The Mad Woman in the Attic* presents female madness as a sort of feminist rebellion against the rule of the patriarchal social order. However, in reality it diminishes the lived life experiences of those disabled by mental health illnesses. (Donaldson 618)

By failing to thoroughly examine Susanna's mental state, the film perpetuates stigmatised perceptions of mental health, implying that individuals who engage in violent behaviour are essentially mentally unstable. Additionally, the movie's reliance on religious justification to conclude Susanna's character development undermines the exploration of the consequences she faces for her violent actions. Each of her husbands represent a

Biblical sin -Rodriques that of pride , Jimmy of adultery, Wasillulah Khan of wrath, Vronsky of envy, Keemat Lal of lust and Tarafdar of greed. Susanna herself stands for the sin of sloth; years of failed relationships had turned her emotionally hollow and indifferent. It was the death of her house help, her seventh “murder” that forced her to give up on her old ways and embrace the spiritual life. This approach diminishes the moral complexity of her character and fails to hold her accountable for her actions. By using religion as an agent to absolve Susanna of any repercussions, the film sidesteps the opportunity to grapple with the ethical implications of her choices, ultimately resulting in a narrative that lacks a meaningful and responsible resolution.

Thus, both *Bulbbul* and *7 Khoon Maaf* reflect essentialist perspectives on female aggression. The movies’ depiction of women's capacity to perpetrate violence, as well as their motivations for doing so perpetuates regressive gender stereotypes which promote the creation of problematic presumptions. It is therefore necessary to look beyond the bounds of gender, which Judith Butler says is merely “an identity tenuously constituted in time ... through a stylised repetition of acts” when conceptualising the idea of female violence. There is an immediate need to adopt an anti-essentialist outlook that recognises and seeks to understand the particular reality of women’s engagement with violence, treating the subject with the great consideration and seriousness that it deserves.

Conclusion

There is a need to explore the multifaceted nature of women's engagement with violence to fully understand the nuances that it encompasses. The hallowed view of the feminine nature has characterised much of the popular notions about women. From being termed the bearers of his non-violent movement by Gandhi to becoming some of the most celebrated villains in the history of cinema, the conception of women's violence have evolved. While it is true that much of the tendency to categorise women as sacrificing and servicing have changed over the course of the previous century, the limiting stereotypes that prevent them from fully exploring the extent of their capacity still exist.

The development of the concept of female violence has undergone a range of different stages. The rise in female crimes around the world has resulted in an increase in interest in studying female violence. This project examines the realms of cinematic narratives and real-world criminality to reveal the social bounds that relegate women to unjustified expectations. An analysis of the theoretical framework highlights the complex interplay of power, agency and gender norms that dictate hegemonic assumptions about women's violence. The anti-essentialist perspective employed in the project effectively breaks down the thematic and stylistic elements used in the movies analysed, *Bulbbul* and *7 Khoon Maaf* to bring out the subtly masked patriarchal stances that they promote.

The shocking case of the Koodathayi serial murders exemplifies the repercussions of the essentialist views on women's capacity for violence. The societal reluctance to acknowledge the female faculty for violence is what allowed Jolly Joseph to operate unnoticed within the prescribed roles of caregiver, wife and mother. Jolly's case serves as a reminder of the consequences of clinging to essentialist notions. The project challenges the

simplistic dichotomies that shape the social notions of female aggression and calls for a more comprehensive approach in theorising women's engagement with violence.

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