

**Feminine Power and Patriarchal Revenge: Exploring the Archetype of the Femme
Fatale in Indian Horror Cinema**



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

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I hereby declare that this dissertation entitled "Feminine Power and Patriarchal Revenge: Exploring the Archetype of the Femme Fatale in Indian Horror Cinema" is a record of bona fide work done by me under the supervision of Dr. Jisha John, Assistant Professor, Department of English, and that no part of the dissertation has been presented earlier for the award of any degree, diploma, or any other similar title of recognition.



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CERTIFICATE

I hereby certify that this project entitled "Feminine Power and Patriarchal Revenge: Exploring the Archetype of the Femme Fatale in Indian Horror Cinema", is a record of bona fide work carried out by A. Sreelakshmi under my supervision and guidance



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Introduction

Mass communication reaches billions of people through cinema as it influences public views and culture yet it supports established societal values. Movies possess the ability to build alternative worlds that entertain viewers throughout the global audience. Through cinematic content viewers develop new cognitive patterns that subsequently create modern cultural and social and political systems. From its very beginning it has experienced widespread popularity. The Indian film industry changes personal lives across society because movies shape how people dress and talk together with their social conduct.

From the start of popular Indian films women have reflected societal status and roles together with public images. Many films use religious elements to portray women through virtuous loyal submissiveness as main characters. The classic gender stereotypes persisted throughout Indian horror films between 1940's to 1970's. During this period movie characters were categorized into protective men and chaste heroines together with malevolent spirits and innocent victims. The horror genre used gender stereotypes as a common technique to enhance both psychological stress and emotional strain.

During the early period of Indian cinema women appeared as powerless victims under supernatural influences in horror films. The rescue or exorcism process demanded male participation whenever women fell victim to spirit possession or other forms of supernatural haunting. Traditional heroines in these films exhibited moral character alongside innocence and followed Indian sacred values of selflessness and chastity. Through male characters who decided the fate of salvation the plot utilized suffering as a technique to maintain traditional gender roles. During the early years of

horror films the main male character represented strong bravery and logical thinking while attempting to eliminate demonic powers. This depiction demonstrated classic male-based beliefs about problem resolution while providing feminine protection. Supernatural threats always failed against masculine figures in their final battles regardless of the strength level shown initially in the movies which frequently involved clerics or academic characters.

Vindictive female ghosts known as “*Chudails*” function as the leading gendered stereotype throughout Indian horror movies. The motif based on social anxieties about female sexuality along with authority and transgression continues serving as a strong theme throughout many years of Indian horror films. The *Chudail* symbolism embodies female anger through an irregular hair appearance and misshapen feet while giving an unnerving visual effect. In many horror films directors use this concept to depict female characters who faced abuse along with oppression and sexual assault or betrayal which transform them into supernatural creatures who seek justice. Within horror stories women have the chance to transform into powerful supernatural entities rather than the limited victimhood they face throughout other genres that require exorcism or banishment.

The Ramsay Brothers successfully controlled the horror genre through their budget-friendly popular films which made the 1980s and 1990s known as the golden years of Indian horror. Women in scant outfits were typically used to create fear and desire in horror movies that emerged throughout this time. The films displayed a high number of scenes showing voyeuristic pleasure through which women were usually depicted as sexually enticing before they were either murdered or came under control. At the intersection of eroticism and terror both male and female audiences accepted that sexual women could bring death to men.

This research analyzes the female fatale archetype in current Indian horror films through examining *Bulbbul* and *Stree*. The research uses the male gaze analysis developed by Laura Mulvey together with the concepts of gynae-horror theory. The analysis explores how these film productions transform traditional femme fatale representations to restore control to female characters within horror storytelling.

Indian mainstream cinemas reflect female representation as well as express dominant male patriarchal influences. The analysis demonstrates that superstitions and myths commonly spread throughout patriarchal cultures to create oppression of feminine figures.

Throughout many decades of Hindi horror films a misogynist spirit has dominated the portrayal of women. Women exist only to fulfill the viewing needs of male spectators through living characters or spectral manifestations of ghostly forms. Indian horror cinema commonly depicts two subgenres that typically show religious women turning violent as revenge against men when she gets defiled and becomes impure during their offenses against her. These subgenres dominate Indian horror. *Khoon Ki Pyaasi* (1996) represents one of the popular films along with *Chudail* (1991) and *Khoon Ki Pyaasi Daayan* (1998) in this category. They set the stage for later films like *Raagini MMS* (2011), *Ek This Daayan* (2013), *Pari* (2018), which attempted to subvert the witch trope to portray strong, feminist women and themes of violence against women, despite their explicit plots and emphasis on women's bodies as objects of lust. Some of the films themselves cleared the path for more complex female characters in horror films, even though many of them adhered to the "sexploitation" subgenre.

The portrayal of women as monstrous figures in Indian horror films reflects patriarchal anxieties (Mazumdar 55) adds that the fear and patriarchy of Brahmins are the reasons why women are frequently portrayed in India as terrible, hideous beings in the shape of a *Chudail* or daayan. It was necessary to accept the woman's anger to acknowledge her ability as a heavenly healer. "The goddess will always prevail in the conflict between Mahakaal and Mahakali. All males and Brahmins are aware of this. Maybe that's why they have always grabbed their pitchforks and torches to burn and decapitate the "witch". She explains, "Because they know deep down that they cannot kill the witch, just as they cannot kill the goddess." It appears that a number of current Bollywood filmmakers have noticed that trend. In 2020, debut filmmaker Anvita Dutt's horror film *Bulbbul* won two Filmfare OTT awards and accolades for retelling the story of the vigilant daayan who uses her own brand of justice system to punish those who hurt her and the drivers of patriarchy. In 2018, Amar Kaushik's film *Stree* stunned the audiences with its feminist horror-comedy approach to the witch, retold an old folk tale about a witch who roamed the streets hunting young men with not-so-subversions in gender roles.

Psychologist Albert Bandura explained that individual learn behaviour by observing others in the environment. The perception of what women can achieve in the cinema will help in changing the societies attitudes towards gender roles. Cultural acceptability occurs in society as a result of the normalisation of female-centric characters in films. There is a lot of cultural interchange in India. Media and film portrayals pf women as symbols of strength contribute to a shift in the nation's cultural narrative. Growth and introspection greatly influence one's identity and self-concept. A person's self-concept is greatly influenced by the media, including movies. A greater sense of self-worth and gender agency can be developed through films like

Piku (2015), *Queen* (2018), *Mardaani* (2014), and *Neerja* (2016), which all have strong, autonomous female protagonists and tackle a variety of topics and themes.

Bollywood is not known for making the most sensitive films, and while recent years have seen some positive developments, there is still more work to be done to ensure that all genres are represented in a suitable and sensitive manner. Bollywood horror films are one genre that probably needs more discussion, even while genres like romance and comedy are openly criticised for frequently depicting unbalanced gender dynamics on screen. By enclosing women's identities in rigid stereotypes of the "overprotective mother", the "crazy ex-lover", and so on, a number of other clichés have been methodically developed that further problematically portray women in horror stories. Many Indian films like *Raaz 3* (2012) and *Krishna Cottage* (2004), use these clichés. These stereotypes normalise specific gendered standards and expectations in addition to restricting the vivid portrayal of a whole group of people as the main characters in a whole genre of films. Through the use of easy horror tropes, a number of films also use women to represent villains: witches, vampires, shape-shifting cobras, practitioners of black magic, ghosts, vengeful spirits, and a myriad of other monsters and beasts with undesirable attributes. Such "vamp" characters are frequently shown as promiscuous and sexually available, which contributes to the false belief that "loose" women are fundamentally bad and "evil". This idea frequently operates concurrently with the previously described cliché of ex-lovers seeking revenge by employing techniques such as black magic and other traditionally evil methods. Another negative stereotype that affects female characters on the opposite end of the spectrum is this antagonisation.

Women are rarely shown as powerful, positive individuals or as being treated with respect. Even though *Stree* (2018) was famous for handling a delicate subject in

a respectful yet humorous manner, we still see a female vengeful spirit who only wanted love and respect and was treated as a weak and foolish woman who was rescued by a man, as well as a strong woman who exuded knowledge and confidence and demonstrated her superiority to the male protagonists before ultimately revealing herself to be a power-hungry sorceress in an admittedly ambiguous and open-ended climax. It is really impossible to succeed in Bollywood with female representation; they are either doomed or dammed.

The femme fatale archetype has been a corner stone in the stage of cinemas across the globe, often portraying alluring but dangerous femininity that questions patriarchal norms. From the earlier times, this figure is often portrayed as seductive and manipulative woman who pushes men to their downfall. But in modern Indian horror cinema, this archetype undergoes a violent change, combining with supernatural horror and feminist ideology to question the dominant power structures that rule them. Films like *Bulbbul* and *Stree*, reconstruct the traditional narrative of femme fatale through the prism of folklore, trauma and revenge, striking on the stereotyped male centric narrative of horror.

The presentation of women in these horror films can be explained by the male gaze theory, which is introduced by Laura Mulvey to throw light on how the visual media objectifies woman for male pleasure. In traditional horror movies, women are presented as victims or threats, underlining patriarchal temperament that revolves around female autonomy and sexuality. But in the cinemas quoted above, the ideology of femme fatale brings out itself not as an object of male desire but as an active disruptor of gender rules and stereotypes. The ideology of male gaze theory is subverted here, by placing the female protagonist as subjects of horror as well as agents of resistance. We could see the growth of femme fatale archetype in Indian

horror cinema evolving beyond the western notions and patriarchal origins, when we closely look upon the cinematography, narrative structure and character development pictured on the screen.

This study also employs the theory of gynae horror, a feminist ideology that studies horror cinema through the dimension of female bodily autonomy, trauma and vengeance. Unlike the portrayal of stereotyped powerful women as ghost, gynae horror forms the identity of a monstrous female as a means of subversion and empowerment. As feminist philosopher Christine Battersby contends:

“The ‘experience’ of the female human in our culture has direct links with the anomalous, the monstrous, the inconsistent and the paradoxical... a mode of selfhood that is positioned between freedom and rationality, on the one hand, and passive and thing-like embodiment, on the other.”

Gynae horror is a subgenre of horror that explores the fears and anxieties surrounding the female body, often focusing on themes of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, sexuality, and medical control. It reflects societal fears of female biology and autonomy, using horror as a lens to examine both personal and collective anxieties. The genre frequently portrays the body as something uncontrollable, invaded, or transformed in ways that evoke deep discomfort.

One of the earliest and most famous examples of gynae horror is *Carrie* (1976), based on Stephen King’s novel. The film begins with a traumatic moment of menstruation, signaling the onset of puberty as something horrifying. Carrie’s newfound telekinetic powers parallel her sexual awakening, and the fear others have of her is deeply tied to her femininity. The film suggests that female puberty is not just a biological change but something that threatens societal norms.

Pregnancy horror is another major theme, with *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) standing as one of the most iconic examples. The film plays on fears of bodily autonomy, medical gaslighting, and the idea that pregnancy itself can be monstrous. Rosemary is trapped in a world where her body is no longer her own, manipulated by those around her for their own purposes. The horror comes not only from the demonic nature of her child but also from the loss of control she experiences. Similar fears of alien invasion through pregnancy appear in *Alien* (1979), where the film's infamous chestburster scene serves as a grotesque metaphor for forced birth.

Films like *The Brood* (1979) take the horror of motherhood to another level. In David Cronenberg's psychological body horror, a woman's repressed trauma manifests physically, as she gives birth to mutant children who act on her rage. Here, the horror is not just about reproduction but also about how emotions, especially those of women, can be viewed as dangerous and destructive. The idea of the "monstrous mother" recurs throughout the genre, often exploring the fear that motherhood can warp or corrupt both the mother and child.

The control of women's bodies through medical institutions is another recurring theme. In *American Mary* (2012), the protagonist is a medical student who turns to underground surgeries, exploring themes of bodily autonomy and the grotesque beauty of transformation. The film critiques the way women's bodies are subjected to male control, whether through the medical system or society's expectations.

The monstrous feminine is central to gynae horror, with films like *Teeth* (2007) and *Ginger Snaps* (2000) portraying female sexuality as both powerful and terrifying. *Teeth* plays with the myth of the vagina dentata, where a young woman discovers she

has teeth in her vagina, making her a literal threat to male dominance. *Ginger Snaps* connects menstruation to lycanthropy, suggesting that puberty turns women into something wild and uncontrollable.

Gynaehorror ultimately challenges societal narratives about female biology, using horror to confront deep-seated fears about power, control, and transformation. It turns the realities of the female experience into nightmarish metaphors, forcing audiences to confront their anxieties about the body in ways that are both unsettling and thought-provoking.

The first chapter titled “Predatory Perspectives: The Femme Fatale and the Male Gaze in Horror Cinema” introduces the theoretical framework which discusses how the concepts of femme fatale, male gaze, and gynaehorror works in Indian horror movies. The second chapter titled “Supernatural Justice: Gender, Trauma, and Resistance in *Bulbbul*” discusses how the transformative power to a supernatural entity act as a tool of resistance. The third chapter titled, “Flipping the Gaze: Male Anxiety and Laura Mulvey’s theory in *Stree*”, deals with how male gaze is subverted by the spectre’s female gaze which leads to male anxiety. The conclusion sums the findings of this study.

Chapter 1

Predatory Perspectives: The Femme Fatale and the Male Gaze in Horror Cinema

There are multiple forms of entertainment, but films play a pivotal role in capturing the attention of the people. Films are powerful enough to hold the audience for a long period of time in the theatre, where the audience gets entertained with the willing suspension of disbelief. Especially horror films advocates for willing suspension of disbelief as past and present intermingle with each other when the spectre appears in the movie to take revenge on what happened in the past.

The films present stories which reflect societal dominant beliefs and values. Directly through various storytelling approaches film producers advocate their ideological beliefs. Different social ideals such as cultural standards and class systems along with gender positions work as these dominant ideologies. The cinematic world depicts men as leading figures who make logical choices and control most decision processes yet women function as characters who show emotional behavior and exercise independence and shyness. Motion pictures throughout every filmmaking tradition including Hollywood and Bollywood prefer to emphasize male view by focusing on male perspectives. The desires of women receive no recognition when society views them as irrational in real life scenarios as well as in filmed narratives.

A negligible number of motion pictures exist which let viewers see women enjoying male beauty. The Malayalam film *Oru Vadakkan Veera Gadha* showcases how a female sitting on a horsebase examines the beauty of a man during a sequence. During the film female beholders remain absent from screen focus because male observers receive top priority throughout every sequence. Woman are barred from selecting their life partners or experiencing unblinking views of male partners.

According to Laura Mulvey in her paper “The Cinema offers a number of possible pleasures.” (806). Scopophilia stands as one type of pleasure because it enables men to look at female forms primarily for their desired object status. In the Hollywood industry Mulvey finds evidence of Scopophilic pleasure through men who view women as static objects they want to observe. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema became famous when Laura Mulvey published her original work about male gaze in 1975. Through the male gaze theory she analyzes the way women appear in standard Cinema when they serve solely as male sexual objects. The theory establishes three distinct glimpse types that Mulvey studies in her paper. In the opening look of the film the male character serves as both the leading protagonist and the dominant viewer. The film director uses their creative perspectives to stage women as uninvolved subjects throughout the story. The male audience forms the third view by perceiving women as irrational and subjective subjects. Watching sexual objects brings passive but controlling satisfaction to the viewer (Mulvey 806). Nearly every motion picture represents women by fragmenting their bodies for audience enjoyment by showing their lower extremities and breasts alongside hips to reduce them from being individuals to mere sex objects.

Through male-dominated vision a particular grouping of women became famous as femme fatales. According to this stereotype women appeared dangerous and alluring with mysterious appeal to attract male attention through sexual attraction. Women receive this visual treatment because their outward appearance sends strong erotic signals which create a feeling of being meant for viewing by others according to Laura Mulvey (809).

Mulvey confirmed this theory by arguing that women exist only as visual items for male audience members to observe. The female character displays her

sexuality and physical beauty to draw attention from the male spectators at the same manner that femme fatale does. Femme fatale represents female characters through close-up shots that demonstrate both sexual parts of the body or by displaying hip figures according to the male gaze theory. Femme fatale extends its origins to historical works which feature women playing essential roles when men get destroyed. These women gain fame through their mysterious nature along with autonomous behavior which includes manipulative abilities. Through their use of psychological methods along with their intellectual abilities these women pursue their targets and navigate men into actions that give her benefits. The goal of a femme fatale woman depends deeply on the individual desires that comprise her makes up. Her activities involve deception towards men for obtaining power and wealth or she seeks vengeance because of past experiences. Through the male perspective femme fatales obtain their status despite appearing both powerful and intelligent because they function as viewed objects for men. The world operates through sexual imbalance since pleasure during observations falls into active men and passive women categories (Mulvey 808).

According to femme fatale theory and male gaze theory woman experience sexualization through objectification. The cinema displays the femme fatale through the male visual perspective by using bodies to create erotic imagery for male observing pleasure. The male gaze theory criticizes women as simple sexual objects according to the same logic as femme fatales are viewed. During femme fatale manipulation the protagonist uses sexual weapons to control men. Female sexuality appears as a visual manifestation meant to fuel male visual enjoyment under the male gaze theory framework. Both cases utilize the females as the main subject of sexual objectification and display making them central themes of pleasure.

Renaissance space appears through the camera's mechanism which produces natural human eye-compatible movements to build deceptive worlds that allow the spectator's surrogate to perform realistically (Mulvey 816).

Within horror film genres exists the specific subcategory known as Gynaehorror that centers on female experiences and the female body as well as the fears associated with womanhood. The understanding of gynaehorror analyzes how disturbing bodily transformations affect female physiological changes. Through male gaze theory the gynaehorror concept transforms from desirous to fearful representation that shows female body parts as simultaneously fascinating and frightening images. The male characters in Gynaehorror films express their phobias about feminine strength just as femme fatales exhibit their lethal combination of seduction and destruction that creates unpredictable emotion which could be perceived as either attractive or threatening. Gynaehorror uses menstruation and pregnancy and female sexual power as common exploration subjects in its narratives.

The analysis of *Stree* and *Bulbbul* in the following chapter uses the femme fatale concept together with Male Gaze theory and the gynaehorror film genre that were explored in this chapter.

Chapter 2

Supernatural Justice: Gender, Trauma, and Resistance in *Bulbbul*

The 2020 Indian production *Bulbbul* belongs to the supernatural thriller category. Anushka Sharma together with Karnesh Sharma produced the film while Anvita Dutt served as its director. Its portrayal of an evil feminine presence together with its social commentary made the film highly noticeable. *Bulbbul*, who comes from wealth, marries an older man then follows his journey in the Bengal Presidency during the late nineteenth century. The mature *Bulbbul* discovers all the sinister and fatal secrets within her personal world after gaining full awareness of the unusual things surrounding her. Throughout this film the audience experiences discussions about social issues that include gender-based discrimination and patriarchy. The story shows a female essence which takes vengeance against male-assaulted women. Throughout the movie the filmmakers evaluate how women navigate through life within the framework of a patriarchal society that restricts and oppresses them. Through its thematic elements the movie explains complex social patterns existing within Indian society.

The viewers praised *Bulbbul* both for its innovative storytelling and its striking visual appeal. Viewers praised the film's analysis of gender-based discrimination and patriarchy because it incorporated these themes through the film's storyline about an angry ghost and the depiction of women in the society. According to Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalytic theory the unconscious mind controls mental operations and external conduct of individuals. Through Psychoanalytic theory the filmmakers analyze character motivations in the film *Bulbbul*. Within *Bulbbul*'s narrative the abusive husband embodies traditional male societal hierarchies which

dominate throughout the story. The film portrays unconscious psychological urges together with dreams that analysts use to establish their interpretations. The film shares similarities with *Stree*. In *Bulbbul* the main character experiences realistic dreams that display her deep fears while in *Stree* the character Vicky suffers from scary dreams that expose his hidden feelings for the unknown woman. Magical realism serves as a literary style which uses realistic situations to build a world of familiar aspects alongside mysterious elements. The film *Bulbbul* enhances its story with supernatural elements through the magical realism technique. Several magical realist elements about the evil female spirit together with her vengeance strategies appear in the film *Bulbbul*. During *Bulbbul*'s dream sequences the mystical realist theme rises due to the inclusion of the spirit and its past visions. Magic realist storytelling allows the film to lead viewers to an unsettling version of reality where they can experience the wonder of magic alongside familiar elements. Supernatural elements remain essential for understanding gender discrimination and societal roles regarding women according to the analysis.

The movie explores female emancipation together with patriarchy systems and unequal gender standards to demonstrate modern feminist ideas. The plot of a younger girl married to an older man at childhood age allows *Bulbbul* to showcase both gender disparity and girls' ability to gain power over their destiny. This movie illustrates how women face two obstacles under patriarchy: denial of personal choices and curtailed independence. Throughout the developing story the main character confronts traditional male-dominated customs so she can gain independence. Throughout the film the main lesson emerges clearly that women can surpass gender stereotypes and social barriers. The plot of the film expresses feminist messages which emphasize women's worth.

In essence, *Bulbbul* is a fantasy of feminist retaliation. Similar to *Maleficent*, the film recasts the villain as a woman who has been wronged, therefore subverting the patriarchal stereotype of the “witch”. Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay’s stories about the Bengali upper-caste housewife, who has an extravagant front but a stifling interior, are reminiscent of the entire film’s context. She looks for love and, more significantly, understanding from a younger, less controlling man because she is stuck with a husband who doesn’t get her sensitive personality and creative potential. The practice of forced widowhood is one of the atrocities of the upper caste colonial Bengali patriarchy that are fully shown in the film. We can also observe how women in the joint family are driven to treat one another cruelly by their desire to fight for the love of the “master” of the home. The film’s plot is predictable, to be sure, but one can tell right away that *Bulbbul* is not the naive girl Satyendra left behind when you see her grinning, enigmatic face upon his return from London, and we can also see why the witch is pursuing her victims.

The way the movie handles the relationship between *Bulbbul* and Satya is when it truly defies clichés. According to the movie’s trailer, Satya is the romantic lead. It is typical for Satya-like character to intervene and rescue the heroine using the redeeming power of his love in stories that involve the “possession” of a poor or fallen lady. As the attractive, intelligent, and cultured Babu who has returned from overseas, he checks all the boxes. At first, he is the only male who hasn’t treated the protagonist badly. However, when Satya acts condescendingly towards *Bulbbul*’s recent appointment as the “mistress” of the house, as though she was merely playing a game. As the only man left in the family, he feels compelled to publicly establish his patriarchal authority when he discovers that *Bulbbul* is openly flirting with her doctor. In order to monitor *Bulbbul*, he brings his widowed sister-in law back into the

mansion. He also subtly assumes charge of the estate's management and chastises her for not wearing a veil in front of the doctor. Later, when he witnesses *Bulbbul* and the doctor smoking together, he writes to his brother proposing that *Bulbbul* be punished by being brought back to her mother's house. "You are all alike," *Bulbbul* remarks sourly. Because it is the kindest ones who let you down as a warning to never trust anyone. Rather, as a romantic interest, the endearing doctor Sudip seems more likable. The main focus of Sudip and *Bulbbul*'s relationship is him looking after her feet. Subtle symbolism: a guy is more reliable than others if he voluntarily surrenders himself at a woman's feet. This is made even more apparent when we learn later that *Bulbbul* has been taken over by the goddess Kali's spirit. But the use of rape as a plot element is what is really controversial in the movie, and here is where the main criticism lies. In a violent outburst of jealousy over her love for Satya, *Bulbbul*'s husband practically stops her from walking. *Bulbbul*'s feet serve as a metaphor in this context because they convey to the audience that a woman's feet should remain inside the lines that males have established around her existence. *Bulbbul*'s mentally sick brother-in law rapes her while she is paralyzed in bed, accidentally suffocating her to death. The protagonist becomes the "witch" after being possessed by a spirit from the nearby Kali temple in an unexplained turn of mysticism. Finally, *Bulbbul* represents the recurrent motif of the vindictive "Kali Maa" in her form as the witch. In a chilling sequence, Doctor Sudip corrects Satya when he refers to her as "*Chudail*", stating that she is truly a goddess or devi. The same is said by a child sexual assault victim who is saved by *Bulbbul*. She appears to have perished in a forest fire that Satya ignited during the movie's conclusion, but her ghost reappears to harass Thakur Moshai upon his return to home.

The movie shows that male violence does not exist in a vacuum. It does not operate alone. It is insidious and gradually weaves a shroud of silence, following which it manifest itself in its lower form, in the form of physical violence. *Bulbbul* is the name of a bird. Additionally, our main character *Bulbbul* is a free spirit, as her name suggests. According to Paul Kivel, men must adhere to a strict set of behavioural standards known as the “Man Box”. Like the “Man Box”, the women’s box is incredibly small. Women are supposed to be silent and obedient. A woman is labelled a “witch” and becomes a threat to society if she does not exhibit the expected feminine traits. *Bulbbul* resisted being a bird in a cage. The film also tells the story of “*Chudail*”- a witch. Women have been labelled “witches” for generations if they didn’t follow social norms. Indian folklore also contains the fable of *Chudail*, but *Bulbbul* handles it in a different way. It reveals the narrative of a woman’s journey from an ordinary girl to a “witch”. During the 2016 U.S. presidential race, Hilary Clinton was referred to as “The Wicked Witch of the Left”. Because these women fought being crushed by patriarchy from the bottom of their hearts, they are still frequently branded as “witches” in our society. The movie restates the idea that women will always be referred to by derogatory terms or labelled as “witch” if they venture beyond of their comfort zone, regardless of the century.

Siddharth Diwan’s film has a beautiful visual aesthetic. The movie makes considerable use of the colour red, in fact, the climax and other important scenes are drenched in red. “*Bulbbul*” is not filled with dance sequences or frequent musical interludes, in contrast to conventional Bollywood flicks. In the film, Men, who support patriarchy and the repression of women, are the privileged in the haveli. The audience follows the protagonist *Bulbbul*’s transformation from a helpless young girl to a victim of male lust satiation to a strong “*Chudail*” who aimed to bring justice to

every mistreated woman in her country, starting with her marriage to an older man Indranil and ending with her fate at the hands of her husband and his twin brother. The director exposed the idea of hidden secrets among large households to public disclosure while digging up cultural superstitions embedded in history. International society sentenced her to death through an act of burning her alive. Throughout the narrative *Bulbbul* dresses in various outfits containing faint red tones because she shares a name with that bird. A peacock plume fan adorns her as she uses it to represent the highest status along with unmatched beauty. In this situation she held supremacy at the haveli but her life was ended nonetheless. The manner of human treatment towards trees and other natural resources matches the concept of rape.

In the early narrative of the film the directors display *Bulbbul* through blue-colored scenes representing cold temperatures. A transformation into a bloodthirsty *Chudail* happens at the instant *Bulbbul* loses control bringing a dangerous shift in overall lighting throughout the movie. When the light changes in *Bulbbul*'s life her actions show similarities to the alarm call of a small bird whose habitat face rapid extinction because of human actions. Although Satya shows signs of caring for *Bulbbul* he burns down her habitat thus creating a path to her death. The ecosystem remains balanced through natural organisms in the similar way that *Bulbbul* sought justice for abused women.

The film portrays patriarchy as dangerous within Bengali havelis but on another level critiques a significant ecological disaster where *Bulbbul* birds alongside all forest creatures lose their habitats. The male perspective and female sexualization occurs through the patriarchy shown in “*Bulbbul*.”

Part of Indian horror filmmaking depicts women in two opposing categories that function as helpless victims who experience patriarchal oppression or frightening supernatural entities. Through its blending of supernatural elements with feministScope *Bulbbul* seeks to confront conventional societal standards. The film shows a progression which swaps between powerless female characters of previous subversive depictions to present powerful agents of justice who take control. Throughout its examination of cinematic techniques and critical perspectives alongside seduction and vengeance and female trauma the film demonstrates changes in the role of women in Indian horror cinema.

The main character *Bulbbul* transforms completely from her original innocent brain to a supernatural force that achieves revenge. Through her character transformation the movie displays the way the film industry redefined horror with feminist perspectives. At the start of the film viewers observe her forced union with an elderly man against her pure love for his brother. During the initial stages of the film the story evaluates how women lose their maturity through widespread practices of child-marriage and decision-making power deprivation.

The film reaches its peak dramatic moment when her spouse realizes his sister-in-law is involved romantically with his brother. The process of domestic abuse ends when her husband beats her brutally then her brother-in-law continues by subjecting her to sexual violence. The conversation crosses this point at 00.59.23 when a character establishes their family home sits apart from others because no other building in the village features a stairway. This moment reveals typical coverage used by abusers. The scene demonstrates how Laura Mulvey explains how male watchers get pleasure through their dominant gaze against female passivity. Through most of the film the male characters maintain firm control over *Bulbbul* while reducing her to

an object yet she later emerges as a supernatural being and takes control. Patriarchal cultures require women to serve as symbolic markers that permit men to pour out their fantasies onto an image of woman limited to her passive meaning-bearer role (Mulvey 813).

The essential narrative point in *Bulbbul* emerges from the way the character functions as male property. People mistake her quietness as evidence of sanctity but she later restores her freedom to self-govern. The main cause of *Bulbbul's* mystical transformation reveals her acquired ability to fight against oppressive subjugation through a supernatural body with inverted feet. The dialogue expresses the dual role of woman in the patriarchal unconscious by symbolizing penis-castration through her physical barrenness and using this to guide her son toward symbolic understanding (1:00:05) (Mulvey 804).

Her metamorphosis can be linked to these lines. Her arc of change to supernatural entity can be visualised as a threat to men she haunts, destructing the power and reversing gender hierarchy. When *Bulbbul* confronts Mahendra, a deep red lighting is seen, that symbolises the rage and reclamation from the perspective of *Bulbbul*. The usage of slow motion underlines the power, throwing light on the spectral form of hers both as terrifying and inspiring. A parallelism of goddess Kali can be drawn here, giving a figure of divine retribution.

In traditional horror films, femme fatale is portrayed as seductive and mysterious women who uses her capabilities to woo and manipulate men. But when it comes to *Bulbbul*. Her ethereal presence, alluring beauty and grace is joined along with aura of mystery and danger. A subversion of femme fatale archetype is seen when her beauty and charm hides her deadly metamorphosis to a witch. In traditional

femme fatales, we could see sexuality being used to dominate over the patriarchal world, gaining power over male hegemony. But, here *Bulbbul*'s supernatural transformation itself act as the tool for asserting power. After silencing herself in the scenarios of violence and betrayal, she rise to form in order to avenge over abusive manhood.

Chapter 3

Flipping the Gaze: Male Anxiety and Laura Mulvey's Theory in *Stree*

All films do not advocate or favour the dominant ideologies that suppress and assert the thought that women should be under the control of men. A Bollywood movie named *Stree* came out in 2018 challenging the dominant structures of society that restrict the freedom of women to choose their life. Women are often linked with family or marital institutions and are never free, no women have the agency to choose what and how their lives should be rather they are always forced or obliged to follow the wishes of others when they choose their lives according to their wish, her life becomes a tragedy. In the movie *Stree*, a woman chooses to be a prostitute in her life for a living. "Women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey 809). Men in her village fall for her charm making her an object of their male gaze. The woman found that earning her living was selling this male gaze.

Her life turns into a tragic story when the comfortable male gaze is disrupted as the woman decides to live a happy marital life. The males in the village strongly oppose this decision. They cannot accept the fact that a woman with loose morals should, according to them, live a normal, happy life; rather, she should continue to be an object of desire for men. The woman in the film went against this dominant ideology. The villagers could not accept this resistance of hers which finally led to her and her family's untimely death. Societal validation is inevitable for a woman living in a patriarchal society.

The women who were subjected to the atrocities from the dominant gender come back to question and take revenge on men. Stree comes back as a spectre, her haunting presence brings a sense of fear in the men in the village. Her spectral presence becomes a site of resistance. According to Laura Mulvey, “woman then stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning (810). By her appearance as a specter she shed her passive being rather becomes the active narrator who has the agency and power to question the male gaze. Stree kills men in the village who was the reason for her untimely death.

The men in Chanderi gossip about women not only individual but as a collective force. Characters like Vicky look at women shrinking the identity of women as objects of fantasy. Later when the woman Stree becomes a powerful specter the idea of women being watched gets subverted men becomes the ones who are watched by a ghost who is waiting to kidnap men. Like previously women who are in constant fear but it gets subverted in the story line.

“In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active male and passive female.”(Mulvey 809). The fetishization of the Female Body is evident in the movie where the story circles around a festive background. The men roam freely in the streets commanding the women to stay indoors for safety. But by the arrival of a female spectre this patriarchal notion that women should stay indoors for safety and to satisfy the males ego as a supreme power flips upside down when the freely moving spirit of men has shuddered with the fear of being kidnapped by the ghost. Men in the later part of the movie are the ones who are

forced to remain in the household for their safety, whereas women can wander around safely during the festive night. “She comes at night and takes away only men” (*Stree* 00:15:32). The spectre gives liberation to the women in the village while restricting men. The men who once controlled women’s bodies now live in fear of a woman’s gaze. Finally the men in the village started to believe in a superstition to escape from her, that is they write a sentence on the walls of the village that says “Hey woman come tomorrow” (*Stree* 00:08:15) thinking that she might not harm them.

Mulvey argues that men often view powerful women as a threat, which cinema addresses by either punishing them or taming their power. *Stree* plays on this fear by making men the victims. The ghost, *Stree*, hunts men at night, reversing the traditional horror trope where women are the primary victims. The film forces male characters into a position where they feel the vulnerability that women often experience in male-dominated societies. This subversion explains the male gaze politics, Mulvey states that “The male protagonist is free to command the stage, a stage of spatial illusion in which he articulates the look and creates the action.” (810) this power of the male protagonist becomes nearly absent when the spectre arrives. When the men in the village start to get vulnerable in fear the men try to boost their male ego by telling dialogues like “Behave like a man don’t fear” (*Stree* 00:43:10) and “Be a man stand in front of her” (*Stree* 01:12:37).

The film refrains from conventional representations of female distress because it displays male characters as the ones needing protection. Throughout their lives women stay in danger because they constantly fear molestation and rape and murder. This film does not showcase vulnerable characters because the male characters exist perpetually in danger. According to Mulvey the male character becomes aware of what spectators perceive at the moment. (813) Watching the long-awaited scene

becomes possible exclusively through the eyes of the female audience member during the film. Watching this film provides no desired viewing experience to male audience members. During the second part of the movie the male perspective remains unsatisfied.

The male characters in the movie continually pursue female attention especially Vicky who feels women find him unpreventable. Feminine andreceptivity exists as one of the central aspects through which male viewing preferences typically understand women. The film's narrative reveals to Vicky that the character love for him may not be real for Shraddha Kapoor when she potentially turns out to not be human. The analysis of male ego reveals that cinematic male gaze tradition chooses men to be the principal target of female fascination regardless of actual reality.

According to Mulvey (811), male sexual anxiety leads to “castration” in films. The male characters demonstrate a terror that surpasses death fears because they fear losing their masculine attributes which belongs to conventional horror narratives. The film reveals more than a simple horror-comedy because it uses a sophisticated method to challenge movie-progressive male perspectives. The movie challenges standard gender expectations while revealing that patriarchal masculinity exists in a state of weakness and offers stories with women controlling men instead of men controlling women. The film presents one of the most distinctive feminist critiques ever showcased in Indian mainstream film.

Conclusion

The combination of male perspective along with femme fatale and gynae-horror elements delivers an interesting analysis on patriarchal structures as they reshape how women exercise power. Through their narratives both films transform women who were originally used as male watching objects into powerful avenging beings. The three psychological approaches combine to present an interpretation of gender assumptions in addition to discussing power functions and female representation throughout Indian filmmaking. The supernatural elements in these movies function as instruments for feminist empowerment which helps women claim independence and reject abuse through revolutionary acts of resistance.

Through its supernatural plot *Bulbul* transforms the subjective female character into a powerful spirit which counteracts victimhood through violent means. The film deploys the femme fatale archetype to express retaliation toward gendered oppression instead of using it for seduction. The film *Stree* delivers its message through a supernatural femme fatale manifestation that attacks male characters who exploit women.

The films dismantle traditional gender roles through their female characters who reject patriarchy through merging victimhood with vengeance. Through modernized subversion *Bulbul* transforms the femme fatale archetype into a strong feminist power that administers vengeance. Being rejecting both desire and destruction *Bulbul* chooses to be an active justice agent who changes the traditional film portrayals of femme fatales.

The intersection of male gaze analysis and gynae-horror and femme fatale perspectives provides analytical insights into modern Indian horror film

representations between gender and cinematic power dynamics. These movies radically alter traditional male-centered themes by dismantling the male perspective and presenting novel feminist narratives which fight against persistent gendered stereotypes. The movies construct traditional female representations through supernatural horror and feminist arguments while giving birth to central female characters who gain agency across the horror genre.

According to Laura Mulvey the male spectator experiences visual pleasure through feminine depictions that serve as objects in cinema. Bollywood displays the same male sexual objectification of women by making female characters support male-dominated storytelling and by featuring them as secondary to romance and sensual visual elements. While other films follow male gaze ideology *Bulbul* and *Stree* use counter-cinematic techniques to challenge male domination within the screen. *Bulbul* shows the development of a young bride into an angry character who seeks revenge against male perpetrators of gender-based stereotypes. The narrative shift changes male observer behavior because it moves victims from passive suffering toward becoming agents of revenge. The horror film uses its portrayal of supernatural attacks to rebalance screen representation by exposing men to fear while making them experience vulnerability which traditionally belongs to the female horror audience.

Gynaehorror functions as a tool for sharing knowledge about cinematic explorations of women's trauma alongside the preservation of feminine power and control over their bodies. Under the subgenre umbrella this philosophy demonstrates destructive experiences affecting women who face marriage before age, family and community abuse and sexual harm plus societal control. *Ghul* is portrayed as an supernatural instrument to defend against attacks aimed at women. She transforms into a supernatural entity which shows repressed female hostility expressed through

revenge methods that society refuses to women for justice. The movie's visual elements including red-tinted shots alongside gothic buildings attached to ethereal imagery achieve the disruption of horror rules which establishes *Bulbul* as both a victimized character and a vengeful agent against traditional horror rules.

Gynae-horror achieves its effect in *Stree* by using satirical methods together with inverted elements. The main character functions as a supernatural symbol of female independence which terrorizes a society that oppresses women. The men of the town collectively fear *Stree* because they hold deep subconscious concerns about women's rising power and sexual freedom leading to a horror turnabout. The movie achieves its subversive effect through entertaining satire and ironic exploration which combats male entitlement throughout its examination of feminist ideas within horror-comedy. Though she appears only infrequently in the story line *Stree* serves as a representation of the accumulated fears faced by all silenced women throughout history. The character of *Stree* uses her powers to make men directly face feminized anxiety which women have endured through the years thus becoming a powerful examination of male-female power dynamics.

The femme fatale pattern evolved tremendously throughout these films since it usually depicts seductive women who destroy male protagonists. The standard representation of femme fatales in noir and horror films gets punished because it causes feelings of concern among patriarchal power structures about women who defy gender roles and maintain their independence. The two films present female protagonists who navigate patriarchy simultaneously facing victimhood and taking on a path of justice. *Bulbbul* transforms from an innocent bride into a unstoppable force of vengeance which merges all the femme fatale stereotypes into a single figure who disrupts oppressive structures. Through her supernatural activities *Bulbbul* shows how

society condemns female resistance yet feminism because this power evokes fear about women acquiring power from history. Throughout the film's conclusion the main character demonstrates karmic justice instead of representing a villainous role which validates that horror stands as a platform for feminist empowerment.

The feminine fatal character becomes extremely unclear within the film narrative of *Stree*. The movie *Stree* challenges the typical femme fatale storyline by presenting this dangerous power as a force that remains invisible throughout the film. Through her mysterious presence she symbolically destroys customary masculine-dominant relationships even while manifesting as an immediate physical danger. The male characters undergo fearful helplessness that matches traditional female distress in horror stories. The film uses this new point of view to encourage audiences to rethink traditional gender norms while establishing a complex view of female abnormal behavior and opposition.

The movies use horror as both a genre and a feminist instrument that reinterprets dominant social understandings. Their exploration of local mythologies enables feminist critique that specifically targets Indian cultural frameworks to create stronger impact for their feminist interventions. Through supernatural elements the filmmakers create an interpretive metaphor of gendered violence in society which empowers their characters to retrieve their power instead of preserving their state as victims. Horror films reveal that their genre which some dismiss for exhibitionism contains multiple layers of subversion which effectively touch on social transgender violations.

The public response toward these films demonstrates expanding attitudes regarding gender issues within the Indian film industry. The feminist aspects of

Bulbbul and *Stree* receive widespread acclaim because these films show how society wants to confront patriarchal systems through their storytelling. Feminist horror proves its power to make cultural critique by achieving commercial triumph alongside critical acclaim. Film success demonstrates an audience transformation because viewers now welcome depictions that eliminate sexual stereotypes and present alternative expressions of female might.

Although subversive in nature these films have several important drawbacks. The feminist revisionist story of *Bulbbul* presents a compelling feminist argument yet its portrayal of revenge turns into a potentially simplistic view of justifiable revenge and healing. The supernatural ending of the film brings catharsis but it fails to present substantial solutions for systemic gendered violence which exposes the permanent separation between film realities and real-world justice systems. The successful reversal of the horror perspective in *Stree* occurs within mainstream cinema yet the film sometimes uses comic moments which potentially weaken its feminist analysis. The creative obstacles filmmakers encounter do not decrease their impact since they reflect the continuous work required to fuse feminist storytelling with mainstream movie production.

The concluding impact of each film involves their success at transforming horror into a feminist communicative channel. The production of alternative visual perspectives through the movie functions as resistance against male perspectives by highlighting the trauma that strengthens the femme fatale character instead of turning it into a condemnatory image. Following these approaches enables the long-established patriarchal frameworks to break down thus allowing women to stake their rightful position in narrative creation.

Indian horror cinema experiences significant strides through the feminist approaches that both films introduce to break conventional stereotypes depicted in cinematic media. The genre of horror depicts social uncertainties through its reflections while transforming their meanings through the combination of male gaze theory together with gynae horror and femme fatale archetype. The successful templates in these movies created a model for upcoming gender-focused Indian cinema to present empowerment through storytelling that goes beyond traditional tropes leading to boundary redefinition in feminist horror.

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