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Unveiling Silence: Exploring the Psychosocial Impact of Violence in Contemporary India through Anvita Dutt's 'Bulbbul' and the Myth of Philomela

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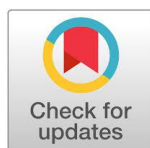
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Abstract: *Anvita Dutt's Bulbbul navigates feminist themes, illuminating violence against women and their coping mechanisms in a patriarchal milieu. Drawing on the Greek myth of Philomela, the film critiques 19th-century colonial gender dynamics, depicting the suppression of women's autonomy and widespread violence. This narrative remains pertinent in contemporary India, where, despite rising reported cases, societal pressures contribute to underreporting. Dutt underscores the intensified challenges modern women confront, emphasising emotional, physical, and psychological torment. The film dissects the struggles within the "Thakur Bari" household through a psychosocial lens, exemplifying the impact of male dominance and societal constraints on characters like Bulbbul and Binodini. While Bulbbul symbolises defiance and resilience, advocating for autonomy and equality, Binodini represents silent suffering. Bulbbul ultimately challenges patriarchal norms, advocating for empowerment and liberation, heralding a new era of progress and equality.*

Keywords— Patriarchal structures, Gender violence, Psychosocial analysis, Defiance and resilience, Anvita Dutt's "Bulbbul", Myth of Philomela

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I. Introduction

Anvita Dutt's 2020 Netflix film "Bulbbul" explores feminist issues, highlighting violence against women and their coping mechanisms in a patriarchal society. The film, loosely based on the Greek myth of Philomela, reflects 19th-century gender hierarchies during colonialism that suppressed women's autonomy and fostered an environment of physical and sexual violence. The contemporary reality is equally grim: NCRB data shows reported crimes against women in India rose from 3,71,503 in 2020 to 4,45,256 in 2022. Analysis by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) reveals that nearly one-third of crimes against women from 2016 to 2021 involved "cruelty" by husbands or male relatives, with 1,36,234 such incidents in 2021 alone, and West Bengal recorded the highest number at 19,952 cases. However, many cases go unreported due to fear, social pressure, low literacy rates, and distrust of the police. In an interview, Dutt notes, "Today, women endure even harsher realities, facing profound emotional, physical, and psychological torment" (Pathak). The film is significant in both literary and contemporary contexts, depicting the impact of violence on women's mental and emotional well-being, showcasing characters like Binodini coping silently with their trauma while Bulbbul becomes a perpetrator herself.

II. The Psychological Toll of Violence: Bulbbul's Journey

Bulbbul, a child bride married to the aristocrat Indranil at five, forms a close bond with his younger brother Satya through shared tales of a mysterious witch- "*chudail*". Her first torment arises when Indranil decides to send Satya to England. At time stamp [46:42], Bulbbul voices her anxiety, saying, "I am scared of being alone here. Who will talk to me now?"—emphasising her deep emotional dependence on Satya for companionship and support. Upset by Satya's departure, Bulbbul burns their shared notebook, but Indranil finds the remnants at the time stamp [52:31], misinterpreting their "textual" relationship as "sexual". This discovery triggers a violent outburst, culminating in Indranil brutally assaulting Bulbbul. The misery continues the next day as well when Bulbbul is raped by Indranil's twin brother Mahendra. For him, Bulbbul is his "*gudiya*" (doll). When she lies wounded and unconscious, at [01:04:10], Mahendra climbs on her, imposing his will like a child who has never been denied anything. In this scene, Dutt emphasises Bulbbul's suffering over Mahendra's animalistic lust, similar to Philomela as a symbol of suffering and ignored cries in T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922).

The change of Philomel by the barbarous king
 So rudely forced, yet there the nightingale
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
 And still, she cried, and still the world pursues,
 “Jug Jug” to dirty ears. (Eliot 98-103)

Philomela was raped by her sister’s husband, King Tereus, and later transformed into a nightingale. Her song, symbolised by “Jug Jug,” echoes the unheard pain of women in society, akin to Bulbbul’s plight. The series of violent incidents in the film shattered her trust in men, as those supposed to protect her were the ones inflicting violence. Even when Dr. Sudip initially tries to inquire about the events at timestamp (01:16:20), she curtly responds, “Do your job and leave,” reflecting her reluctance to open up.

III.Silent Suffering: The Psychosocial Impact of Violence on Binodini

Dutt considers Binodini the film’s most tragic character (Genesia). Initially obscured behind the groom, her expressions reveal her understanding of Bulbbul’s plight, reminiscent of her own experience as a child bride. Binodini is burdened with caring for her husband Mahendra, Satya, young Bulbbul, and even Indranil. She manages the household and kitchen but remains the overlooked “*chhoti bahu*,” not the matriarchal figure. Sarkar’s analysis of nineteenth-century Bengali women’s autobiographies underscores the fear surrounding marriage initiation, where women surrendered their agency to fulfil their husbands’ desires (Sarkar 237). Binodini’s husband, Mahendra, exhibits child-like cognitive abilities, suggesting he may have subjected Binodini to similar treatment when she was a child bride herself, at possibly six or eight years old. However, having no one to go to, Binodini internalised the lesson imparted to her: “Keep quiet” (Genesia). She finds solace in repeating it to Bulbbul, seeing her own reflection in Bulbbul’s suffering and attempting to provide comfort through the familiar refrain she had been taught. In the movie, at timestamp (01:11:06), Binodini, as she cleans Bulbbul’s bloodstains, says-

You have been married into a royal family. Why these tears? Keep quiet.
 He’s a little insane, but he’ll be fine after marriage.
 He’s a little insane, but he’s of royal blood. Keep quiet.
 He’s a little insane, but you will be adorned in jewels.
 He’s a little insane, but you will be draped in silks. You’ll get respect. Keep quiet.
 He’s a little insane, but if not him, then his brother will look after you.
 Large manors have big secrets. So keep quiet. (Bulbbul)

These lines underscore how patriarchal societies condition women to tolerate violence silently, prioritising marriage into prestigious families and enduring abuse for material gain,

societal status, and family honour. Abusive behaviour is rationalised, and the allure of wealth and status is used to justify suffering, reinforcing dependence on male protection and perpetuating a cycle of silence and subjugation. The psychological indoctrination of women to endure violence silently reflects the symbolic act of Tereus cutting out Philomela's tongue to silence her. Binodini's singing of the lullaby "Keep Quiet" serves as a subtle form of communication akin to Philomela weaving a tapestry depicting the brutality. In this manner, Binodini also encapsulates the spirit of "Bulbbul" or the Nightingale. Beyond just Bulbbul, Binodini represents the cultural conditioning and silent agony experienced by numerous other women in her village. Her tragedy mirrors that of Master Dinkar's wife, who endures domestic violence, the *gadiwan's* first wife, who commits suicide after being cast out, and the young girl who falls victim to sexual abuse.

IV. From Silent Endurance to Active Retribution: Bulbbul's Transformation

The "*chup raho* (keep quiet)" scene unveils a profound truth: Bulbbul recognises the magnitude of Binodini's agony, surpassing her own recent ordeal, marking a divergence from Philomela's narrative. This realisation catalyses a transformation, motivating Bulbbul to advocate for Binodini and stand in solidarity with women's plight. Bulbbul's notion of justice involves violence, as violence begets further violence, creating a cycle of victimisation and perpetration. She murders the wrongdoers like Mahendra for what he did to Binodini and her, Master Dinkar for domestic violence, the paedophile foreigner for child abuse, and the *gadiwan* for abandoning his first wife. However, Bulbbul's tragic demise, orchestrated by Satya, who ignites the forest fire, symbolises the brutal consequences faced by women who challenge patriarchal norms. Her death while sitting on a tree engulfed in flames serves as a stark reminder of the dangers awaiting those who defy traditional gender roles. But the post-credits scene, depicting Bulbbul rising from the ashes like a phoenix, offers a glimmer of hope. Her transformation from a nightingale to a phoenix symbolises resilience and renewal in the face of patriarchal oppression. It calls for rejecting violence and standing up for ourselves and other women, heralding a new era of empowerment and liberation.

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