

The *Chudail* as “Monstrous Feminine”: Spectacle, Power, and Representation in *Bulbbul*

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the symbol of the witch in the film *Bulbbul* (2020) to argue that the witch is not an uncomplicated figure of female empowerment but a construct moulded by patriarchal representation. Drawing upon Judith Butler’s notion of gender and performativity, Barbara Creed’s concept of the “monstrous-feminine,” and Laura Mulvey’s theory of visual spectacle, the paper analyses how the film produces the witch as both spectacle and threat. Rather than representing empowerment, the witch in *Bulbbul* develops her power from being framed as a frightening spectacle, suggesting that female agency is accepted only when it appears monstrous.

Keywords: Witch, Spectacle, Agency, Monstrosity, Resistance, Visuality.

Introduction

This paper provides a close reading of *Bulbbul*, focusing on how the witch's character is constructed through visual and narrative elements. The study looks at key aspects like Bulbbul's transformation, the portrayal of violence, and the role of visual imagery, especially colour, costume, and framing, in defining female power. The study also examines the use of space, particularly the *Rajbari* and the forest, as important places where control, confinement, and transformation are visually portrayed.

The paper mentions the historical context of nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, but only to help explain the film's social and spatial setting. It does not provide a detailed historical or sociological analysis of the period, nor does it offer an in-depth exploration of folklore traditions involving witches in India or Europe. Similarly, while the paper discusses existing research on *Bulbbul*, it does not aim to review all available criticism. Instead, it focuses on the key arguments most relevant to its main theme. The scope of the study is also limited to textual and visual analysis of the film itself. It does not examine audience reception, production history, or broader contexts such as streaming platforms in detail.

With these aspects in mind, it is important to situate the film within broader historical and cultural narratives. The symbol of the witch has often been linked with female power, but this dominance is seldom straightforward. Not only in European but also in Indian cultural contexts, women who step outside normative social roles are often categorised as witches and treated as dangerous. They are "creatures" of dread, unease and terror. In Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, witch hunting was common, with women being labelled as witches and being burnt or drowned.

In Indian folklore, the figure of the *chudail* (or *dakini* in Bangla) is one of the most persistent depictions of female supernatural power, often linked to women who have suffered injustice or died under traumatic circumstances. Generally, the *chudail* is believed to be the agitated spirit of a woman often wronged through brutality, betrayal, or death during childbirth. Her unfulfilled desires mark her return for revenge. Narrative descriptions commonly underscore distinctive physical features. These include twisted feet, which symbolise her abnormal and disconcerting presence. These physical signifiers are noteworthy because they visually frame her as “other,” transforming her from a wronged woman into a figure of fear. The inversion of the feet, in particular, suggests a reversal of the natural order, symbolising how the *chudail* exists outside the norms of society and morality. In this way, folklore does not simply describe the supernatural, but constructs a language through which female suffering is reinterpreted as something dangerous and monstrous.

Simultaneously, the *chudail* is often associated with liminal spaces such as forests and graveyards, which lie outside the constraints of daily social life. She is repeatedly imagined as swinging from trees or moving through the woods, appearing suddenly and catching people unaware, which reinforces her connection to the unknown. *Bulbbul* draws directly on these folkloric elements, particularly in its visual portrayal of the supernatural figure in the forest. The trailer shows a woman with long hair, against a deep red background, her figure gliding through the air. Director Anvita Dutt uses the image of the female body suspended among trees to evoke the presence of the *chudail*, connecting traditional imagery with a brilliant cinematic representation. This visual choice is not only reminiscent of folklore but also transforms it into spectacle. By drawing on these familiar motifs, the film places *Bulbbul* within a familiar cultural milieu but also shows how such imagery is implicated in the production of the witch as a figure of both terror and visual fascination.

Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt and streamed on Netflix in 2020, deals with the same theme by narrating the tale of Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri), a child bride (in Bengal Presidency 1881) who marries into a feudal family from Bengal and develops an intense association with her husband's little brother, Satya (Avinash Tiwary). Because the husband is much older, the bond is natural and spontaneous as Bulbbul and Satya grow up together, and the former develops feelings for him. However, suspecting an illicit relationship between the two, the bond is broken when Satya leaves the *Rajbari* and Bulbbul is subjected to horrific and vicious physical abuse by her husband Indranil (Rahul Bose) and rape by his twin brother Mahender (also played by Rahul Bose). One of the most powerful scenes in the film occurs after the act of violence, as Binodini (Paoli Dam), Bulbbul's sister-in-law, heals her wounds and silently tells her to be quiet: "*badi badi haveli mein bade bade razz hotey hain chup rehna*" (big mansions, harbour deep secrets, stay quiet). This symbolises the acceptance of the torture suffered by women within patriarchal society. In the subsequent scenes, a series of mysterious deaths take place in the *Rajbari* and the village, and Bulbbul is assumed to be the figure of the "witch" who kills abusive men. However, the film never really says if Bulbbul is a witch or not. It does not definitively establish her identity as one. The story leaves it open to question. This means that people thinking she is a witch and talking about her like one is what makes her a witch. Bulbbul is not really a witch to begin with. She becomes a witch because of how she is represented and talked about.

This paper argues that the witch in *Bulbbul* is not truly agentic. Instead, her agency derives from being framed as a frightening spectacle. Drawing on Barbara Creed's concept of the "monstrous feminine" and Laura Mulvey's theory of visual spectacle, the analysis shows that female agency in the film becomes visible only when it appears excessive, violent, and monstrous. Barbara Creed, in her book *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, writes: "The monstrous feminine reflects 'male fears rather than male desire

“ (Creed 24). This is visible in *Bulbbul*, where her violence becomes distant and eerie. The film repeatedly withholds her body from being seen. The camera avoids long close-ups, instead showing brief glimpses of her hair, feet, or outline. The visual approach makes it difficult for the viewer to see her as completely human and presents her as mysterious and unsettling. The identity of this figure remains unclear.

Creed's argument that the monstrous feminine is shaped by male fear becomes particularly relevant here. The partial visibility of *Bulbbul*'s body does not simply heighten uncertainty; it also determines how her violent acts are understood. Instead of showing her anger in direct or familiar terms, the film renders it distant and difficult to grasp. Her acts are not shown clearly as rational or justified, but appear excessive and otherworldly. This does not suggest a failure of representation, but rather reveals the limits within which female rage can be depicted. *Bulbbul*'s violence becomes intelligible only when it is transformed into something uncanny and unsettling. In this way, the film turns her body into a site where cultural anxieties about female power are projected. Her change is in sync with Creed's idea of the monstrous feminine, where the figure of the woman is shaped less by her own subjectivity and more by the fears that surround her.

Women in nineteenth-century Bengal

In his book titled *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Partha Chatterjee discusses the “Woman Question,” addressing modernisation, the establishment of the Brahmo Samaj, and women's reforms. However, he points out that modernisation under Western influence began in the early part of the nineteenth century, but declined after its limited success. Chatterjee explains that the rise of nationalism led to a strong admiration for India's past and a defence of traditional practices. As a result, attempts to change social customs were often viewed with suspicion and dismissed as imitations of Western culture. This contributed

to the development of a more conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices (Chatterjee 116).

This had a direct impact on women who performed deeply restricted roles in feudal Bengal. Upper-caste households, particularly those belonging to landed elites or *zamindars*, were organised around rigid hierarchies that placed women firmly within the private sphere. Child marriage was rampant, and their roles were defined by submission, silence and servitude.

The architecture of the feudal home, particularly the *Rajbari* or royal mansion, played a decisive role in perpetuating these power structures. The large, often labyrinthine structures were divided into inner and outer spaces, with the *andar mahal* (inner quarters) restricted to women. This spatial segregation was not merely practical but ideological, reinforcing the separation between the public (male) and private (female) spheres. The *Rajbari* thus became a site where power was both exercised and concealed, its closed corridors and shadowed interiors mirroring the restricted lives of the women within. The visual grandeur of such spaces often masked the underlying structures of control, presenting an image of order and stability while containing forms of suffering and repression.

Bulbbul draws directly on this historical and spatial context. The film's use of the *Rajbari* is not incidental but central to its narrative and visual logic. Bulbbul's life unfolds within this enclosed, hierarchical space, where abuse and violence are deeply entrenched in the household. The camera repeatedly focuses on corridors, thresholds and enclosed rooms, visually reinforcing her lack of mobility and autonomy. A huge but forbidding flight of stairs forms the entrance to the *Rajbari*, ready to engulf the women in its entrails. The scene in which Binodini (Paoli Dam) tends to Bulbbul's wounds after her savage thrashing, urging her to remain silent, captures the internalisation of these structures, where women themselves become agents in

maintaining silence and submission. The house, in this sense, is not merely a setting but an active force that produces and sustains gendered oppression, swallowing women as it were.

At the same time, the film is visually rich. Bright reds, billowing fabrics, and carefully crafted visual scenes transform this space into something both beautiful and disturbing. As Bulbbul moves through these spaces, her transformation is framed through visual intensity, suggesting that her power emerges not in opposition to the structure of the house, but through its reconfiguration. However, this power remains tied to spectacle and fear, reinforcing the idea that female agency becomes visible only when it is rendered excessive and otherworldly. In this way, the film connects the historical realities of women's confinement in feudal Bengal with a contemporary critique of how such confinement continues to shape the representation of female power.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship on *Bulbbul* has focused on its treatment of gender, violence, and folklore, often reading the film as a feminist reinterpretation of the witch figure. An interesting reading is P.R. Mrudula's essay "Bulbbul: Not Just Another Feminist Tale", which looks at the film from an ecological perspective. An equally compelling approach is taken by Urvashi Krishna in her essay "From Canvas to Cinema: How Raja Ravi Verma's Paintings Changed the Visual Language of Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul*." Her analysis focuses on elements such as colour palette, composition, lighting, texture, and mise-en-scène to demonstrate how the film recreates the atmosphere of Raja Ravi Verma's mythic realism. Mutqueen Khan and Aqib Javed, in their essay entitled "Supernatural Justice Through the Monstrous Feminine: Reading *Bulbbul* (2020) as a New Wave Feminist Film," position the film within the framework of New Wave Feminist Cinema. Scholars like Devleena Kundu and Benson Rajan, in the essay "Analysing Death, Evil,

and Monstrous Femininity in *Bulbbul*,” examine how the film reworks the mythological figure of the *chudail* into a form of patriarchal resistance.

While these readings offer valuable insights into *Bulbbul*’s engagement with gender, visuality, and folklore, they largely interpret the *chudail* as a site of resistance and empowerment. This paper departs from such approaches by questioning the very terms through which this “empowerment” is understood. Rather than accepting the *chudail* as a straightforward symbol of feminist agency, it examines how this agency is produced through specific visual and narrative strategies. Drawing on Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous feminine, Judith Butler’s theory of constructed identity, and Laura Mulvey’s idea of visual spectacle, the analysis argues that *Bulbbul*’s power is not autonomous but mediated through excess, fear, and aestheticisation. In doing so, the paper shifts the focus from celebration to critique, showing that female resistance becomes legible only when it is transformed into a spectacle of monstrosity.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative and interpretive method to examine the film. It focuses on how the witch figure is created through narrative and visual elements. The paper analyses key scenes, paying attention to symbolism, colour, character portrayal, and spatial setting. The theoretical framework mainly draws on Barbara Creed’s concept of the “monstrous feminine” and Laura Mulvey’s idea of visual spectacle. Creed’s work helps explain how female power is shown as excessive and threatening. Mulvey’s theory emphasises how the female body is presented as something to be looked at.

Judith Butler’s view of identity as socially constructed helps explain how *Bulbbul* is seen as a witch based on perception rather than inherent traits. By combining close visual analysis with

these theoretical perspectives, the study examines how the film produces the witch as a figure of both power and fear. The methodology thus focuses on representation rather than intention, asking not what the film claims to do, but how it actually constructs meaning through its visual and narrative choices.

“The Monstrous Feminine” as Spectacle and Power in *Bulbbul*

Barbara Creed’s concept of the monstrous feminine provides a crucial framework for understanding *Bulbbul*’s transformation, not as empowerment, but as a culturally constructed form of fear, rooted in cultural anxieties about women’s sexuality, desire and defiance of patriarchal norms. Critiquing Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject in films, Creed writes that it is the fear of women that makes men make witches or monsters out of them. The witch is a projection of male fear and paranoia.

In *Bulbbul*, this anxiety is clearly visible in the way the protagonist’s transformation is staged. Binodini hums a song, “*Mai he kolankini Radha*” (O mother! characterless Radha), subtly suggesting a perceived romantic relationship between Satya and *Bulbbul*. She later suggests this to Indranil as well, who sends Satya to London, unleashes brutal violence upon *Bulbbul* and leaves the *Rajbari*. In an extremely impactful scene, as *Bulbbul* bathes in a bathtub, she is dragged out by the hair. The camera focuses on her face and then on Indranil, who raises a sharp object and brings it down on her repeatedly and mercilessly. (Figure 1). A grievously injured *Bulbbul* is then raped by Mahender and coerced into silence. Five years elapse, but *Bulbbul* is now a transformed and strong woman, taking her position as head of the feudal household in the absence of Indranil and a widowed Binodini.

Her long, loose hair, her association with images bathed in red and her flowing, almost supernatural movement all signal a departure from normative femininity. However, this

departure does not lead to freedom. It places her within a graphic and representational framework that makes her threatening and unknowable.



Figure 1: A still from Bulbbul. Indranil (Rahul Bose) prepares to strike Bulbbul, framed against a painting of Sita Haran. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, Netflix 2020. Picture credits IMDb

This change is most striking in the forest sequences of the film, where Bulbbul's body is often shown hanging in mid-air, soaring across the sky, against a red moon. These moments visually disconnect her from the mortal world, associating her with the otherworldly and the uncanny. Creed argues that the monstrous feminine often emerges at the point where the female body exceeds its socially acceptable limits. This is exactly what happens here. Bulbbul's body is no longer confined within the domestic space of the *Rajbari*. It is relocated into a space where it can only exist as something overpowering and disturbing. Her movement, which was earlier limited to the spatial confines of the *Rajbari*, now appears unbounded. However, this "freedom" is unnatural and dangerous rather than liberating.

The depiction of Bulbbul's violence further supports this idea. Her acts of killing, though directed at abusive men, are not framed only in terms of justice or moral resolution. Instead, they are shown through shadow, quick movements and brief glimpses. In the climax of the film, as Satya leaves the *Rajbari*, his carriage suddenly comes to a halt, and the coachman disappears. Earlier, the film suggests that the coachman was an abusive husband, relating him to the pattern of violence that runs through the story. The rumours say that the *chudail* has killed Mahender and other men. Interestingly, the camera does not focus on the coachman himself, but on Satya, who steps out in search of him. This shift in focus is important, as it holds back the act of violence and rather focuses on the moment of discovery, supporting the sense of absence and unease. By keeping the violence off-screen and refusing to show Bulbbul directly, the film hides her humanity, showing her as an unseen force.

It is only in the climax that she is revealed as human, even as the image of the *chudail* continues to dominate how she is perceived. There are other moments in the film where something similar happens. When Satya is returning home, his carriage is forced to halt because a tree trunk blocks the path. In this scene, a woman is fleetingly seen hanging upside down from a tree, her hair loose, softly humming to herself. The camera does not hold, showing only a quick glimpse that presents her as a shadowy figure rather than a clearly visible presence.

The death of Master Dinkar during the *shikar* sequence, which resembles a witch hunt, is once again marked by the use of red. In this scene, the *chudail* appears briefly and carries him away in a swift and sudden movement. The moment is quick and visually striking, reinforcing her presence as fleeting and unsettling. Later, a woman clothed in red is seen in the ruins of a building located in the forest. In another scene, a paedophile is killed by the *chudail*. This moment, too, is shown very briefly. The man disappears in a sudden, swift movement, without the act of violence being fully shown. The camera does not linger on the event, offering only a

quick glimpse that emphasises speed and absence rather than detail. Towards the end, it is revealed that the *chudail* has bitten him on the neck. However, this detail is shown only briefly. The narrative follows a pattern of concealment, where the violence is not directly shown but gradually made visible through fragments.

In this sense, her violence becomes a part of the spectacle that defines her presence. Creed's argument that male fears shape the monstrous feminine is relevant here, as Bulbbul's transformation reflects a cultural inability to represent female anger and resistance in ordinary terms. Her rage can only be understood when it is displaced onto the figure of the witch.



Figure 2: A still from Bulbbul. An image of the "chudail", gliding in the sky, against the backdrop of the red moon. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, Netflix 2020. Picture credit IMDb

Visual Spectacle and the Female Body in *Bulbbul*.

Developing the argument further, the paper will now engage with Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure, most famously articulated in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative

Cinema,”. The essay analyses how cinema builds meaning through the act of looking. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Mulvey argues that commercial cinema is framed around what she calls the “male gaze”. Here, the camera, the narrative, and the spectator are joined in a way that positions women as objects to be seen rather than subjects who act. In this framework, the female body is not simply present within the narrative but is actively shaped as a visual spectacle, designed to attract attention and produce pleasure through looking. As a result, women in cinema are often fragmented into parts, faces, bodies, gestures, so that they can be consumed visually rather than understood as whole, autonomous individuals. (Mulvey 12)

Mulvey further distinguishes between two modes of looking: voyeuristic and fetishist. Voyeurism involves observing the female figure as an object of curiosity or control, often linked with narrative investigation or punishment. At the same time, fetishistic scopophilia transforms the woman into a visually pleasing image that masks anxiety. In both cases, the woman’s role is to be looked at, and her presence disrupts the narrative flow by introducing moments of visual display. This concept of spectacle is extremely important because it reveals how power operates through being seen. The more the female figure is made a spectacle through lighting, costume, colour, and framing, the more she becomes an image rather than a subject. When we apply Mulvey’s theory to films like *Bulbbul*, the analysis focuses on how the female body is transformed into a spectacle. The film moves from showing Bulbbul as visible but powerless to presenting her as a spectacle through which power is made visible.

The opening scene of the film shows a little girl, a child bride, sitting atop a tree, swinging her feet while her aunt calls out her name. The scene is followed by toe rings being put on her feet. A few scenes later, the child bride enters her new home, dipping her feet in *aalta* and leaving footprints as she walks inside. Indranil attacks Bulbbul’s feet during the brutal assault and Dr Sudip (Parambrata Chattopadhyay) treats them by bandaging them. Once again, the camera

focuses on her blood-soaked feet after Mahender's rape. These are spectacles of powerlessness. However, as the narrative unfolds towards the end of the film, especially the forest scenes, Bulbbul's damaged, twisted feet are a focus of attention. The feet are now something to be looked at and feared as Bulbbul "becomes" a *chudail*, a spectacle of power. In the climax of the film, two men gazing at her feet view her differently; Satya refers to her as a *chudail*, while Dr Sudip refers to her as a *devi* (goddess).

The male gaze does not view her as human. Her body is constantly framed for the gaze, aligning with the idea that she exists not just as a character but as an image. Her long, loose hair, associated with the figure of the witch, is once again one of the most striking visual motifs. This is where the monstrous feminine intersects with spectacle: Bulbbul is both feared and visually captivating. Her power lies in her ability to occupy a position as something to be seen and something to be feared.



Figure 3: A still from Bulbbul. Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri) with long, loose hair, her body framed as a visual spectacle for the gaze. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, Netflix, 2020. Picture Credits IMDB

The use of red deepens Bulbbul's presence as a visual spectacle. The moon appears in an unnatural shade of red, creating a sense of unease. In the climax, Bulbbul is also dressed in red, visually linking her to this unsettling landscape. The colour swathes interiors, costumes, and lighting, linking it to desire, blood, and excess. Through this repeated use, her image becomes intense and theatrical. Red is first introduced within the *Rajbari*, where it dominates the interiors, costumes, and lighting. Bulbbul first enters the house and dips her feet in red *aalta*. Inside the house, red is closely tied to domestic life, marriage, and the controlled space of the *Rajbari*. At the same time, it also signals tension and suppressed violence, suggesting that beneath the surface of order lies something unsettling. The *Rajbari* scenes with Dr Sudip are swathed in red. In an important scene where Satya confronts Bulbbul (Figure 4 below), asking her about her relationship with Dr Sudip, it is against a backdrop of deep, dark velvety red. Bulbbul responds by deriding the men of the family.

The same colour is present outside the *Rajbari* and in the forest. When Satya returns home, the landscape is bathed in red, extending the atmosphere of discomfort into the open space. This shift is important because it collapses the distinction between inside and outside. The forest, which might otherwise suggest freedom, is instead marked by the same intensity and danger as the domestic space. In the *shikar* sequence as well, red dominates the frames, aligning with acts of violence.



Figure 4: A still from Bulbbul. Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri) framed against a red background as a spectacle, where visibility produces power. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, Netflix, 2020, Picture Credits IMDb

Bulbbul's agency remains tied to her position as spectacle, supporting the idea that female power becomes intelligible only when it is depicted as visually striking and supernatural.

Becoming the *Chudail*: Identity, Performativity, and Social Construction

Taking the analysis further, Judith Butler's theory of identity contests the idea that identity is natural or static. She argues that identity is not something we are born with but something formed over time through our actions, social norms and how others look at us. Butler calls this process "performativity," meaning that identity is formed through everyday practices such as behaviour, rituals, and language. In this sense, identity is not an inner truth but something that develops through repetition and interpretation. She also points out that identity only makes sense within social systems that label and categorise people, especially when they do not fit accepted norms. (Butler 12-13)

Another important part of Butler's theory is that identity persists through repetition. When certain actions and behaviours are repeated, they begin to appear natural and stable, even though they are constantly being produced. When people act outside what is considered normal, they are often labelled or understood differently, so they can still be placed within familiar categories. This shows that identity is closely linked to power, as society decides which identities are accepted and which are seen as different or outside the norm.

This process of identity construction is evident from the beginning of *Bulbbul*, especially in the child marriage scene. As a young bride, Bulbbul is taught how to behave as a wife. Her aunt's comment about toe rings, which marks her entry into married life, shows how identity is shaped through cultural practices. Bulbbul does not choose this role; rather, it is assigned to her and reinforced over time. From a Butlerian perspective, this scene shows that gender identity is formed through social teaching and expectation, rather than something natural. As the narrative progresses, identity continues to be shaped through perception and social understanding. When Satya returns as an adult, he struggles to recognise Bulbbul, suggesting that she no longer fits the identity he once knew, the apprehensive, reticent and suppressed wife of Indranil. This shift becomes even more radical in the scene where Bulbbul is with Dr Sudip, smoking and laughing freely. This moment presents her in a way that breaks away from traditional expectations of how a woman, especially a *zamindar's* abandoned wife, should behave. Her actions appear unusual and difficult to place within familiar social roles. On the other hand, Binodini is recognisable and relatable as a widow with her shaved head and white garments.

From a Butlerian perspective, this scene shows how identity is not fixed but changes through behaviour and how others interpret it. Bulbbul's actions challenge accepted norms, and as a result, her identity becomes unstable and open to reinterpretation. Because she does not fit into

expected categories, she is gradually seen as something different, even “other.” This also reflects Butler’s idea that when individuals step outside social norms, they are redefined in ways that make them intelligible within existing structures. At the same time, the rumours circulating in the village about a *chudail* further demonstrate how identity is constructed collectively. Bulbbul becomes associated with death and mystery not because of any confirmed reality, but because of repeated storytelling and social belief. In Butler’s terms, this shows how identity is produced through discourse, where repetition stabilises meaning.

Once again, the film also uses visual details to shape this identity. For example, the focus on Bulbbul’s feet becomes an important sign that marks her as a *chudail*. Her body is read through familiar cultural signs, making it easy for others to identify and label her. This reflects Butler’s idea that bodies are understood through social meanings (Butler 15). In the forest scenes, where Bulbbul moves in an uncanny, almost unreal way, these signs are repeated and make this identity feel more fixed. By the time of the final confrontation, she is fully seen as a *chudail*. Not because the film clearly confirms it, but because her actions, appearance, and the stories about her have come together to create this identity. Through these moments, *Bulbbul* illustrates Butler’s central argument: identity is not something one inherently possesses, but something constructed through social perception, repetition, and representation. Bulbbul is “made” a *chudail*, framed within cultural structures.

Key findings

This paper finds that *Bulbbul* does not simply present the witch as a symbol of agency but shows how female power is shaped through cultural and visual processes. Using the ideas of Butler, Creed, and Mulvey, the analysis illustrates that Bulbbul’s identity is not natural but constructed through perception, repetition, and visual framing. Her transformation into a *chudail* is made impactful through signs such as her feet, movement, and the use of red, which

turn her into a figure that is both mysterious and disturbing. Rather than offering freedom, the film suggests that female agency becomes visible only when it is presented as something excessive and frightening. In this way, the witch is not simply a figure of resistance but also a product of how society understands and represents female transgression.



Figure 4: Bulbbul (Tripti Dimri) and Satya (Avinash Tiwary) in a scene from the film. Bulbbul, directed by Anvita Dutt, Netflix, 2020. Picture credits: IMDb

Conclusion

At the same time, this study has certain limitations. It focuses mainly on visual analysis and theoretical interpretation, which means that other aspects of the film, such as audience reception or historical context, are not fully explored in greater detail. The reading is also shaped by specific theoretical frameworks, which may limit alternative interpretations of the film. The film could also be examined through ecological, regional, or performance-based approaches, each offering different insights.

In conclusion, *Bulbbul* offers a powerful but complex portrayal of female agency. While it appears to tell a story of transformation and resistance, a closer reading shows that this power is shaped by how it is seen and understood. Bulbbul does not simply become powerful; her power becomes visible only when it takes on a form that is difficult to ignore. By bringing together ideas of identity, monstrosity, and spectacle, this paper has shown that the figure of the *chudail* is created through social meaning, visual signs, and cultural fears. The film leaves us with an important question. Can female power be recognised without being turned into something excessive or frightening? In raising this question, *Bulbbul* does not offer easy answers, but it invites us to think more carefully about how we understand gender, power, and representation.

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