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Exploring Mythological Themes and Gender-Based Discrimination: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis of Superstition, Tradition, and Modernity in Two Bollywood Films, ‘*Stree*’ and ‘*Bulbbul*’

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Abstract

The prevalent notion regarding superstitions is that they possess a mystical or paranormal potency capable of exerting a direct impact on an individual’s existence. The belief that certain rituals or abstentions from specific actions can ward off ill-fate or invite good luck is commonly held by a considerable number of individuals. These beliefs, commonly referred to as superstitions, are primarily rooted in cultural or religious customs, lacking in any logical or empirical basis.

In these films draw on various theoretical perspectives to explore the themes of gender-based discrimination, superstition, and tradition versus modernity. One of the theoretical frameworks employed in the films is psychoanalytic theory, which seeks to explore the unconscious mind and the impact of past experiences on an individual’s behaviour and psyche. Another theoretical perspective utilized in the films is magical realism, which blends elements of fantasy and reality to create a unique narrative that comments on contemporary issues. Folklore is also a prominent theoretical framework used in films. Finally, the films also explore feminist theory, which seeks to examine and challenge gender-based discrimination and oppression.

The two Bollywood films under consideration in this study are “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*,” directed by Amar Kaushik and Anvita Dutt Gupta, respectively. This research aims to analyse how the portrayal of mythological themes in two films, namely “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*,” relates to both superstition and reality. The study also aims to investigate the depiction of female identity within societal contexts in these films. Specifically, the research seeks to examine how the films represent and contextualize myths, beliefs, and practices related to gender, patriarchy, and power dynamics in society. The analysis will explore how the representation of such themes in these films contributes to a broader understanding of the role of popular media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards these issues. This research seeks to investigate the persistent significance of certain themes, such as violence, sexual assault, oppression, and patriarchy, in contemporary patriarchal representation in two Bollywood films, “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*.” The research aims to examine how these films provide a realistic portrayal of the treatment of women in patriarchal societies and explore the complex

interplay between gender, power dynamics, and societal norms. Additionally, this study aims to analyse how the films depict the sensitive topic of child marriage, the myth of the “chudail,” and related prejudices. The research will delve into how the films navigate these issues and contribute to broader discussions and understandings of them.

Keywords: superstitions, beliefs, rituals, cultural customs, mythological themes, portrayal of gender, societal discussions.

INTRODUCTION

An analysis of the films *Stree* and *Bulbbul*, the concept of myth pertains to the depiction of narratives, convictions, and customs that are firmly established in cultural or religious traditions. These myths often incorporate extraordinary or paranormal components and may be used to justify societal customs or influence social conduct. In the context of behaviours, the presentation of mythological themes functions as a means to scrutinize and challenge prevailing societal norms, power dynamics, and gender roles. By exploring the mythical elements of behaviours, we gain insight into the underlying values and beliefs that shape the characters' behaviours and motivations, as well as their impact on the broader cultural context. Through this way, we can better understand the significance of myth in shaping cultural attitudes and beliefs. These two films employ myths and superstitions as a means of social commentary on contemporary issues, with a particular focus on the treatment of women in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, the films delve into the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity, while also raising questions about the continued validity and relevance of certain cultural beliefs and practices in the context of contemporary society. Through their portrayal of mythological themes, the films seek to critically examine and challenge societal norms, power dynamics, and gender roles, ultimately contributing to broader discussions about the relationship between culture, tradition, and societal change.

In the films *Stree* and *Bulbbul*, the theme of superstition is explored in diverse manners. In the case of *Stree*, the central plot revolves around a ghostly female spirit that targets men during a festival. Through the portrayal of this supernatural entity, the film highlights the theme of superstition by depicting the belief in malevolent spirits and the notion that wearing women's clothes can protect men from her wrath. Additionally, the film delves into the idea of social stigma that is attached to women who are considered unlucky or 'untouchable,' thereby highlighting how such beliefs can contribute to the marginalization and oppression of certain groups within society. Through this exploration of superstition in *Stree*, the film aims to critique the societal norms and beliefs that perpetuate these superstitions and to encourage audiences to question their validity and impact. Furthermore, the film underscores how such beliefs can have serious consequences, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, who may be disproportionately affected by such superstitions and associated stigma. Overall, the depiction of superstition in *Stree* serves as a means to comment on contemporary issues such as gender roles, power dynamics, and social inequality, and to shed light on the treatment of women in patriarchal societies. The film *Bulbbul* presents a narrative that takes place in a village where a witch or 'chudail' is thought to be responsible for unexplained deaths. The film examines the notion that associates women with dark magic and the supernatural and portrays the 'chudail' as a symbol of women's suppressed anger and their resistance against patriarchal norms. The film also delves into the belief that links owls with witchcraft, using them as a symbol of wisdom and resistance against the oppressive norms of society. By portraying the 'chudail' as a representation of women's struggle against patriarchal oppression, the film sheds light on the gender-based discrimination and the negative impact of deep-seated superstitions on women's lives and society. The film's exploration of these themes provides a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding gender dynamics in contemporary society.

Overall, both films examine the impact of superstitions on people's lives and society, and how these beliefs can perpetuate gender-based discrimination and oppression.

A Comparative Analysis of Indian Horror Films “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*” through the Lens of Critical Theories and Societal Issues.

Stree released in 2018, is a horror-comedy movie produced and directed by Amar Kaushik and features prominent Bollywood actors Rajkummar Rao, Shraddha Kapoor, and Pankaj Tripathi in the lead roles. The film draws inspiration from the Indian urban legend of Nale Ba, which revolves around a female ghost who is believed to visit homes during an annual festival and abduct men. Although the film is not a direct adaptation of the legend, it incorporates its central themes and motifs, including the fear of supernatural entities and the role of women in Indian folklore.

The cinematic narrative of “*Stree*” revolves around the fictitious town of Chanderi, where an annual festival is marred by the enigmatic vanishing of men. The recurring incidents of men disappearing have become a major concern for the townspeople, and have led to the emergence of a popular belief that a female ghost known as “*Stree*” is behind the abductions. The situation creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear in the town, as men are afraid to venture out during the festival for fear of being abducted by the mysterious entity. According to the narrative of the film, the townspeople attribute the mysterious disappearance of men during the annual festival in Chanderi to the malevolent actions of a female entity named “*Stree*.” This character is portrayed as a vengeful spirit, who seeks to punish men for past wrongdoings. In the film, the townsmen of Chanderi believe that by inscribing the words “*O Stree Kal Aana*” (O Stree, come tomorrow) on the walls of their homes, they can protect themselves from the vengeful spirit of “*Stree*” who is believed to be responsible for the mysterious disappearances of men during an annual festival. This practice reflects the town’s belief in the supernatural power of incantations and rituals to ward off evil spirits. This belief is grounded in the cultural and religious traditions of the town, which often incorporate supernatural elements and rituals into daily life.

The film narrates the tale of Vicky, a young tailor, who develops an affection for a mysterious woman which is played by actress Shraddha Kapoor. As an annual festival draws closer, Vicky’s suspicion grows that Shraddha may be the vengeful ghost of Stree, leading him and his friends on a quest to expose the truth and save their town from her curse. In doing so, they are challenged to confront their own superstitious beliefs and overcome them to defeat the ghostly spirit. The movie “*Stree*” garnered significant critical recognition due to its unconventional combination of horror and comedy elements, along with its social commentary on the exploitation of women and gender-based discrimination.

“*Bulbbul*” is a 2020 Indian film that falls under the genre of supernatural thriller. It was directed by Anvita Dutt and produced by Anushka Sharma and Karnesh Sharma. The film received significant attention for its unique portrayal of a vengeful female spirit and its commentary on societal issues. The film is set in the late 19th century Bengal Presidency and narrates the story of a young girl, Bulbbul, who is married to a man much older than her and belongs to a wealthy family. As Bulbbul matures, she becomes increasingly aware of peculiar incidents occurring around her and gradually discovers the enigmatic and sinister truths concealed within her domestic sphere. This film search into several societal issues including patriarchy, gender-based discrimination, and supernatural beliefs. It portrays a vengeful female spirit who seeks retribution for the oppression and exploitation of women. The film further examines the role of women in society, highlighting their struggles and limitations in a patriarchal setup. Through its themes, the film aims to shed light on the complexities of gender dynamics and cultural norms prevalent in Indian society.

The film “*Bulbbul*” was Widely praised by critics for its distinctive storytelling and visually striking style. Additionally, the film was acclaimed for its exploration of societal issues, particularly the themes of patriarchy and gender-based discrimination, which were depicted through the lens of a vengeful female spirit and the portrayal of women’s roles in society.

The films "*Stree*" and "*Bulbbul*" incorporate diverse critical theories such as psychoanalytic theory, magical realism, folklore, and feminism to analyse and scrutinize their respective plots. Through the lens of these theories, the films offer an in-depth exploration of themes such as gender-based discrimination, patriarchy, and the supernatural, providing commentary on the social and cultural issues that continue to impact contemporary society. These theories are used to provide a deeper understanding of the themes explored in the films, such as the portrayal of female empowerment, gender-based discrimination, and supernatural phenomena. The use of these theories has contributed to the critical acclaim received by the films for their unique storytelling and visual style, as well as their commentary on societal issues.

An Analysis of the Use of Psychoanalytic Theory, Magical Realism, Folklore, Feminism, and Superstition in the Films *Stree* and *Bulbbul*

Psychoanalytic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud, delves into the workings of the unconscious mind and its impact on human behaviour. The films "*Stree*" and "*Bulbbul*" employ psychoanalytic theory to analyse the characters' behaviours and motivations. For instance, in "*Stree*," the fear of the female spirit may be interpreted as a manifestation of men's suppressed guilt for mistreating women. Similarly, in "*Bulbbul*," the abusive husband symbolizes the patriarchal values and power structures that dominate society. Psychoanalytic theory provides a deeper understanding of these complex themes and characters. Moreover, both films feature dreams and subconscious desires that can be analysed through a psychoanalytic lens. In "*Stree*," Vicky is plagued by dreams that reveal his suppressed feelings for Shraddha, while in "*Bulbbul*," the title character has vivid dreams that expose her innermost desires and fears. The application of psychoanalytic theory uncovers the concealed motivations and meanings behind the characters' actions and thoughts, leading to a more profound and nuanced comprehension of their narratives.

Magical realism is a literary style that merges magical elements with realistic settings, creating a world that is both familiar and extraordinary. The films "*Stree*" and "*Bulbbul*" employ magical realism to incorporate supernatural components into their storylines. In "*Stree*," the ability of the female spirit to abduct men during the festival is an example of magical realism. Despite taking place in a small Indian town, the inclusion of a supernatural entity blurs the line between reality and fantasy. The spirit's true nature remains ambiguous, further contributing to the magical realism of the film.

Similarly, in "*Bulbbul*," the portrayal of the vengeful female spirit and her mode of revenge can be interpreted as magical realist elements. The dream sequences experienced by Bulbbul, which feature the spirit and reveal glimpses of the past, also add to the magical realism of the film. The use of magical realism in these films creates an atmosphere of enchantment and wonder, immersing the audience in a world that is both familiar and otherworldly. It also serves to underscore the importance of supernatural themes in exploring issues such as gender-based discrimination and the status of women in society.

Folklore is a body of traditional beliefs, customs, and stories that have been passed down within a culture over time. The films "*Stree*" and "*Bulbbul*" utilize folklore to delve into and critique societal issues.

The film "*Stree*" is based on the legend of a female spirit who targets men during a festival. The legend serves as the fundamental basis for the story, which integrates several aspects of the myth, such as the use of written chants to ward off the spirit. The inclusion of folklore not only enhances the supernatural ambiance of the film but also presents an observation on the status of women in Indian society.

Likewise, "*Bulbbul*" draws upon the Bengali folktale of the "chudail" or female demon. The character of Bulbbul is linked to the folktale, and her transformation into a vengeful spirit is viewed as a representation of the injustices inflicted upon her by the men in her life. By using folklore in this film, cultural context and depth is added to the narrative, while issues of gender-based discrimination are highlighted.

In summary, the use of folklore in these films provides a cultural foundation for the narratives while simultaneously serving as a medium to examine and critique societal issues.

The films “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*” offer insightful perspectives on feminism by exploring the themes of patriarchy, gender inequality, and female empowerment. In “*Stree*,” the female spirit preys on men during a festival, highlighting the subjugation of women in Indian society. The film portrays how women are often objectified and viewed as objects of desire by men. However, the film’s climax subverts this notion by revealing that the spirit seeks revenge against men who have wronged women. Thus, the film provides a commentary on the importance of treating women with respect and dignity.

Similarly, “*Bulbbul*” examines the themes of gender inequality and female empowerment through the story of a young girl who is married off at a young age to an older man. The film shows how patriarchy restricts women’s freedom and denies them agency. However, as the story progresses, the protagonist asserts her independence and defies patriarchal norms. The film’s message is clear – women have the power to break free from societal constraints and challenge gender stereotypes.

In both films, feminist themes are interwoven into the storylines, highlighting the importance of women’s empowerment and the need for gender equality. By portraying women as strong and resilient, the films challenge traditional gender roles and encourage audiences to rethink their views on women’s rights.

Both “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*” explore the interplay between myth and reality in relation to female identity and superstition in Indian society. The films draw upon local myths and legends, such as the legend of the female spirit in “*Stree*” and the folktale of the witch in “*Bulbbul*,” to explore how such narratives influence people’s perceptions of women and their place in society. Through their narratives, the films offer a critical commentary on the role of superstition and its impact on female identity. They depict how these myths and legends are often used to perpetuate gender stereotypes and reinforce patriarchal norms. The films also showcase how these narratives can be used to empower women and challenge traditional gender roles. Furthermore the films highlight the importance of female identity in society by portraying women as complex and multi-dimensional characters who have agency and independence. They challenge the traditional gender roles assigned to women in Indian society and position them as active agents of change.

Overall, both “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*” provide nuanced insights into the relationship between myth, reality, and female identity in Indian society, shedding light on the ways in which popular narratives shape perceptions of gender and influence societal attitudes towards women.

CONCLUSION

The cinematic works titled “*Stree*” and “*Bulbbul*” are the creative output of Amar Kaushik and Anvita Dutt Gupta, who functioned as the respective directors. The movies prominently showcase the leading actresses Shraddha Kapoor and Tripti Dimri in the primary roles. The aforementioned films delve into the idea that myths and superstitions often permeate societies, leading to the oppression of female characters within patriarchal social structures. The movies aim to elucidate the negative impact of such beliefs and practices on women’s lives and highlight the need to challenge and overcome them. The films successfully convey their intended themes with a realistic portrayal of the societal dynamics they aim to depict. The presentation of the themes in the films is believable and in line with the nature of the social issues they address, contributing to a more authentic and impactful cinematic experience. Moreover, the continued relevance of these films can be attributed to their relatability to contemporary societal issues, which are unlikely to be resolved in the near future.

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