

Reimagining Witches in Contemporary Hindi Cinema: A Study of “Bulbbul” and “Roohi”

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Abstract

Witch-hunting, an age-old practice in India, survives in a myriad of avatars in rural and urban areas. These avatars of witch-hunting have often been trapped in the binary of Indian modernity and Indian traditions, with the latter often embracing unchallenged superstitious beliefs. Herein we study the way the binary is handled in two recent telefilms, namely *Bulbbul* and *Roohi*, as they aim to revolutionise the portrayal of witches in Hindi cinema. The paper looks at how the films in question subvert the genesis of witches and witch-hunts, and how in the process of undermining superstitious belief, they situate witches as embodiment of an emancipatory discourse that resists the silencing of women, a practise still serves the patriarchal standards of a heteronormative, bourgeois society. In so doing, our reading of the films engages with questions such as: How have witches been defined in Indian culture? How are these witches being imagined in the films in question? What implications do these redefinitions have in terms of the feminist movement in India, or in terms of the larger portrayal of Indian women in Hindi cinema?

Keywords: *Bulbbul*, Hindi cinema, *Roohi*, witch hunting, witches

The practice of witch-hunting has long existed in India, and yet it can be said with some certainty that it features little in academic debates. Though modern thought tends to relegate the practise of witch-hunting to the dark corners of the past, data from the National Crime Records Bureau suggests that it is still widespread. The NCRB states that around 2500 people have been hunted and killed between 2000-2016 (most of them women), though the number maybe higher as some states do not register witch-hunting as a descriptive category for murder. Though some states have passed laws declaring witch-hunting as illegal, because of the lack respect for the law and the lax enforcement (Islam and Ahmed 2017), the crime continues unabated. In such a scenario the role of popular cinema in changing people's perception cannot be ignored. The portrayal of witches has come a long way in contemporary Indian cinema, from the age-old formulaic representation to a revolutionary depiction that could play a major role in transforming people's perception of witches.

Witch-hunts have often been the result of the association of witches with diabolical abilities; the amalgam of these skills is called witchcraft. Witchcraft is a compound word stemming from "wicce" meaning witch, and "craft" meaning ability (Dilts 2015). Alam and Raj (2018, n.p.) define it as "the practice of, and belief in, magical skills and abilities which are believed to influence the mind, body, or property – of others in a malicious manner". The "intent" becomes significant in the branding of witches, where their abilities (craft) and their intentions does not induce anything positive, rather is associated with a desire for evil-doing, a diabolical intent. These witches are blamed for various problems befalling the society, from bad crops, erratic rains, unexplained diseases to even unexplainable deaths. The evil influence of the impersonal spirits gives the society some sense of control by having someone to blame for their misfortunes. "The witches were feared as mysterious creatures imbued with phenomenal powers...The witches, adivasis held, not only 'ate' persons and induced illness such as cholera, smallpox, and so forth, but were also responsible for destroying crops, killing cattle and the like" (Sinha, 2007, p. 1673).

Among all the domains of witch-studies, what remains particularly controversial is the relation of witch-discourse with gender (Carstairs 1983; Kapur 1983; Bailey 1997; Kelkar and Nathan 1991; Nathan et al. 1998; Mishra 2003; MacDonald 2004; Sinha 2006). Bever (2002) argues that the advocates of witches often attributed the fragile, feminine sex...feeble in both body and mind to the reason of their being prone to witchcraft. However, it was often found that these women's social relations and economic conditions often were a foremost reason for their being branded as witches. These women would be too independent in some cases, while in others they would be the owners of some properties that some money-minded villagers would be eager to capture. The hapless women would fall victims to these conspiracies, get labelled as witches, and lead a harrowing life after that, often losing their property as well as their life in the bargain.

On other occasions it was the structure of the patriarchal society that was at stake because of the increasing number of spinsters and widows, and so to establish a stable society (patriarchal families have been historically upheld as the bedrock of a stable society), the only way out was to eliminate the threats or these outlier women, upholding the dictum that "domesticity and docility gets rewarded, anything else is punished" (McCoy, 2014, para. 7). Often men resisted their social and moral duty to help the spinsters and widows, something that they were not inclined to do once the women were labelled witches. So these women were trialled, paraded naked, raped, murdered or often burnt at stake, a symbolic patriarchal seizure of power and a return to the stable societal structure. Stuart Clark (2013) has gone so far as to suggest that witch-hunting was nothing other than women-hunting. He has further applied a functionalist

analysis to witch studies, saying that the binary division inherent in the systematisation of language caused women to be inferior and secondary, and thus easier for men (the perpetrators) to place malicious intent on their shoulders. As women are not part of the forces devising the system, it can be used to victimise them.

Witchcraft, Society and Literature

Sinha (2007) locates the presence of witchcraft in the Adivasi region of India, specifically in Chhotanagpur. The significance/strength of the belief among the Adivasi people can be gauged in Sinha's linking the causality of the mutiny of 1857 to the banning of witchcraft in the Adivasi region by British colonial forces. Sinha also underlines the fact that for the Adivasis, witchcraft was genuine, so much so that many of the victims who stood trials for the crimes often accepted their sentences without putting up a fight. Many groups also did not consider the killing of women on the grounds of witchcraft to be illegal, resulting in their taking up arms against the colonial forces that banned killing people by branding them as witches. Mallick (2008) challenges the idea that witchcraft received universal support within the Adivasi community. According to Mallick, there were sections within the Adivasi community, a substantial majority, who opposed this practice, and wanted to save their wives and daughters from being labelled as witches and subsequently killed. Mallick states that these people resorted to help from the British administration to fight the ills of witch-hunting, rebuffing Sinha's claim that the entire Adivasi community was fighting the British administration for having rendered witch-hunting illegal. Both these studies strongly underline the fact that women were often the ones who had to bear the brunt of society's disasters, natural or man-made.

The gendered perspective in witchcraft is something that Nathan et al. also draw attention to. They argue that "we can conclude that the phenomena of women being denounced as witches or otherwise as keepers of evil spirits and the accompanying violence were large-scale in nature" (1998, p. 58). In all such cases, there was an able demonstration of "the power of one section of society (men) to declare individuals of another section of society (women) as witches...a great power that was used to change the old order and establish a new one" (p. 59).

This gender-biased portrayal of witches has been memorialised by classical and popular literature. The archetype of the witches in literature has generally been of a woman with wild eyes, hair streaming loose, dancing around some cauldron and evoking the evil spirits. The witch archetype is often drawn from the image of the Medusa, the sorceress with snakes for hair who can turn people to stone. Such archetypes appear in *Macbeth*, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", "Christabel", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Crucible*, *The Blithedale Romance*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Songs of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. To pinpoint one specific area from where witches or witch-like characters started appearing in literature is difficult. The OED, however, notes that the term *wicce* was being deployed in literature from as early as 890 AD. The present study refrains from any claims of unearthing the genesis of the occurrence of witch-like figures in literature, and following Diana Perkiss' claim that "When we say witch...we can hardly help thinking of *Macbeth*'s witches" (p. 180) we'll begin locating witches in literature from *Macbeth* on. The "weird" sisters of *Macbeth* are portrayed as the three powerful and dangerous women, who through their prophecies and hidden evil intent set off a course of events that leads to a fight for the crown, the death of *Macbeth* and of a host of other characters. These weird witches of *Macbeth* have had an important influence over the representation of witches in English Literature. Anna Taylor, in her highly influential study *Magic in English Romanticism* (1979), brings to the fore textual influences like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and in the case of second-generation Romantic writers

the influence is found in poems like “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner”, “Christabel” or “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. In most of these poems women characters are represented possessing magical powers through which they charm and elude people.

Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter*, besides being a historical novel, has elements of the preternatural and is also inspired by the Salem Witch Trials (1692-1693) of the colonial United States. Wentersdorf (1972) emphasises this relationship to the novel on “The people’s belief in witchcraft, the superstitious interpretation of natural phenomena, the gossip about Chillingworth’s necromancy” (p. 133) and the character of Mistress Hibbins, the old woman who appeared witch-like and who verbally exhibited witch-like characteristics. *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller was also based on the Salem Witch Trials, even though it tried to use the event as an allegory to address a similar paranoia that the United States government felt towards the communists.

The literary representations of the witches change significantly in the twentieth century, with the age-old representation of the witches undergoing a herculean change, from the vassal of evil forces to healers and often portrayed as the victims of an orthodox society’s fear and stigma of the liberated woman. *The Witches of Eastwick* by John Updike is one such novel that pitches the idea of sexuality as a hallmark of witches in an ironic assertion and mockery of the patriarchal society’s fear of the liberated woman, single or divorced. The three characters, Alexandra, Sukie and Jane have hilariously derived their witch power of sexuality from their divorces, which came through in their sexual prime, and these powers scare the conservative society in which they live. *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* too are rife with supernatural elements. In the latter, Morrison uses Circe, a witch of Greek mythology, who has the ability to turn people into wolves, lions and swine. However, Morrison subverts the image of Circe, and shows her as somebody who uses her powers to help Milkman. These witches solve the problems of identities and spiritual crises faced by Milkman. Morrison upends the entire image of the witches, who instead of being the fearsome embodiments of evil are full of compassion and possess a desire to help out human beings.

In Indian literature, the earliest mention of witchcraft can be found in the Atharva Veda. H.W. Magoun (1889) locates witchcraft in the Veda, stating, “The ritual literature of the Atharva-Veda, like that of the other Vedas, has attached to itself certain *paricistas*, or supplements. Of these, the thirty-fifth...is the Asuri-Kalpa, an *abhic ra*, or witchcraft practice, containing rites to be used in connection with the asuri-plant” (p. 165), though some Vedic scholars have pointed out that Asuri-Kalpa is not equivalent to witchcraft. The Indian novels in English have rarely touched upon this issue, though regional literatures have rendered the practice of witchcraft in rural India visible. Munshi Premchand was one such writer whose progressive attitude, socialist bent, and a feminist attitude made it imperative for him to champion the cause of the marginalised, extending to even the social evil of witchcraft. More recently, Sukanya Venkataraghavan’s edited book *Magical Women* (2019) contains stories of witches, rakshasas, and critiques the patriarchal system that is fearful of strong, liberated women. The system then attempts to control and monitor these independent women through witch-hunting.

Witches in Indian Cinema

In the more popular medium of Indian movies—and speaking to the limited scope of the paper we refer to only the Hindi movies, popularly known as the Bollywood movies—there have been infrequent references to witches. The movies, however, have been given the shape of horror thrillers largely meant to entertain. Hindi horror mainstream movies began with the Ramsay

family production house in the latter half of the last century. Ramsay films lacked the appeal of horror, which subsequent films tried to compensate for by broadening their scope and including features that made them more appealing to the public. This meant incorporating some characteristics that stuck on because of commercial success, often negating and discouraging nuanced treatment of the subject. The most common trope employed in the horror movies, as we will see, is often that of women protagonists being possessed by some evil spirit/witch (*chudail*), often resulting in their wreaking havoc and devastation, and the film reaches its denouement with the possessed women being normalised again by getting the evil spirit to set her free. This trope follows the common patriarchal belief that women, being more weak and fragile, are strongly susceptible to evil forces.

These representations of women in horror movies are an extension of the formulaic “damsel in distress” Hindi movies where the love story of the hero and heroine is set on a rescue-the-heroine-from-evil-goons plane. Only that the distress of the damsel here is blown out of proportion by making them victims of witches who possess them, and thus require a strong masculine energy to free the damsel from evil. *Raaz* Series (2002-2016), *Bhoot* (2003), *Krishna Cottage* (2004) *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007), *Ek thi Dayan* (2013), and many more feature-films conform to the set stereotypes of projecting women as witches, ghosts, snakes and much more which goes on to normalise sexist depictions of women on screen. Interestingly, in many cases not only the possessed, but even the possessor is a woman. The latter is somebody with unbalanced emotions that lead them to seek vengeance. These deranged possessors often range from an overprotective friend to a spurned lover out for a vengeance. These women are also promiscuous and their emotional base is also licentious, making it necessary to absolve society of these evil forces. In portraying these debauched women, the films also uphold and tacitly conform to the gender matrix, where morally loose women are labelled as evil. In depicting the women as a receptacle of evil forces, in representing the witches as sexually immoral, the narrative of these films then abides by the age-old rules for demarcating and labelling witches, as documented by sundry sociological and anthropological studies.

Films like *Bhool Bhulaiya* (2007) have tried to explore the problem in a different light by amalgamating the superstitious belief of witchcraft with scientific pseudo-analysis. The protagonist of the movie, Avni, apparently suffering from schizophrenia, is subjected to witchcraft combined with a scientific experimentation to get her rid of the possessed spirit/mental illness. What could have been a thoughtful narrative of a woman with mental illness, instead introduced an unsatiated evil force taking hold of Avni’s body, all of it immersed in a comic narrative. The film did not do enough to bring the problems of mental illness to the forefront, rather focusing exceedingly on the story of possession and upholding the set formula for horror movies in general. *Bhoot* (2003) took the horror narrative till now limited to the rural/semi-urban areas to the urban areas, where ghosts did not always reside in sprawling homes of sparse occupancy, and with this movie reached the high-rise apartment buildings of one of the biggest cities of the country, Mumbai. However, the plot conforms to the sexist tropes of the horror movies in terms of portraying both the possessed and the possessor as women, and in playing by the trope of the patriarch (here the husband) as the brave knight who saves the damsel (the possessed wife) from the evil force.

These set formulas began to witness a change with the motion picture *Makdee* (2002), which had reached the screen before most of the other movies that are mentioned here. Starring Shabana Azmi as a *chudail* (witch), the movie depicts how the superstitious beliefs of sorcery and witchcraft can be employed by rogues to carry out criminal acts with ease. Though the movie begins on a note of horror witnessed through the eyes of children, yet towards the end

it bursts the horror balloon by uncovering the heinous criminal activities being carried out by outlaws exploiting people's belief in witchcraft practices. It will be another twelve years before another movie comes on the scene that challenges the tropes and popular perception of ghosts and witches. *Stree* (2018) takes a fresh approach to the horror movies and tries to restore some dignity to the ever-vilified witches by portraying two important changes. The first change that it brings is that the witch was not always some crazy spurned lover looking for love, and second, that a man was not required to salvage the situation. A humorous and well-made film, *Stree*, appears almost like a parody of horror movies, critiquing the role of the patriarchal society as self-appointed saviours, while spinning webs of lies and illusion around witches/witchcraft. It also subverts the traditional formula where women would be kept safe inside the homes, and men would fight the ghost, by depicting how men were locked up inside the homes and were dependent on their wives and mothers for safety. The movie, however, ends on an ambivalent note by revealing at the end that the woman who salvaged the situation was herself a witch/sorceress, stopping short of really liberating the witch narrative from the grasp of patriarchy.

A stark change was brought in the year 2020 with *Bulbbul*, a Netflix original movie, which challenged the formulaic depiction of witches in Hindi movies. Set in pre-Renaissance Bengal, *Bulbbul* has references to social practices like child marriage, and brings out the second-class citizenship status of women in nineteenth century Bengali society. Above all, the story is a haunting reminder of how patriarchal powers punish a young girl, whose zeal to right the wrongs meted out to women in an unjust society earns her the title of witch.

Bulbbul has a poignant beginning. The opening shot has a young girl sitting on the branch of a tree, dangling her legs, seemingly enjoying herself. The scene draws up an image of an innocent girl enjoying her foray in the trees, at the same time highlighting one of the most important aspects of a witch: somebody who lives in the tree. The scene impresses on the mind of the audience an eeriness, as if trying to remind the reader of the feet of the witch (*chudail ke pair*), and also draws a contrast between the feet of the innocent young girl and that of a *chudail*. The camera focuses on the world below her, a goddess surveying the world, when the chariot of a marriage procession draws up.

The scene thereafter introduces us to the three men, Indranil, the *Bado Thakur* (Elder Lord), Mahendra, Indranil's insane twin brother, and Satya, Indranil's youngest brother; these are the three patriarchs who are about to shape her life. The young girl, enjoying herself on the tree, is the eponymous protagonist of the movie, Bulbbul is the bride getting married to the *bado thakur*, following a practice of *gouridaan* prevalent in eighteenth-century Bengal. Bulbbul's homecoming after marriage is interspersed with the tale of a witch told to her by Satya, a witch waiting for her chance to possess the princess. A parallel is struck between Bulbbul and the princess in Satya's story. As viewers we are horrified at the prospect of this story coming true. Conditioned by our consumption of patriarchal discourses, we feel the evil spirit lurking about somewhere, ready to take hold of the soul of the innocent, young, and immature princess, a fit object for the evil spirit. But this evil spirit that would possess the princess has no physical existence; it is the avatar for the patriarchal forces that ravage her life. The scene after her homecoming in the grand Zamindar family palace establishes some of the major tensions that would shape the life of Bulbbul: the relationship of Bulbbul with her brother-in-law, Satya, the mixed emotions that Mahendra has towards Satya, and the young Bulbbul's inability to recognise Indranil as her husband. All three situations lead to the film's denouement.

The story jumps forward twenty years. It is time for Satya's homecoming, ironically like Bulbul's, accompanied by a tale of a chudail who lives in the forest that surrounds their village. The eerie night is flooded with red light, and Satya has the feeling that there is an unseen presence lurking. The next scene portrays Satya meeting his sister-in-law, Bulbul, where the viewers are provided with a peek into how drastically their lives had changed – the eldest thakur has left the family home, his twin brother, Mahendra had passed away, and Mahendra's wife, Binodini had been shunted to an outhouse meant for widows. The lively atmosphere of the Zamindari house has been replaced by an atmosphere of uncanny silence and brooding. However, what had not changed in twenty years was the status of women in the Bengali society. Women were still the second-class citizens in this Bengal: the widow is forced to give up all comforts in life; the man can take any number of wives, even if the wives don't agree to the arrangement; the master Dinkar can subject his wife to domestic abuse, and yet she'll refuse to speak out against him; or the woman that can't be the head of a household. All of this is amply demonstrated by Satya's reaction when he sees Bulbul resolving a dispute regarding a man taking two wives: "*thakur, thakur, khel rahe hai boudi?*" (Are you play-acting as a thakur [boss], sister-in-law?). Later, when he sees Bulbul on friendly terms with the doctor, Sudip, he recriminates her (as he is the only patriarch at home): "Purdah bhi nahi kara apne!" (You didn't cover your face in a veil!)

In the next important segment of the movie, Satya is out on a hunt, only that this hunt does not target animals, unlike the other royal hunts of colonial India: it is the hunt for a witch. The educated, savvy young thakur (boss) does not believe in the existence of witches, but he is out there on the noble task of proving to the villagers that witchcraft is mere superstition. But his attempt is foiled when an invisible entity (supposedly the witch) kills one member of the hunting party, Master Dinkar, the wife beater. Shaken, yet not submitting himself to the superstition, the young thakur believes it to be the work of a man, and the presence of the doctor, an outsider to the village, makes him conveniently guilty in the eyes of Satya. The viewer is, however, made privy to the doctor's confusion regarding the murder, undermining the theory of a witch having killed the innocent victim. At the same time Satya takes over the role of the family patriarch and brings Binodini from the outhouse into the family home to keep a control over Bulbul, leading to the active preservation of the strict patriarchal family structure.

Binodini, Mahendra's wife, has an illicit sexual relationship with Indranil, the scion of the Zamindar family, and is also responsible, out of jealousy of Indranil and Bulbul's marriage, for planting a seed of doubt in Indranil's mind about the relationship between Satya and Bulbul. Thereafter Indranil rushes to send Satya to London for further studies, and Satya, unmindful of his sister-in-law's affection towards him, quickly acquiesces. The broken, despairing Bulbul tries to destroy a story that she and Satya had been writing, but an already irked Indranil discovers it. The patriarch in Indranil can't let his (immoral) wife go unpunished (ironically his immoral act of sleeping with his younger brother's sister is absolved in his own eyes), and he barges into the privacy of Bulbul's bath, drags her out of the water, and strikes upon her feet with a hot iron rod.

However, her woes do not end there. While she is bandaged and is trying to recover she is raped by her mentally deranged brother-in-law, Mahendra. These heinous acts strip Bulbul of the innocence that characterises her in the first section of the movie, and forces her in the subsequent section to acquire an air of nonchalance and studied indifference which symbolises her transformation into a strong woman. The transformation is marked by the change in the colour of the moon during the night in which she was violated by Mahendra. The red colour of

the new moon is emblematic of Bulbbul's loss of timidity and innocence, and in its place she creates a cool, poised exterior to hide the turmoil inside her. This turmoil is channelised by Bulbbul to correct the wrongs of the patriarchal forces of society, and she is there to avenge all the injustices being heaped by the men on the women in her society. She is a saviour who is out there to challenge these patriarchs who treat their wives, daughters, and other women as objects, devoid of any feelings, and punish them accordingly.

The film showcases how Bulbbul uses her strengths and weaknesses to harness all powers in her command to put up a fight for the wronged women in her social environment. The film focuses on Bulbbul's childhood adeptness in climbing trees, on her dangling feet, and then on her maimed feet, which had been turned inside out after being physically tortured by her husband. Thus the film narrative attempts to give a sarcastic rendition of the image that has been traditionally associated with witches, a person who lives in trees and whose feet are inside out. In doing this there occurs a humanisation of the image of the witch, now somebody who has been battered by patriarchy and is out there to save the other women from its evils. She is labelled a witch because patriarchy will not countenance forces that tend to disrupt or challenge the primacy that this structure lends to men. This movie takes exception to the damsel-in-distress formula by portraying a woman who can fight her own battle, and also stand up for the inequalities faced by other women. She does not need any man to fight her battles, to set right the wrongs; she is a complete force in herself. Even her friend, Doctor Sudip, who had treated and healed her, does not know of this avatar of hers. Her childhood aide and confidante, Satya also remains blissfully unaware of this reality, suspecting Sudip to have committed all the heinous murders in the village. He is transporting Sudip to Kolkata to give him up to the law, while on the way his wagoner is killed by Bulbbul, for having driven his wife to suicide by his mistreatment.

Satya immediately realises that the murders are not being carried out by the doctor, and that there is another force committing these murders. He shoots at the mysterious figure in the trees, and Bulbbul chooses the moment to reveal herself to Sudip. Sudip, in order to save Bulbbul, tries to stop Satya from causing further harm, but there ensues a struggle between them, when accidentally due to some stray flames a wildfire begins in the forest. Bulbbul tries to save herself from the fire, but symbolically, she is engulfed by the flames. Satya realises his mistake a bit too late, the mistake that he is getting moulded into the groove of muscular patriarchy. He gives up the family home and leaves. The unrepentant Indranil returns after a long gap only to be accosted by Bulbbul's ghost emerging from the flames, apparently there to take her revenge against the cruel *thakur*.

The narrative ends on an ambivalent note; what could have been a realistic tale of a wronged woman out to avenge cruelties against women in general, is ultimately turned into a horror at the end. The unfolding fails to keep up the intelligent message of social perversity that forced a woman to seek justice for herself and her community. The film also fails on another count whereby it moves from the projection of Bulbbul from a witch to a goddess. Sudip emphatically claims to Satya, "*Chudail nahi, Devi hai woh*"! (She is not a witch, she is a goddess!). The dialogue signifies how difficult it is for society and for the movie makers to accept their women with their failings as ordinary human beings. She is either a devil or a goddess. Nevertheless, such a novel plot takes a quantum leap in shifting the landscape of conventional representation of women and their projection as witches within the general patriarchal discourse of women as evil in popular cinema.

Another film which is of very recent vintage and which can be considered a landmark in women's representation in the horror genre is *Roohi*. Released in April 2021 on the OTT platform Netflix, it is set in contemporary India, in Baagadpur, a quaint enclave in the industrial city of Mujirabad. We witness the town through the camera of an English news channel celebrating the old-worldish construction of the town and the unconventional people inhabiting it. It is again through the news channel camera that we are introduced to the male protagonists, Bhawra Pandey, who works as a crime reporter in the local newspaper, Mujirabadi Zalzalaa, and Katanni, who writes the horoscope column in the same newspaper. They are being interviewed by the English channel, where they are asked to shed some light on the quaintness of their town. Pandey, calling the town "*antshant*" (non-sense), though trying to mean "ancient", talks about an ancient and illegal method of marriage, *Pakdai Shaadi* or bride kidnapping. Pandey very boldly asserts, "*jab yahan ke laundon ko kisi se pyaar ho jata hai, woh ussey utha lete h, Pakdai Shaadi!*" (here when a boy falls in love with a girl, they get her kidnapped, that is the concept of bride kidnapping!).

And then the viewer is taken to witness a bride kidnapping that has transformed into a more professional affair, with people taking contracts for the kidnapping of a bride-to-be. Both Bhawra Pandey and Katanni are employed in the job of bride-kidnapping, carried out by the print journal company where they are employed. While they kidnap the girl, none come to her rescue as they believe that even though the practice has been rendered illegal, cultural practices and traditions cannot be overruled by law. After experiencing all this the reporter very fittingly mentions, "It is said India lives in several centuries at once". And in that sense the century that Baagadpur lived in was no different from the nineteenth century Bengal of Bulbul.

The fate of the kidnapped girl is significant. She is weighed down by gold and expensive clothes, and in return asked to forget the fact that her volition in any of this was never requested. A relative commenting on the unchallenged ancient ritual states, "*hamari bhi aisi huyi thi*" (We had also been married in this manner), portraying how the town has remained cocooned, untouched by the changes in law and the modernisation of the country and the world at large.

The next shot shows the girl and her family accepting the groom; and amidst the din, the celebration and the show of gaiety, the cruel suppression of the selfhood and very existence of women is forgotten. Society, mired in ill-cultural practices, remains cruelly ignorant and indifferent to the wishes of a woman. What if she too had loved someone? What if she wanted to continue her education further and marry later? But a society steeped in received patriarchal notions could neither accommodate the wishes of its women nor give her enough space to flourish.

The first time that a witch was ever mentioned in the movie was in relation to a marriage where a wise old woman cautions that on the night of the marriage the groom is not allowed to sleep, else a witch hovering nearby would possess the bride. And with that the bugle of the arrival of the witch in the movie is sounded. Superstition abounds in Baagadpur, and the presence of a witch in such a superstitious place and among those people is not all that implausible. This is a world where witches can roam about unhindered, looking to possess young brides. And this ancientness of Baagadpur is further highlighted when Kattani casually talks to Pandey about "Alam Mask" (Elon Musk) sending Tesla (Tesla) to space. These people are frozen in time, and they are striving hard to break free and move ahead.

The next task that Pandey and Katanni are assigned is the kidnapping of another bride which sets into motion the incidents that lead to the climax of the movie. While the kidnapping is

taking place, a slogan on the wall by the Government reads “*Beti bachayenge tabhi bahu layenge*” (Save the daughter; only then will you bring the daughter-in-law), which goes on to show the deplorable status of the women in their society, where a girl child is unwanted and must fight for the most basic of things: survival. However, the kidnapping did not serve its purpose, as the sudden death of the groom’s family member caused the marriage to be postponed. The girl now had to be housed in a wood factory in a place called Ambiyapur until the marriage could take place.

Once there, Pandey realises that the girl (Roohi) is possessed by a witch, but before Katanni could see this, the witch has left her body, and she is back to a normal girl. Her pale face, full of timidity and innocence, strikes Pandey, and in a formulaic pattern of Hindi movies he is immediately in love with her. For the sake of clarity for the audience, Roohi’s father, while reporting her case to the cops, states how her body had been possessed by a soul on the day of her marriage, and the situation remains the same since then. In his clandestine offering of love, Pandey, who for the first time thought that he was hallucinating, again sees the witch possessing her body, and his love notwithstanding, he is scared of the witch. He springs into action and tries to report it to their boss, who rebuffs and threatens them to comply with his orders.

While Roohi is in the forest guarded by Katanni, a reference to her marriage by Katanni agitates the witch in her, and Pandey heroically salvages the situation by saving Katanni and carrying the unconscious Roohi back to the factory. The horrific condition that Roohi was in arouses Pandey’s pity, who brings an exorcist to rid her body of the witch. The exorcist discovers the witch to be powerful beyond his control and escapes from the scene. Meanwhile the police start questioning the boss on suspicion of the kidnapping of Roohi, and the boss asks Pandey to drop the girl in an unconscious state in some isolated area of Mujirabad. Pandey refuses saying he will marry her and restore the respect that the kidnapping had taken away from her. It is interesting to note how women are still objects in this universe dominated by males, whose honour is frail and can be broken in a moment by a scandal. This honour can be saved from collapsing by marriage alone, and Pandey, like a knight in shining armour, decides to marry Roohi to save the distressed damsel. However, this means that he has to throw the witch out of her body, and hence he embarks on a journey to find a solution by which this problem can be fixed.

But the viewer is not allowed to simply enjoy the thrill of the horror. The horror is punctuated with possible patriarchal diatribes against women that has led to the birth of the label of a witch. So while the exorcist is explaining the powers of the witch possessing Roohi’s body, Katanni, weirdly enamoured by the witch, humorously renders an explanation which strangely sounds true and upholds all patriarchal notions of a witch; he says, “*bhai, same to same. Mere papa, tere mama, Zubair ke abbu, Fekil bhai, sab yahi bolte h apne Mrs. ke bare mein*”, (Bro, exactly same! My father, your uncle, Zubair’s father, Fekil bhai all say such things about their wives) explaining how men with their received patriarchal superiority use this term to vilify and demean women. Any woman who is beyond their power of control is labelled a witch.

The movie at other times attempts to provide more scientific explanations to counter the witch-discourse, as when Pandey confesses to Roohi, his love for her. She ventures to provide an explanation of her behaviour by mentioning that some people consider it a split personality disorder. These scientific and social explanations of her situation prevent the viewer from just sitting back and enjoying the movie; he is forced to think. The strong woman image that Katanni spoke about as being despised by the society is again harped upon in the movie when the boss’ men come to take back Roohi and beat up or possibly kill Katanni, but the witch in

her gives her enormous strength to beat up the goons and save herself and Katanni. The witch, calling herself Afza, proves herself a hero by saving Katanni and Roohi from the goons, and the movie upends the patriarchal social order where a man is supposed to save the girl from the goons. The damsel here is a macho who can save the knight and challenge the formulaic depiction of powerless women who need the intervention and support of men to save themselves in horror movies.

Meanwhile, Pandey is up to his quirky ways trying to find a way to get the possessed soul out of Roohi's body. He takes her to a place, Chimmatipur, where he involves himself in rituals to get Roohi free of the witch, while a scared Roohi, unwilling to participate in the rituals forced upon her, causes the witch in her to publicly manifest itself and create a chaos in Chimmatipur. The witch in her gives her the strength to express her volition that we see missing in almost all the women characters in the movie. She is strong-willed and dangerous enough to ward off all those who force her to commit acts against her will. However, a timid Roohi, unable to bear the soul possessing her body, tries to commit suicide, but the witch prevents her and says, *"takat hoon teri, jo tujh mein kabhi na thi...ye takat teri har kamzori, har dukh ka nibaran karegi"* (I am the source of your strength, something which you never had...this strength will fight against all your weaknesses and misery).

The witch, however, has to marry that night itself or else she will die, so she hastily agrees to an offer of marriage made by Pandey's boss. The witch gives her consent and marries of her own will, something that no woman has ever done in Baagadpur. While the marriage ceremonies are underway, the groom, on discovering that Roohi's body is possessed by a witch, flees the scene. And the witch proceeds to marry Katanni. However, due to some ritualistic confusion she gives up Katanni and proceeds to marry Pandey, but Roohi intercedes and declines Pandey's favour. She exhorts with her new found strength, *"Kab tak doosron ke haaton sambhalte rahe?"* (Till when should I rely on others?) and she marries the witch herself. She addresses the witch Afza and declares, *"Sath jiye, hum sath marenge; takat diya hai tumne, milke iski hifazat karenge; kisi aur se kyun, Roohi aur Afza aaj khud se shaadi karenge"*. (We will live and die together; You have given me strength, we will safeguard this strength together; Why marry anybody else, Roohi and Afza will marry each other today). With this she accepts the wedding vows with the witch. The timid Roohi rises to the occasion, becomes her own master and saviour, and happily accepting the witch within her as the source of her strength she goes away. The scene is a strong departure from the slavish adherence to patriarchy in horror movies, and champions the cause of women. The film celebrates the power of women and celebrates the cause of individualism. Roohi would now require no male support to fight against the odds, and the film's depiction exonerates the genre of horror from the clutches of patriarchal discourse that has till now burdened it.

Conclusion

The films under consideration are set in two different periods. One in nineteenth century Bengal, and the other in a fictional contemporary town. Though the difference in the time period is stark, yet the spirit that the movies embody does not present much of a difference. The old world of Baagadpur could very well have been the nineteenth century Bengal. The women in both the movies are disempowered individuals who are treated as appendages to men. These women exist only to fulfil the fancy and desires of men. Their own wishes, fancies and desires have no place in this society. The witches in the movie, however, are the revolutionary forces that set right the wrongs of society and establish the equality of women in it; in doing so they upset the traditional understanding of witches and their activities. Witches

have historically been portrayed as villainous characters, whose motive is to destroy the existing order and harmony of (patriarchal) society. Their existence was seen as a threat to the heteronormative patriarchal families. And their chosen vessel for wreaking this havoc had largely been women, timid and fragile.

Men, the saviours of society, were the force that could defeat or get rid of these witches and restore the balance in the patriarchal system. *Roohi* and *Bulbbul* upset that set structure and force the audience to question their fixed belief in that structure. Both the movies portray the witches or witch-like form not as a vile character, but as a force challenging the rigid patriarchal norms of the society, which is also the reason that they are labelled as witches. They are the harbingers of change in the lives of the women in the movie, showcasing a transformation of meek docile women to macho women. The protagonists of both of the eponymous movies, *Roohi* and *Bulbbul*, undergo a massive change, and they become symbolic forces of a dramatic alteration, a force that as viewers we hope will sweep society. Through such a depiction, both the movies question and force the viewers to revisit the popular notions of witches, often coloured by patriarchal discourse, in cinema as well as in life.

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