

Cultural Entanglement of Hair: Exploring the Cinematic Representation of Women's Hair in Hindi Movie *Bulbbul*

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Abstract

Hair has been a site of the body which is embedded with numerous cultural and social meanings, defining various everyday practices for women. The physical state of hair, bound or unbound, groomed or dishevelled, generates symbolism for the entangled meanings it carries within it. These meanings impart power to an individual for asserting agency to construct or deconstruct the discourse. Based upon this, women's hair has been prominently portrayed in numerous literary, cultural and visual works expressing multifarious semiotic significances. The paper proposes to politicise the representation of hair in the Indian context in such works through special reference to the Hindi movie *Bulbbul*. The paper attempts to investigate the construction of the body as cultured, within this construction, it further looks at how hair is used as an equipment for the cultural conditioning of the body. Further, the paper examines the representation of certain female characters and how they align with the notion of femininity and female sexuality. Furthermore, the paper looks at how the movie represents the manipulation of power embedded in hair to assert agency.

Keywords: Hair symbolism, Cultural meaning, Agency, Representation, *Bulbbul*

Introduction

Hair, as a cultural and symbolic entity, holds a deep connection with the identity, power, and autonomy of women across various societies, including India. In Indian culture, hair has been assigned numerous roles, from representing feminine beauty to signifying purity, submission, and oppression. Its representation in visual media, particularly in films like *Bulbbul*, amplifies the intersection of these cultural and social implications. This paper delves into how hair functions as a metaphor for feminism and cultural representation in the Indian context, exploring the transformations of women through their relationship with their hair in the film *Bulbbul* (2020). By examining these visual elements, we unravel how hair is used to communicate societal expectations, rebellion, and the assertion of power.

Human hair is a fascinating and complex subject, yet it is often ignored or regarded as trivial in academic circles. However, the study of hair holds significant value in understanding the intricate social and cultural conditioning of human hair, which is tangled with cultural meanings. Hair, through its physical state, symbolises these embedded cultural meanings, which opens up the possibility of politicising hair, leading to the debunking of discourse of gender and sexuality. This paper proposes to explore the significance of hair symbolism embedded in the cultural meaning of hair to understand the notions of power and transgression associated with femininity. It investigates the politicisation of women's hair through its

representation in Hindi film *Bulbbul* by analyzing the hair symbolism of two female contradictory characters from the film, Bulbbul and Binodini, The paper posits to lay primal emphasis on how social norms constructs the body in gendered way that define moral standards to categorise good and evil women. The female body's meticulously groomed hair in juxtaposition with loose hair to understand the entangled and embedded meanings, establishing hair as a site embodied with power. In studying these representations of femininity, the study examines two different facets of feminine power, one that adheres to the ideal of femininity and the other that transgresses it; which could be done by analysing the semiotic representation of select scenes from the movie, which depict the dialectical positioning of the two female characters. While doing so, this study focuses on the significance of unbound and groomed hair as a strategy to resist and accommodate cultural and social ideas about the female body, respectively. (Weitz, 2001) Moreover, it is essential to understand how individuals undo the cultural conditioning of hair and challenge the existing power dynamics.

Hair has played an important role in human history and culture, depicting various cultural and social meanings, and its importance is reflected in Hindu traditions and mythology. From the episode of Draupadi's hair being dragged by Dushashana raised question about power, patriarchy, and politics that signifies stripping her of her dignity and reducing her to an object of desire to the depiction of goddess Kali, in Hindu mythology, with wild, unbound hair which symbolises her fearsome power and her willingness to do battle with evil forces. On one hand, virtues and dignity are ascribed to hair; on the other hand, strength and power are linked to long, unbound hair that has been imbued with symbolic meaning throughout history.

In Hindu and Buddhist narratives, the act of unbinding a woman's hair is deeply symbolic: it not only signals sexual receptivity but also represents spiritual awakening and power. As seen in the stories of the Buddha's previous births (*jātakas*), the loosening of braided hair often coincides with a woman's readiness for spiritual transformation. The goddess Kali, described as the "loose-haired charmer of the mind," (Kubjikamatatantra) becomes a visual embodiment of this fierce and liberated feminine energy. In this way, hair becomes more than a biological attribute; it serves as a powerful metaphor for women's agency over their bodies and their spiritual destinies. Yet, this association of loose hair with both spiritual and sexual energy also reveals underlying societal anxieties about female autonomy, a tension visible across religious, artistic, and cultural representations.

Methodology

This study limits its scope to analyzing a few significant scenes in *Bulbbul* where the depiction of women's hair is symbolic of larger themes within the film, such as transformation, agency, and resistance. While there is scope to conduct a more extensive visual analysis of various themes, this paper specifically focuses on examining the symbolism of women's hair through a gendered lens. The study examines how hair functions as a visual trope to express societal roles, femininity, and individual agency, emphasizing its role in questioning the structural oppression of patriarchy within the film's broader narrative.

Seeking Limited Sense of Power and Accommodation

As Rose Weitz discusses in her essay how women seek power by both resisting and accommodating mainstream norms for female appearance, particularly through hair. She further suggests, women are neither 'docile bodies' nor free agents; rather, they combine accommodation and resistance as they actively grapple with cultural expectations and social structures. We can trace how Binodini tries to negotiate with

the limited sense of power within a male dominated space by accommodating conventional gender norms which according to Weitz 'traditional strategy' that 'de-emphasize resistance and instead emphasize accommodation to mainstream ideas about attractiveness. (Weitz, 2001)

Binodini's carefully styled, tightly bound hair reflects her adherence to the traditional ideals of femininity, positioning her within the sphere of "ideal" womanhood as defined by the traditional norms. In the scene where Binodini insults Bulbul, taunting her appearance by saying, "You look like a drab little thing decked up in all your dowry," she actively enforces the very standards she herself has internalized. Here, Binodini uses appearance — especially hair, jewelry, and bodily adornment — as a tool of social control, subtly reminding Bulbul that 'doing femininity well' (Bordo 1989, as cited by Weitz, 2001) is seen as a woman's source of power within the domestic sphere.

However, as Rose Weitz argues (2001), the power gained through traditional strategies is "circumscribed, fragile, bittersweet, and limiting." Although Binodini is trying to assert her authority on Bulbul it does not refer to her status as free and liberated rather its sense of power derived from cultural expectations — a momentary achievement dependent on societal approval. By using conventional appearance, Binodini, Weitz describes, uses her 'understanding of cultural ideologies surrounding women's hair to increase her effectiveness.' — namely, status within the household — but without the liberty to ignore these norms altogether.

Control and Torture

In *Bulbul*, hair becomes a visible marker of social control and personal agency, the film carefully utilises visual tropes of hair to heightened the contrast between Binodini's neatly tied hair and Bulbul's loose, unbound hair shows how gendered the body accommodates and resists to express subjectivity. Historically, hair has been used as a means to classify and regulate identity; as weitz (2014) argues, "the most common way women use their hair to seek power is through strategies that de-emphasize resistance and instead emphasize accommodation to mainstream ideas about attractive" (Weitz, 2001) especially in institutional contexts. Conventional norms where married women part their hair which normally divides the head into right and left sides and put sindura (Red Vermilion). The red vermilion symbolises fertility. In the case of a widow, use of vermilion is not permitted and historically hair is also removed to show her inferior status in society and expected to follow a life that of ascetic by wearing only white sarees without the presence of her husband. Taking a few scenes from the movie will help us to explore the cultural codes of hair.

When Bulbul, is introduced in the movie, she has long, and loosely bound hair representing her as a young bride less aware about family and other associated responsibilities. In the context of the story, this symbolises her status as a married woman but less bothered about her responsibilities to her husband. However, as the story progresses, Bulbul becomes more independent and assertive, and her hair behaviour also changes and become less structured. This can be seen as a representation of her resistance and autonomy over her body.

One of the more shocking scenes in the movie when her husband is dragged by her reflects that her dignity has been taken away by her own husband. In Mahabharata, Draupadi was also dragged by her hair by Dushasana in front of her closed ones. This act can be interpreted as how women's hair is once adorned and glorified as a crowning glory but used as a tool to humiliate and reject her from her status.

Hair as a Transgressive Force

Hair is a powerful symbol in many cultures, rendering strength, beauty, and identity. In Indian culture, women's hair holds immense significance, often seen as an essential component of beauty, femininity, and virtue. Throughout history, the significance of hair in Indian culture has been intertwined with cultural conditioning and societal expectations. The cultural entanglement with women's hair shapes her identity, and many times subjected to rigid cultural norms. For example, in traditional Indian society, thick, long and well-maintained hair is glorified as a symbol of good health and vitality. Notwithstanding its aesthetic trait, hair is also considered as a sign of fertility, virtue, and beauty. In parts of India especially in most of the southern states women adorn their hair with flowers, jewels in everyday life that highlights the deep cultural heritage and sign of femininity and beauty in Indian cultural discourse. However, this celebration of women's hair comes with its cost that objectifies hair to minimise the individual liberty. Long unbound hair is not welcome for married women due to its association with unrestrained sexuality, wild and uncontrollable power. As Gitter (1984) notes, the more loose and abundant a woman's hair, the greater the possibility of sexual invitation it offered. This long unbound hair, often associated with a source of raw and violent power, suggested in the ancient literature across various cultures. Depicted in the Greek mythology Medusa, a gorgon, a female creature with snake-like hairs. The sight of the decapitated head of Medusa according to Freud generated male castration anxiety. (Schwartz, 1995) In Indian context the goddess Kali is often depicted as abundant hair flowing freely with garlands of decapitated head of *asuras* symbolizing the similar connection with strength and raw feminine state. The unkempt hair of Kali embodies both destructive and transformative qualities, symbolises her fierce power and eliminates the evil forces. Consequently, hair became a site of regulation and fear. As Hoffman (n.d.) notes, in Victorian visual art and literature there is enormous evidence that women's hair embodied "malignant qualities associated with sexuality," consequently transforming the female figure into a dangerous presence. This uncovered hair becomes a forbidden sight in many religious traditions such as Hinduism, Islam and Judaism, this requirement of covering the hair in public justifies the recognition of its "dangerous force that could lure men into disreputable acts" (Gitter 1984). This symbolism of sexuality in hair, ironically intensified by practices of veiling, suggest efforts to suppress women's sexuality is also originated by its cultural potency. This is also evident in traditional hair norms practiced in Indian society— where there are various hairstyles that suggest different stages of femininity. Children would normally be seen with their hair unbound and teenage girls with two braids and married women keep their hair tied in a knot in public (Das, 1976) — further reinforcing the idea that breaking these hair norms leads to a threat to existing social boundaries. Anthropologist Marry Douglas (1966) in her book explained that the body and society operate in a similar way. She further states society follows an order in a way it operates. In that case, social agents are expected to follow that order to maintain its harmony; whoever breaks it becomes an 'anomaly' or 'matter out of place' ; a position refers to transgression. Therefore, a woman's unbound hair is synonymous with transgression suggesting that if a woman deviates from the prescribed hair norms, her morality will come into question as a potential threat to the social order. This transgression is considered threatening because it disrupts the established social and cultural boundaries that define a woman's place in society. That requires regulation by restricting their hair display, this weaponized hair control as a way of disciplining female identity is evident across cultures. The cultural conditioning of hair, therefore, goes beyond a mere physical attribute to a potent tool that signifies one's adherence or resistance to societal expectations. Through these interconnected representations, hair emerges not simply

as a marker of beauty, but as a charged site where gendered power dynamics, sexual agency, and social anxiety converge.

Thus, women's hair is often depicted in art and literature in an ambivalent state of both empowerment and threat. Borrowing some insights from tantric text and its uses of ambivalent matters such as menstrual blood we can examine the connection between hair's magical and dangerous power. In tantric tradition ambivalent matters are considered possessing powerful potency. Similarly, hair, like other bodily substances that transgress the boundaries of the body, holds an ambivalent symbolic power — it is both graceful and dangerous, both sacred and threatening. As David Shulman suggests, "Power is... derived from forces that are contaminating; these forces belong to the violent substratum of chaos out of which the world emerged," and as Marglin further explains, connecting notions of bodily integrity with purity suggesting "those substances that flow over the boundaries of the body are dangerously polluting" (1980). Hair, much like menstrual blood, crosses bodily boundaries and acquires a potent, ambivalent symbolism. Thus connotes a site of beauty, fertility, and vitality, yet simultaneously feared for its uncontrollable, contaminating potential. In *Bulbbul*, the protagonist's flowing, unbound hair visually marks her defiance of societal constraints, embodying both her empowerment and the perceived threat she poses to patriarchal structures.

Conclusion

As Gitter (1984) argues, throughout mythology and art, an abundance of loose, flowing hair often signifies heightened erotic power and autonomy, but also societal unease. *Bulbbul*'s hair, in its vivid abundance, becomes the visual embodiment of her reclaimed sexuality and power. Historically, as Ellen (1988) notes, hair was fetishized, endowed with powers extending beyond the physical, often representing female sexuality itself. In *Bulbbul*, the protagonist's hair thus evolves from a marker of innocence into a signifier of both liberation and menace, challenging the structures that once sought to bind her. In religious and cultural traditions, control over women's hair often symbolized control over their sexuality and identity, as seen in the practices of veiling or hair shaving. Similarly, *Bulbbul*'s early life is marked by external control, signaled visually through her restrained hairstyle. Her later unbound hair represents not just physical freedom but a profound reclamation of selfhood, opposing the societal structures that once rendered her voiceless.

By visually anchoring *Bulbbul*'s transformation through her hair, the film crafts a narrative where female power, often feared and suppressed, rises uncontrollable. Hair here is both a weapon and a liberation, simultaneously drawing upon historical ambivalences and re-signifying them within a contemporary feminist imagination.

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