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Amalgamation of Supernatural Elements and Social Commentary in Contemporary Indian Cinema: A Study of Bulbbul and Stree

Astha[1], Dr. Aruna Bhat[2]

[1]Masters in English, Institute of Liberal Arts & Humanities Chandigarh University
[2]Assistant professor (English) Institute of Liberal Arts and Humanities Chandigarh University

Abstract
Every art form, whether dance, music, literature, or films taps into the human psyche by evoking a certain kind of emotion to connect individuals at a deeper level. The contemporary films Bulbbul (2020) and Stree1(2018), directed by Anvita Dutt and Amar Kaushik, respectively, use supernatural elements to comment on societal issues concerning women. Instead of simply portraying women as monstrous figures the films delve deeper by representing them as victims, evoking different emotions. This paper uses Rasa theory- an Indian literary theory described in Natyashastra, a Sanskrit text credited to Bharata Muni, which is major source of Indian system of classification of emotional state. According to Bharatamuni the main aim of any dramatic presentation is to evoke in mind of audience particular kind of aesthetic experience which is described as "Rasa". The paper will explore how these films evoke different ranges of rasas such as Bhayanaka (fear), Raudra (anger), Vira (heroism), Hasya (humour), Adbhutta. The research will also explore how these films use plot, characters, settings and dialogues to further strengthen these emotions and convey the social message effectively among the viewers. By the amalgamation of supernatural element, feminist discourse, Rasa theory these films demonstrate that contemporary films not only serve as medium of entertainment and horror but also serves as an effective tool for conveying social message in contemporary India in subtle yet impactful manner.

Keywords: Feminist perspective, Rasa theory, Supernatural elements, Societal issues.

Introduction

The incorporation of Supernatural elements in Indian Cinema has a long history, dating back to the early days of Indian films. However, the purpose and portrayal of these elements evolved over time. It began with the era of the 1920's where gods and demons are central figures in mythological films inspired by Indian epics. They are widely used to inculcate moral values and to address universal themes like the victory of good over evil, human nature, justice, etc. By mid- 20th century, the supernatural elements like ghosts and spirits were used in horror films to create fear and thrill. Over the years, it has been used to explore psychological dimensions. However the modern era has witnessed significant changes in how Indian films engaged with supernatural elements. It blurs the line between real and mystical by humanizing them and portraying them as victims, highlighting deep societal issues. According to Asghar Ali Ansari: Indian cinema has long been canvas for the supernatural, with ghosts haunting screens and captivating audience for decades. The portrayal of ghosts in Indian Cinema has undergone a remarkable

transformation, evolving from malevolent entities to sympathetic figures, emblematic of a broader cultural shift in storytelling. There has been a noticeable departure from this conventional portrayal, with filmmakers opting to humanize ghosts and imbue them with trait that evoke empathy and compassion. The two films Bulbbul (2020) and Stree1(2018), directed by Anvita Dutt and Amar Kaushik, respectively, work on these premises.

The film Bulbbul is a 2020 Indian Hindi-language period horror film set in the 19th century in a village of the Bengal presidency. It incorporates the myth of "chudail" (witch) figure from Indian folklore, which serves as a metaphor for the female voice challenging patriarchal norms. The film Stree is another Indian Hindi language comedy horror film which draws inspiration from the urban legend Naale Baa Tale from karnataka. The story of the film revolves around a female vengeful spirit who abducts men at time of the festival as an act of revenge for who have done wrong to her in the past.

These films demonstrate the potential for horror and fantasy films to tackle complex social issues and highlight the need for more research. "A nation is built on its myths and folklore. Even in the present era of technology and modernity, myths and fables can change public perception" (Raveendran 1).

The existing studies analyse these films through psychoanalytic theory, magical realism, folklore, and feminism, the use of Rasa theory – a classical Indian aesthetic framework is largely unexplored. Further by analysing these films through the lens of Rasa theory, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how supernatural elements are used to comment on social issues and create a sense of emotional resonance.

The paper uses Rasa theory to examine different ranges of emotions evoked by two films. The research paper will examine how these emotional responses further help in strengthening the social message.

This analysis of contemporary films through Rasa theory illustrates how the traditional framework can be revitalized to address contemporary challenges.

Theoretical framework

The word "Rasa" is originally used for the drink of God in heaven.The meaning of the word varies depending on the context it is used. In the field of healthcare, the best medicine with the most effectiveness is called rasa. In context of music, the pleasure derived by listening to music is called Rasa. In terms of food items, the word Rasa is used for its taste or sweetness. The general meaning of rasa is essence, flavour. However, Bharata Muni an ancient Indian scholar, delves deeper into the concept of Rasa. Bharata Muni, was an ancient scholar who is famous for his contribution to literary theory in the Indian tradition. It is believed that he wrote Natyashastra which serves as a foundational text for other Indian literary theories. Bharata Muni denotes the 6th chapter of his classical work in detail, analysing the concept of Rasa. According to him, Rasa refers to aesthetic pleasure derived from a piece of art. He states in Natyashastra that the aim of dramatic performance is to create Rasa. Thus, no meaning is conveyed if rasa is not evoked.

"Na hi Rasad rite kaschid arthah pravartate" (Thiagarajan).

According to Bharata the director of the play, firstly develops an understanding of the Bhavas of the character employed by the playwright. The director further conveys this knowledge to the actor. The actor, with his own perception by keeping in mind key bhavas associated with the character, performs his part. The actor, through his facial expressions, emotions, and acting, evokes Bhavas, which act as a stimulus in evoking Rasa. Bhavas are further divided into – Styayi bhava, Sanchari bhava, Vibhava, Anubhav. Styayibhava refers to permanent emotion. It is not learned by an individual, rather it is part of

the human psyche from birth, there are a total of eight in number. Sancharibhava is also known as vyabhcharibhav. These are the temporary fleeting emotions.

Contrary to styayibhava, these are not permanent and fade quickly. Vibhava refers to the determinant i.e. causes that lead to the evoking of certain emotions. Anubhav refers to the reaction to vibhava represented through actions, words, and expressions. There are eight primary rasas- Sringar (Erotic), Hasya (comic), karuna (pathetic), Raudra Rasa (furious), Vira (heroic), Bhayanaka (horror), Bibhatsa (Disgust), Adbhutta (wonder).

Bulbbul's journey from lens of Rasa theory

The story of film revolves around child bride Bulbbul, who was married to Indranil . Later, she was subjected to physical and sexual assault, which led to her transformation into a mystical woman. The film incorporates the myth of chudail (witch), but here it serves as the voice of suppressed women in the village of Bengal Presidency. Thus, Bulbbul is also shown as an incarnation of Goddess kali. Goddess kali is a deity in Hindu mythology who is known for her fierce nature and represents a powerful aspect of femininity. Her red clothes, open hair, tongue and mouth stained with blood shows both the resemblance of chudail and Goddess kali. The transformation scene of Bulbbul is a pivotal moment in the film's supernatural narrative. Bulbbul is lying dead on the bed. The moon goes into eclipse and darkness falls. After a moment the colour of the moon changes into blood red. The careful selection of colour palette, particularly the use of bright colours like red, mainly after her transformation, and cinematography with a dream-like quality, enhances the supernatural ambiance.

Bulbbul's journey from being an innocent girl to her transformation taps into the emotional resonance of the audience by evoking various rasas like Raudra Rasa, karuna Rasa, and Adbhuta Rasa.

Raudra Rasa includes sentiments of anger and fury. Bulbbul's transformation into a witch (from the perspective of villagers) or her as an incarnation of goddess kali gave her a new identity, which exhibits in her fierce nature, courage to seek revenge against injustice done to her and the women of her village. Her transformation into a supernatural being is driven by anger and desire for justice against the brutal abuse at the hands of her husband and his brother, which shows the essence of Raudra Rasa. Bulbbul's anger is justified and is similar to the wrath of divine power like that of goddess kali, who punishes those who has done wrong and protects the innocent. The repetitive use of red colour, like blood red moon, Bubbul's red clothes and red ambiance, align with the red colour associated with Raudra Rasa.

The another form of Raudra Rasa is depicted through character Indranil. Unlike Bulbbul whose rage is result of her oppression Indranil rage is not righteous. It is result of his fragile ego, patriarchal belief to look women as object of control. There was a scene where Bulbbul was holding a book and was hesitant to tell when Indranil inquired about it. Indranil said " Ek Patni ka uske pati k alawa kya Niji hota h? (What's personal is there between husbands and wives) (Bulbbul 46:2- 46:4). This question of Indranil arises not from curiosity. There was an underlying rage which further leads to brutal act of mutilating her feet.

Bhayanaka Rasa is aesthetic emotion of fear and dread. It is evoked through inclusion of Supernatural elements, double meaning dialogues and its haunting lullaby. Haunting lullaby is recurring motifs used in story. It mirrors the haunting events in the story. Initially it began with little Satya telling horror story of monstrous female figure "chudail" to newly wed Bulbbul and later after Bulbbul's transformation when story become part of her own real life. The haunting yet gentle melody used in narrative aligned with brutal killing of chudail create a fertile ground of terror. The village people suspect it to be the act

of a witch behind the murders of male members of the village. It inculcates a sense of fear among them. Binodini while addressing to Bulbbul said "Bade haveliyon me Bade raaz hote h" (Big houses hold big secrets) (Bulbbul 1:12:40-1:12-43). The dialogue not only reveal the nature of aristocratic families but also highlights how settings serve as element of horror. The grand mansion holds dark secrets. The walls within mansion symbolizes confinement of women within patriarchal control and act as veil to hide brutal violence against them. For the audience the dialogues create sense of dread.

The troubling scene in the movie where Bulbbul is being beaten by her husband is slowed down to allow the reader to feel the intensity of Bulbbul's pain. Further, it is intensified when she is sexually assaulted by Mahendra (Rahul Bose) and asked by Binodini (Paoli Dam) to keep quiet. The slow pace, zooming on Bulbbul's face while blurring the background, lack of background noise or any sound acts as a stimulus. The audience feels pity for her and sympathizes with her character. Bulbul's transformation is a result of trauma and abuse, which makes the reader empathize with her character, triggering the emotion of sorrow and grief, evoking karuna Rasa.

Further, Binodini asked her to stay quiet in the context that they are privileged to marry into the family of Thakurs, and her sufferings are nothing behind the name they carry with them. It depicts the brutal realities and underscores how familial structure often encourages such violence under the guise of tradition.

" Thakuron ke yahaan rishta hua h. kaisa rona dhona…chup rehna" (You are now part of Thakur's family so stay quiet) (Bulbbul 1:11:4-1:11:59).

"Thoda pagal hai par shaadi ke baad theek ho jayega, thoda pagal hai par thakur hai. Thoda pagal hai par gehney mileingey, resham milege" (He is mad but he will be in discipline after marriage, He is mad but he belongs to Thakur's family and you are privileged that you would get ornaments and clothes) (Bulbbul 1:11:9-1:11:49).

The characters Binodini and Bulbbul highlight women's response to the patriarchal system. The former has surrendered to societal expectation while the other reclaims her freedom. Her transformation into "chudail" subverts the traditional narrative by portraying its protagonist as a victim and an avenger. Her journey is framed as a feminist revenge fantasy that mirrors

Goddess kali actions of both destruction and empowerment.

The transformation of Bulbbul from a victimized girl to a vengeful spirit known as "chudail" evokes a sense of wonder and awe in the viewers. The sudden shift from a helpless woman to an independent entity as a chudail roaming freely in the forest leaves the audience in a state of astonishment and curiosity. Film Bulbbul uses non-linear form of storytelling, oscillating between the present and the past. The plot unfolds in such a manner that each scene includes twists and turns, keeping the audience engaged, curious, and they wonder about what's next, like the scene where Bulbbul is shown to be engulfed by flames, the moment where the individual is about to feel sorry for her, she reappears to take her final revenge. These unexpected events create a sense of wonder, evoking Adbhutta rasa.

Stree from lens of Rasa theory

The story of the film Stree revolves around a vengeful female spirit named "Stree" who creates havoc in the village of Chanderi by targeting the men during the festival. Stree calls out the name of a man roaming alone in the night. The moment the person turned back, she took him with her, and only his clothes were left behind. The narrative also incorporates superstition associated with supernatural entities, like the walls of the houses in the village, which is inscribed with the text O Stree kal ana. Stree face was shown

to be hidden behind the veil, creating fear of the unknown, often associated with a supernatural entity. The Supernatural element, along with other characters in the story, creates a mix of suspense, humour, and social commentary. The primary rasas in film are – Hasya Rasa, Bhayanaka Rasa.

Haya rasa is one among nine rasas, which includes the emotion of laughter, comedy. The film adds humour through the use of dialogue and the way some characters interact with each other. Example: The way Vicky narrates the incident of how a beautiful girl (Shraddha Kapoor) approaches her and asks her to make an outfit for her is filled with humour. Vicky narrates the incident to Bitu and that how the girl from last year, Pooja came and greet her and places the order by holding his hand and said "Vicky please". Bitu with no interest repeat the sentence But Vicky again repeats it and replied not in this way and insists him to speak with love "Vicky, please" (Stree 9:07- 9:20).

Man dressing up like women, village people's superstitions to inscribe text on the wall, the use of special ink made from animal waste, and their beliefs that certain acts will save them from evil spirits add humour to the film. The conversation of Vicky with Watchman is filled with humour. On seeing Watchman after a long duration and indulging him in same activity of inscribing the wall Vicky inquires "kya Chacha puja shuru hui nhi ki phir shuru ho gye" (Hello Chacha. You're at it again?). To this watchman replied "chamkadar ke hadiyoon ke chure ko safeed kawoye ke mutr se milao to banti h ye shyahi" (The ink is made of bat's bones and an albino crow's pee) (Stree 2:39-2:53).

Film Stree blends horror and subtle humour to present the societal issues in a satirical manner. The inclusion of a female vengeful spirit as a Supernatural element leads to a shift in the power dynamics. The presence of Stree evokes fear among male members of the village. They were forced to stay in houses and even dress up like women in order to protect themselves from Stree. It mirrors the circumstances in which women are brought up. They were asked to dress up in certain manner and often deny to roam freely in night leads to loss of her freedom in pretext of protecting them from lustful gaze of men. It mocks such an attitude of society.

The scene where Markandey claims that what if Stree takes away with them. Rudra says , "vo stree h purush nhi, vo purshoon ki tarah jabardasti nhi karti vo pehle apse anumati mangegi " (she is woman not man, she will take permission first) (Stree 58:17- 58:24). This response highlights the importance of consent and presents it in humorous manner.

The presence of a Supernatural entity, a mysterious ghost, "Stree" haunts the village by abducting men during the night, heightened the sense of uneasiness and terror. Further, her mysterious power to possess someone and to disappear triggers this uneasiness. The use of isolated places, such as the presence of Stree in an old mansion, creates eerie atmosphere. In most part of film, Stree is unseen figure. Her presence is felt through her actions- her calling out of name, disappearance of men who saw them and their abandoned clothes evoke a fear of unknown. The text "O Stree kal ana" painted on walls and story recounted by Rudra (Pankaj Tripathi) about history of Stree is constant reminder of her presence. Dim lightning, haunting music, disturbing sound effects, and characters' reactions, such as panic, further convey the fear to the audience, evoking Bhayanaka rasa.

Intensifying Social message through Rasa theory – A Comparative Analysis of Bulbbul and Stree

Both the films Bulbbul and Stree use females as supernatural entities to challenge the societal norms, yet in different manners. Bulbbul is a supernatural thriller that integrates Bengali folklore about "chudail" (female spirit). The film adopts a darker tone, highlighting issues like domestic abuse and child marriage. While Stree uses satire and gentle humor by reversing the gender roles and critiquing societal

beliefs that marginalize women.

The depiction of Bulbbul's physical and sexual abuse and oppression against other women of the village evokes Raudra rasa in the mind of the audience, strengthening the social message that women have the capacity to tap into inner strength and break free from shackles that bound them. Bulbbul, as a child bride and later the victim of oppression, evoked karuna Rasa. The audience not only empathize with her character but it also highlights the serious societal issues like child marriage and the need for women's empowerment to fight against such issues. The metaphor of the toe ring representing her loss of freedom, but soon, when Bulbbul's toe ring is destroyed, it represents her regaining of her freedom. Bulbbul transformation creates a sense of awe and wonders also redefining traditional folklore of witches, portraying them not as evil but as a symbol of resistance in a patriarchal world.

In Stree, elements of humour not only keep the audience entertained but also put satire on existing superstitions without hurting the sentiments of individuals and effectively delivering a message among the audience. The inclusion of Supernatural entities creates a sense of fear among the men of the town highlighting how women are being feared and suppressed in a patriarchal world. The wrath of Stree portrays women as strong and can be agents of change.

Conclusion

The use of Supernatural elements in narrative evokes various rasas, creating a powerful emotional experience for the audience. The Supernatural elements used in films have their roots in traditional Indian folklore and mythology, which further emphasizes the need to redefine societal norms and expectations placed on women. The amalgamation of supernatural elements and Social Commentary helps in delivering a social message in a subtle yet impactful manner. Stories blending supernatural elements with social commentary can be used in an academic course to teach critical thinking about societal issues.

Promoting Indian aesthetics like Rasa Theory in contemporary films revitalizes traditional art forms while making them relevant to contemporary audiences. Thus, supernatural elements not only serve the purpose of entertainment but also act as a mirror in reflecting societal fears and inequalities. By evoking rasas, it fosters empathy among audiences, which allows them to engage with complex social realities on a deeper level.

India is said to be developed not solely on the basis of economic or technological aspiration but also through its cultural and moral renaissance. The combination of the evocative power of Rasa theory with supernatural narrative highlights the power of cinema to not only criticize societal flaws but also lead a future rooted in harmony, progress, and shared humanity. This research bridges ancient aesthetic principles with modern developmental ideas, showing how Indian theories like Rasa Theory can be used to address contemporary challenges.

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