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Avenging Silhouettes: Female Rage and Vengeance as Radical Resistance across Literature and Film

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Abstract

*This paper studies how vengeance has been redefined in the film *Bulbbul* by Anvita Dutt and the novel *Shame* written by Salman Rushdie. This proves that vengeance does not operate as a simple act of retribution but can be elevated to a symbolic language for all historically silenced individuals through these narratives. They also represent dismantling acts performing violence not refracted through myth, allegory, and cinematic metaphors but as direct articulation of what shall become of marginalised women if vengeance were possible against patriarchal and nationalistic forms of dominance. The study employs comparative textual-visual analysis with close reading of Rushdie's allegorical prose against a semiotic analysis of Dutt's storytelling in images. Framing this intersection are aspects drawn from postcolonial feminism, affect theory, and trauma studies helpful in describing how pent-up feelings find expression in violent metamorphosis. It does not read or see Sufiya Zinobia's monstrous emergence and *Bulbbul*'s transformation into a chudail as anomalies but rather interprets them as acts of agency that speak of the tragic effects of shame and repression. It advances that this is a new feminist and postcolonial form of vengeance wherein cruelty changes into speech, anger turns to witness and quietness transforms into a powerful factor. This vantage point deposes traditional understandings of female fury, making it a counter-discursive act of resistance with the body.*

Keywords : Female Rage, Vengeance as Counter-Speech, Postcolonial Feminism, Trauma and Silence, Embodied Resistance, Cinematic Feminism.

Introduction

Female anger usually comes from the times when women were silenced, threatened, and required to pretend that they liked it while the patriarchy hit them in the face over and over again. People would find it almost impossible to raise their voices in such deeply rooted and normalised circumstances. However, when these tortures and abuses go beyond one's endurance, the victims eventually find that they can scream or shout back in small ways. It is when that small yelling has no effect, it gets louder, almost explosive. It is revenge encapsulated in women's rage which is a result of deeply rooted social injustice and prejudice that women are facing or have been facing for centuries. In most cases, revenge is portrayed only as retaliation and is simply regarded as revenge that finds its equilibrium in destruction. Moreover, this sort of reading not only reduces its complexity to a cycle of violence but also overlooks the possibility of its being expression, response or survival.

The case becomes different when revenge appears in the bodies of women, who are traditionally the victims of silence, shame, and oppression, as it becomes one more thing that comes from the repression that they have suffered.

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020) and Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983), both are of this specific kind which re-considers female anger as a performance that interrupts the patriarchal structures and resists the containment. These texts do not portray vengeance as pathological and refigure it as the counter-speech that is absolutely necessary. Two women, whose existence is the very definition of repression, are at the centre of both stories. Sufiya Zinobia, the personification of "Shame" in Rushdie's allegorical history of Pakistan, and "Bulbbul", a child bride who is muted until she is transformed into a chudail. They did not have a voice but they still tore apart the mechanisms that ruled them in such a brutal way. These are not only sudden bursts of anger but also a revolt in which silence is no longer oppressed and a new language that is expressed through action is introduced.

These works *Shame* and *Bulbbul*, depict the very performance of rebellion or vengeance as a means to open the way for women to live, resist and retaliate against. Language is not the medium that enables these women to express their thoughts. Oppression becomes the aspect they become familiar with and this oppression becomes the language that provides them a greatest power to give it back. Both dismantle the old, oppressive systems, and now women no longer have to ask for permission; they use their repressed rage as a rite of passage and make it their way of survival. A patriarchal system is destabilised by a strong female dynamic, where the women most impacted by the rules are broken, and these women, while oftentimes rescuing other women in the process, end up being co-saviours.

Both *Bulbbul* and *Shame* are marred by violence, abuse, and oppression. However, the anger that arose from that repression not only became the characters' "language of transformation" but also a function beyond mere destruction. In a way, the anger, trauma, and feelings that were buried so deeply for years got the chance to be expressed. These accounts alter our way of seeing and acknowledging female anger completely, which is a very significant change, as such anger is mostly vilified.

This paper is situated at the nexus of trauma theory, affect studies, and postcolonial feminism to trace this argument. The female body, which is the site

where honour and identity are policed, is inscribed with both patriarchal control and nationalist allegory, as postcolonial feminism emphasises. Affect theory offers a means to read rage, shame, and silence not as personal emotions but as historically produced states that may erupt into expression when suppressed. Trauma studies shed light on how unimaginable events resurface in violent, distorted, or fragmented forms that bear witness. In light of these overlapping frameworks, we can view vengeance as an embodied archive of affect, silence, and suppressed testimony, in addition to retaliation.

The methodological approach of this study combines comparative textual and visual analyses. Through close reading, Rushdie's excessive and allegorical narrative style is analysed, emphasising how Sufiya Zinobia's outbursts defy easy classifications as pathology or madness. To demonstrate how *Bulbbul*'s transformation conveys repressed pain, an analysis of Dutt's semiotic visual language, such as her use of colour schemes, folkloric imagery, and gothic themes, will be conducted. Within the theoretical frameworks of trauma studies, affect theory, and postcolonial feminism, this dual mode of analysis is situated. Postcolonial feminism helps us understand why patriarchal-nationalist ideologies and colonial history write double-binds onto women's bodies. Affect theory will help us make sense of silence and anger as deep, embodied experiences of expression. In trauma studies, Sufiya and *Bulbbul*'s violent shifts can be counted as powerful and radical testimonies rather than exaggerated breakdowns or out-of-control expressions.

Postcolonial critiques of women's silence and feminist engagements with affect and rage:

It is apparent that women's silence has been an important space for discussion in postcolonial and feminist discussions. There are too many conditions that puts women under the traditional 'feminine' gender roles which are toxic things or aspects that take away a woman's agency, objectify her, or remove power. Silence is used as a tool to control women and maintain gendered hierarchies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" represents how subaltern women are prevented from speaking and allows others,

mostly men in their lives or vicinity, to speak on their behalf. This completely shatters the idea of an individual identity that a woman should have. These works show how the same thing is highlighted in patriarchal, nationalist, and colonial narratives.

Spivak shows that because women are used as symbols of cultural honour instead of being seen as independent individuals with minds and voices of their own, their silence is not a lack of expression but a direct result of being oppressed by the system. This powerful idea is shown through Salman Rushdie's *Shame* and Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul*. These works represent how the silence imposed on women is the beginning of how way too repressed emotions will at some point reach its point of eruption. The authors have portrayed silence as a 'fertile' space that is the source of violence. Silence also forms a new counter-narrative which demonstrates that silence after being brutally suppressed for a long time turns into a loud and violent scream.

This silence experienced by women has been a major factor to which attention has not been given to as much as any other emotion. Sara Ahmed presents a picture of shame as one of the internalized emotions that result in people conforming to oppressive stereotypes. This situation is very similar to what Audre Lorde, the author of *The Uses of Anger*, talks about: anger is one of the most powerful tools that can be used for the protection of one's self and for overcoming oppression. The body resists silence and its protests speak in defiance. It is not at all passive and servile instead it actively advocates for a voice. Feminists' rage is considered terrible in most cases, and women who express their anger are labelled as distressing, disruptive, and harmful, as these kinds of expressions of emotions are generally kept within the bounds of norms and traditional hierarchies.

Within trauma theory, silence is the haunting trace of extreme wounding. Cathy Caruth's work illustrates how a traumatic event can resist a neat narrative by returning belatedly in the form of involuntary symptoms or violent outbursts. One may apply this can be directly applied to Sufiya Zinobia's convulsive violence in *Shame* and *Bulbbul*'s transformation into a mythological chudail. Their extreme acts of revenge are not simply a sign of them being "crazy" because this is the anger that has

been induced by repression for a long time. Their complaints were stifled at all times, and they had to face torment or abuse for a long time. These actions are the only way in which they manage to speak of what they have endured, and violence serves as a shocking but effective way of bearing witness to unspeakable violence. Rushdie's allegory and Dutt's use of folklore and visual metaphor highlights how vengeance is now reformulated something that becomes the only way out of their bounds. This gives it a powerful and expressive nature, a broader context and a legitimate space for emotional recognition irrespective of gender.

Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983)

In *Shame*, Salman Rushdie presents a wide array of characters through which he depicts the complex interplay between Pakistani politics, patriarchy, and repression. The main character, Sufiya Zinobia Hyder, is the core of this inquiry. She represents the ideas of suppressed anger, shame, and silence, and her family regards her as an embarrassment. Her final rampages of violence constitute an important transition from a silent woman who had been oppressed for too long to one that vents through radical counter-speech rather than mere retaliation. Rushdie makes this connection explicit when he argues that both personal and national denial and repression of shame will set off an inevitable, catastrophic, and violent fallout. Sufiya is essentially an empty vessel, a "vessel" where all the unacknowledged shame of her family and country is dumped. The men in the story, including Omar Khayyám Shakil, Raza Hyder, and Iskander Harappa, are all utterly "shameless," leading lives of violence, corruption, and debauchery without hesitation. As they live shamelessly, Sufiya's capacity for it only increases, becoming a hideous, unmanageable burden.

Symbolism of the Blushing

Sufiya is the personification of shame that the people around her never feel. Sufiya Zinobia's constant blushing represents her intake and expression of the environment's dishonour, repression and violence. It also reflects the themes of gender, political corruption, and the impact of repressed emotions which are deeply intertwined in the characters.

Vengeance as a Return of the Repressed

Sufiya's violent act of beheading the turkeys and later men can be read as a symbolic return of her repressed rage. Sufiya Zinobia after her fits is possessed by something deep within her and this violent outburst is a literal representation of how repression has finally acted out. This violence is a directed force against the very systems that have contained her and made her transform into a beast she never wanted to be. The men she attacks are often associated with a kind of moral or political shamelessness. By decapitating them, she symbolically beheads the source of her shame, which had been internalised within her since childhood. This act is her final definitive "speech" against the patriarchy and political corruption she represents. Cathy Caruth's conception of trauma as the "speechless fright that returns belatedly" helps us understand that Sufiya's violence is not an episode of madness but a testimony to experiences that could not otherwise be articulated. The terrifying violence completely shatters the idea that silence has no power. Instead it shows us that silence can be very powerful and become a ticking time-bomb waiting to explode.

Allegory, Excess, and Feminist Rage

Rushdie's decision to turn Sufiya into both a character and a symbol is genius as it visualizes a female's anger during a nation's turmoil. While Pakistan is represented as a delicate country teetering between drops of politics, Sufiya is compared to a shy person who has gathered too much shame and is unable to stand under the combined weight of her collected emotions. Nevertheless, her final change is no longer just a representation, as the tearing of her rage dismantles the conventional patriarchal allegories, allowing her the strength that the narrative so far has not given. Rushdie hence reshapes vengeance into a kind of "performative allegory". Her violence that has now erupted exposes the deep cracks in her family and even the nation at large which disrupts the very systems that kept her quiet. Her individual lore of being silenced, facing violence and abuse, and bearing other people's shame stands for the collective silencing of marginalised people, especially women, under patriarchy and questions

the entire new nationalism which has no concern for a woman's emotions. In *Shame*, this allegory becomes a way highlights the contradictions and instability of a nation by literally projecting them onto a woman's body and emotions.

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020)

Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020), a neo-gothic feminist film, intricately weaves folklore, cinematic symbolism, and postcolonial critique to reimagine vengeance as a potent language of counter-speech. The film narrates the story of *Bulbbul*, a young girl who is married into a patriarchal household in late 19th-century Bengal. Her life is marked by silent suffering and a series of horrific abuses at the hands of the powerful men in her family. In the face of all that abuse, *Bulbbul* turns into a chudail, a mythic figure often vilified in South Asian folklore. There was this "make believe" story that *Satya*, whom she considered her friend and even her husband, told *Bulbbul* on her wedding night about a witch or a chudail while passing through the forest. This chudail has backward feet and towards the end of *Bulbbul*'s own story this turns out to be her reality. *Bulbbul*'s metamorphoses into the chudail who would now only seek revenge for all the atrocities she faced becomes her narrative, which is both terrifying and amusing. However, the movie reinterprets this myth. Instead of a malevolent spirit, the chudail becomes *Bulbbul*'s new identity and a survival tool. This ghostly figure, with her famously backward-facing feet, becomes a symbol of justice, seeking revenge on abusive men in the village.

The Semiotics of Silence and Repression

Bulbbul's silence that has been long imposed on her from the moment she was a child bride until the moment her husband broke her legs with the additional sexual assault becomes a powerful visual for how a patriarchal world can erase a woman's voice and bring in one torture after another. *Bulbbul* was habitually not capable of sharing her emotions. Whether it was her profound love for *Satya*, her painful solitude or the ill-treatment of her spouse. Her silence shows that these non-expressions did not disappear but changed to another form. The film gradually moves its scenery to the supernatural realm

as a metaphor for the social evil of the times. Bulbbul, is set in a period between late 19th century and early 20th century. It is a story of one woman, and through the film, the evil of men with their predatory behaviour is highlighted. The movie portrays her deterioration along with the scary outburst of her other self, the chudail. This, in turn, marks a complete defiance to being silenced. The chudail's brutality turns into a new, scary language of power that is not only heard but also felt as a heartbreak, intense language of emotion which words fail to express. The chudail's roar replaces Bulbbul's quiet suffering turning her silence into a weapon of retaliation. At the end when Indraneil came back, she manifested herself in front of him to take revenge and kill him. The dust from which she takes shape appears to be ash, most likely from her burnt physical body. The ash also appeared to glow. Since fire and light is synonymous with life, it probably means that although her body was destroyed, she had lived on in the ash of her human body.

Dutt uses cinematography and mise-en-scène to highlight the central theme of the movie: how women are silenced. The film's muted colours, dim lighting, and moments of stillness create a feeling of containment and repression. The film's visual silence mirrors the societal and political environments in which female voices remain unheard. Dutt's purposeful colour application conveys Bulbbul's journey. The movie is very rich in reds, but the blues and greens are rather subdued. In general, the colour red plays a major role in the film as it represents both innocence and characteristics of the female gender (the red flowers that Bulbbul loves and the colour of her wedding dress).

The Chudail Archetype

In traditional South Asian narratives the chudail is typically depicted as the vengeful ghost of a woman who died under tragic circumstances, such as during childbirth or as a result of maltreatment by her husband or in-laws. They are generally associated with features such as backward feet and wild hair, and they often haunt forests and graveyards, luring and punishing men who have wronged women. The myth serves as both a cautionary tale and a reflection of societal anxieties regarding women who challenge

norms or suffer injustice. In Bulbbul, Dutt revisits the traditional chudail archetype, and here Bulbbul is transformed from a malevolent spirit to a symbol of justice and feminine rage. Bulbbul's transformation is totally different as she becomes a chudail not because she's evil but because she's a survivor. It's a powerful act of resistance and survival after the horrible domestic and sexual abuse she faces. The violence she unleashes is targeted and feels like a necessary cleansing act against abusive men in her village, and these men are prime flag bearers of violence against women. The film turns a figure that has been used for ages to scare people into a figure which now takes revenge for the wrong doings of these vicious men and becomes a symbol of radical empowerment. This clearly represents how a woman's rage when pushed far enough, can become a force for justice.

The brutal act of Bulbbul's husband breaking her legs is a pivotal moment that serves as the core argument for her transformation and a symbol of patriarchal control. This single act encapsulates the film's entire thesis, arguing that when women are silenced and stripped of their agency, their trauma finds a violent and transformative outlet. Bulbbul's husband, Indranil brutally assaults her and breaks her legs with a poker. This act of breaking her legs is a literal attempt to confine her and stop her from running away, trying to curtail her freedom and mobility. It is the ultimate expression of his power and control over her body and her life. The fact that he targets her feet is a bleak yet powerful metaphor for the way patriarchal systems try to immobilise women; in their helplessness, they might continue to remain passive and dependent. The sickening sound of the poker hitting Bulbbul and her terrified screams is enough to make one realise what took place.

The next scene shows blood splashing onto the Sita-Haran painting which is tragically haunting. A very spine-chilling and brutal interaction is brought into light in Bulbbul's connection to an age-old tale of a woman being kidnapped and struggling. This implies that the story is not the life one person but that the cycle repeats endlessly. In the movie, Bulbbul's suffering is aggravated when her husband breaks her feet and his disabled brother molests and rapes her while she is already hurt, lying on the bed with

her feet broken and bleeding. Such a scene brings about profoundly disturbing feelings of empathy and even physical discomfort and pain in the audience alongside Bulbbul who was the actual victim who faced these horrors. This incident from the movie puts our assumptions about the perpetrators of sexual violence at stake. We found that these crimes could be committed by people whom we least suspect. The worst part comes right after her abuse, when Bulbbul's sister-in-law asks her to keep her mouth shut for all the injustice. This woman herself is a representation of both a perpetrator of Bulbbul's suffering and a victim of the patriarchal system herself.

Comparative analysis of “Shame” and “Bulbbul”

Both Shame and Bulbbul show the female body as a battleground. They depict the female body as the site where women assert their power and resist a world that continually attempts to suppress them. The characters' suffering and torment become legitimate forms of revolt through their nonverbal expressions of pain. In Shame, the body of Sufiya Zinobia is the representation of the suffering shame of her country, which leads to her rage outbursts. Finally, they are the release of the trauma that she has been carrying for a long time.

In Bulbbul, one could see that the main character Bulbbul relives the terrifying story of the chudail. After that transformation, she turns into an eerie supernatural being, a chudail, and places herself at the role of the saviour of other women who have been tormented by a variety of perpetrators. She herself was subjected to the painful experiences. She is transformed from an innocent little girl to the mistress of a rich household who is sexually exploited by men from her own family. Through her performance, Bulbbul shows clearly how her victimization finally becomes a symbol of justice that gives her strength and the applause it deserves.

These characters are shown as surviving figures in both narratives, where revenge is no longer portrayed as a return of action but as a deep, strong, and unrecognised hurt. By combining compelling storytelling and vivid symbolism to either recognize the anger of a woman or simply to argue that rage is not a mere rampage of the crazy or meaningless,

both these works provides different aspects of female wrath. Revenge becomes a conscious, physical, counter-action. The movie depicts one aspect of female rage through the blending of persuasive storytelling and intense symbolism either as an acknowledgment of female rage. The revenge becomes conscious, physical anti-speech which aids in dismantling the oppressive silence.. The rites of violent resistance are forceful enough to be seen and heard. The female characters of these narratives are allowed to redefine survival as a pledge of the silenced will never be dug up or recounted.

A South Asian Lens: Resonating with a Region

One can see how in the South Asian context, women's lives have been influenced by the existence of the patriarchy and colonisation for hundreds of years. The arguments in the paper are especially significant as they discuss at the forefront the process of suppression and regulation of women's bodies in history. By depicting female revenge and silence in the characters of Bulbbul and Shame, this study acknowledges the struggle, which is still prevalent in the area. The research conveys that the deeply rooted systems of patriarchy and historical violence continue to affect women, which in turn makes their defiance not only personal but also political and of the whole region still. This is a common theme in most South Asian cinema especially other horror and folktale films like Stree, Pari, Bhool Bhulaiyaa, Kanchana, Laxmi, and more. All the women ghosts in these stories represent fear and a strong means of resistance. They try and show how grieving women who have suffered more than their tolerance finally explodes worse than a volcano.

The Partition trauma of 1947 is significant in this respect. During that time, women were the worst to suffer amidst a reign of communal violence and forced rescue operations. Women are generally who are constantly sexually violated, among which rapes are the main forms of sexual violence that are practiced as a means of warfare. They are also the ones who have a bigger chance of being kidnapped for the purpose of forced prostitution or given as sexual slaves. And lastly, forced marriages. Such anguish is repeated in the novel Shame by means of the allegorical representation of Sufiya's body as a carrier of the shame that she has gone

through. Bulbbul, however, is just concerned with a very deeply rooted social practice, and in fact, a social evil, “child marriage.” The 19th, century Bengal was suffering from these two evils, namely child marriage and the rejection of female agency. Moreover, these issues are still alive in the Indian villages, rural Bangladesh, and the whole South Asian region. Consequently, it is made into a ghostly and formidable critique of the continuous cultural discourse/argumentation history of the area.

The issues shown in *Shame* and *Bulbbul* do not only refer to literature however they are still quite strong in their resonance with the contemporary South Asian resistance that fights against patriarchal violence. For example, the Pakistan Aurat March directly challenges the state, which sponsors patriarchy and misogyny. This Rushdie also heavily criticizes. One of its slogans, “My Body, My Choice” acts as a direct challenge to the idea that a woman’s body can be controlled for the sake of national honour and pride. In India too, the “#MeToo” movement and the student’s “Pinjra Tod” campaign are very clear signs of the breaking down of structures of silence imposed upon women. These movements are screaming against suppressed trauma and demanding answers just like Sufiya and Bulbbul’s violent convulsions.

Additionally, Dalit feminist stories brought out by groups such as the National Federation of Dalit Women reveal how the combination of caste, based violence and marginalization, which are the main causes of gendered oppression, is a perfect example of a world that is very similar to the silence of the multi-layered edged characters. These movements are similar to fictional narratives in that they represent forms of collective counter-speech. The paper’s arguments also gain depth by examining specific South Asian symbols such as :

The Red Sindoos and Red Saree : In a vibrant red wedding saree, a young Bulbbul was married off into a powerful, wealthy family. She naively believed she was marrying Satya, a boy her own age with whom she had quickly formed a friendship. However, her hopes were shattered on her wedding night when she discovered her husband wasn’t Satya, but his much older and stern elder brother, Indranil Thakur. While both Red sindoor and sarees are associated with

tradition and femininity, they carry deeper meanings related to identity, social status, and patriarchal control.

Dakini, Chudail, or a witch: The term ‘Witch’ reclaims the history and misgivings associated with ancient goddesses who have often been demonised because they dare to frame a version of woman and feminine energy which goes against the normative boundaries of what society and male-centric religions and spaces have prescribed.

Purdah or Ghunghat : Purdah and the ghunghat are two practices that have long been used to oppress women in South Asia. Purdah, which means “curtain”, is a system of female seclusion that restricts a woman’s movement and her interactions with men. The ghunghat, a veil or head covering, requires women to cover their faces in the presence of male elders or strangers. Proponents of these practices claim they are about women’s modesty, but they ultimately act as tools of patriarchal control that limit a women’s freedom and erase their public presence.

Conclusion

The challenge is to normalise female rage and women’s expression of it. Rage should be considered just another emotion to be expressed the moment its felt, not stifled too long or buried too deep. That would allow the manifestation of that anger to not turn out as ugly or destructive. Women have been facing years and years of oppression – from having their own rights to having the autonomy over their bodies and thoughts. The tradition of silence is passed down from generations to generations and even by female perpetrators of patriarchy because they never knew any other way. This paper highlights how we must challenge these acts of taking away a woman’s right to speak or express her abuse (physical, emotional or psychological) and how subjugation, unfair treatment and sexual objectification never ends well. It is not only harmful to the women but an entire family, generation, and society at large. Jean-Paul Sartre quoted : “Freedom is what you do with what’s been done to you.”

These works offer a template with a female protagonist who successfully sets the world ablaze, in a most satisfying way and delivers revenge on those who have humiliated her. For women whose anger is usually suppressed, it does not vanish but becomes

a voice. They do not hesitate to break their silences in the face of the repressive systems and in doing so they compel us to reconsider all that we thought we knew about justice, power, and what survival truly is. What they do Through their art is to provide a voice to silence and visual access to invisibility, making it possible that the unheard could be heard when given autonomy.

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