

**Literariness Journal**

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly  
Journal of Literature and Cultural  
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614  
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

**Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026**

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***The Laughing Medusa: Representation of Monstrosity in Anvita Dutt's Bulbul***

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**Abstract:** Anything which deviates from the norms is seen as monstrous. A study dealing with the idea of monstrosity or shape-shifting in women becomes a way to challenge the dominant narratives and carve possibilities of alternative narratives. The narratives tend to challenge traditional ideas of femininity and also relook at the ways in which women who deviate from the stereotypical construction of womanhood are seen as monstrous or dangerous. Cinema provides a more enhanced continuity to the idea by touching upon the issues of bodily metamorphosis through its focused capturing of the nuances. Helene Cixous' *The Laugh of the Medusa* talks about the connection between women's writing and body-politics. A woman's body, according to Cixous, is representative of multiple meanings. "A woman's body, with its thousand and one thresholds of ardor-once, by smashing yokes and censors, she lets it articulate the profusion of meanings that run through it in every direction-will make the old single-grooved mother tongue reverberate with more than one language." (Cixous 885) Anvita Dutt's *Bulbul* uses the aesthetics of monstrous-feminine to construct a counter-discourse and make way for alternative histories and narratives that tend to demystify the stereotypical representation of monstrosity associated with a female body. In my proposed study, I intend to understand how monstrosity becomes an interesting trope of analysis to study the politics of gender and the aesthetics of representation.

**Keywords:** *Monstrosity, body, femininity, gender, Indian Cinema*

**A**nvita Dutt's 2020 film *Bulbbul* starts with the visual of a young girl with the focus on her decorated legs. She is all dressed up in red, adorned with Aalta (a red dye used as an adornment) on her feet and jewellery. It is year 1881; the Bengal Presidency; and there is a child bride ready to get married off. At one point in the film, she asks her aunt who is getting her dressed up as to why they need to wear anklet rings. To which, the aunt retorts; it is used to bind a nerve in the foot so that the girl does not fly away. *Bulbbul* has been married off to a man, Indranil, who is much older than her, leaving her without any potential companion. The 'historical' discourse is constructed through the story of Satya, who is Bulbul's brother-in-law and a young boy of her age. He narrates to her the story about a demon-woman who has twisted legs and is bloodthirsty. A woman functions 'within' a man's discourse and is never seen as capable of stepping out and speaking for herself. The film establishes it at the outset and the latter half of it is about a woman stepping out of that discourse and creating one for herself. The frame is interspersed with the shots of the child-bride leaving behind her aalta-laden footsteps on the ground, highlighting the red-dipped footprints.

In a patriarchal framework, any sort of deviation is termed as monstrosity. The film shows a woman who 'turns into a monster' and is not a typical ideal woman. The idea of a woman constructing a woman's history by taking recourse to Body is what Helene Cixous hints at in *The Laugh of the Medusa*. "Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, immersed as she was in her naivete, kept in the dark about herself, led into self-disdain by the great arm of parental-conjugal phallogentrism, hasn't been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster?" (Cixous, 876)

When Satya, the brother-in-law, arrives after 20 years, he is escorted by a cart-puller. The background is smeared in red, which is more of a symbol: a symbol of fury, anger, rage, menstruation, a woman's body, and the history associated with it. There is darkness, hinting at what is buried underneath. The unspoken, the hushed loom large in the backdrop. The subtle underlining of the 'feet' can be noticed; the body becoming a preserver of the violence that remains hidden. *Bulbbul* seems to be the lady of the house now, with the men in the family nowhere to be seen, except for Satya who has been her childhood playmate. There is a sense of enigma to the grown-up Bulbul who is now the thakurain (noble woman) of the house. She does not behave in predictable, ideal ways. There is another woman, Binodini, who is her sister-in-law and a widow after her husband, Mahendra, dies. There is a lot of speculation around his death. Binodini's belief is that he has been killed by the witch with the twisted feet since twisted footprints could be spotted on the floor after his death. Binodini serves as a foil to Bulbul. She is draped in white; her head shaved, living an austere life after her husband's death. At this

point, the filmmaker is giving us a glimpse into the ‘historical’ discourse where Mahendra is the victim and the witch is the aggressor, the prototype of any woman who behaves aggressively.

The film takes us on a flashback where we see Bulbul as a young girl engaging in writing activities with her brother-in-law Satya. One can spot in Bulbul a desperate need for a companion. It is interesting to note that Bulbul in the film is also a budding writer, a woman with thoughts and vocabulary of her own. She weaves tales along with Satya and they maintain a journal of their writings together. The husband beats her up on charges of infidelity after he notices her budding companionship with Satya. He brutally thrashes her and in that process, her feet are severely injured. Butchering her feet here is symbolic since feet for a woman are symbols of mobility, freedom, and choice. By injuring her feet, the husband feels validated in keeping her within the framework of gender norms. “For a long time it has been in the body that women have responded to persecution, to the familial-conjugal enterprise of domestication, to the repeated attempts at castrating them...” (Cixous 886)

The film also showcases the hypocrisy that an aristocratic society is imbued in relation to the gender norms. While Indranil has an illegitimate physical relationship with his deranged brother’s wife, his wife’s fondness and companionship with her brother-in-law is punished severely. The mentally unstable brother-in-law rapes *Bulbbul* while she is all bandaged after her husband’s brutal violence on her body and in the next instance, we see the white moon being replaced by the blood moon. *Bulbbul* dies only to be re-awakened by Goddess Kali. There is another murder later on in the film, and the little girl who is rescued by *Bulbbul* says that her perpetrator was killed by Goddess Kali. At the end, the doctor tells Satya that she is not a demon but a Goddess. “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing...” (Cixous, 885)

There has been a lot of discussion on how the demon-woman functions in the film. The film subtly talks about the dominant narrative alongside the alternative story. For instance, Master Dinkar being abusive to his wife is something that Satya doesn’t know. Satya represents the layman, patriarchal in conditioning but well-intentioned. When Satya spots *Bulbul* with the doctor, he suspects something wrong and chides her for not wearing the veil. The society has clearly defined functions for men and women. Satya, like other men, goes out for hunting. In the next scene, Master Dinkar is brutally killed. Satya is sure that the attack has been carried out by a man since the brutal murder could not be the work of a woman. He remarks how the brutalities of the attack convey that the culprit could only be a man and not a woman. The sheer dismissal of a woman being at the centre of the attack also shows how we view women and their behaviour. Women were supposed to be nurturers, soft and emotional, incapable of any violent trait. Judith Butler’s idea of Gender Performativity becomes important here,

where a gender identity is defined and sealed by one's performance that is strictly tied with cultural and social norms.

Cixous talks about how a woman's writing is transgressive, becoming the 'twisted feet' in a man's world. She uses a term called 'female-sexed texts' for narratives crafted by women where vocabulary, form, tone, etc. are different from andro-centric writing. "Now women return from afar, from always: from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture'; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to 'eternal rest'" (Cixous 877). Stories and oral discourse have contributed immensely in propagating biases and stereotypes related to women. The monstrous and evil depictions of women are rooted in a history of burial of the darkest, deepest secrets of patriarchy. Medusa, a Gorgon in Greek mythology, is known for her transformation from a beautiful maiden into a monster with snakes for hair, whose gaze could turn people to stone. Sigmund Freud takes up this point in his short essay *Medusa's Head*, where he equates Medusa's head with the idea of castration. The terror of Medusa's head is synonymous with the terror of castration. The concept of the monstrous-feminine, as constructed within/by a patriarchal and phallogocentric ideology, is related intimately to the problem of sexual difference and castration. The Chudail represents the demonic, the monstrous-feminine as per Barbara Creed. Monstrosity in *Bulbbul* serves as a way of engaging with trauma and abuse and the forces of resistance.

*Bulbbul* has been functioning as the lady of the house till the time Satya enters the scene. Satya tells her that if she does not behave as per a Bhadrakalok mahila, she will have to be sent to her mother's house. Cixous talks about "the consequential phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and to 'pacify.'" (Cixous 877) Dark is seen as dangerous and anything which is not transparent or aligned with the norms becomes 'dark' and inaccessible. *Bulbbul* in the latter part becomes unruly and inaccessible, which would be a threat to the existing status quo. She is seen as an extension of the dark, thereby underlining the dichotomy of virgin versus devil (Gilbert and Gubar). *Bulbbul* is discouraged from voicing herself by Binodini. She keeps reminding her to not speak since speaking becomes an act of transgression. Speaking becomes monstrous and even if she speaks, her speech is not acknowledged by the men around her. The speech becomes inaudible; and when underlined becomes problematic and dangerous. "They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss..." (Cixous, 885) The film shows us how men's understanding of women could be situated around two identities only—a good woman and an evil woman; there is no in-between. Cixous also talks about the whole idea of construction of myths to subjugate women and how it is important for women through their writings to revise these myths. The doctor who treats her becomes her secret-keeper. Since he is privy to the injuries done on women in most patriarchal homes, he somehow becomes their alibi. The personal narratives of *Bulbbul* and Binodini are a part of the larger socio-cultural fabric where a

woman becomes a child-bride, where women are supposed to be subservient to men, where violent acts against women especially in royal and aristocratic homes are hushed, where a woman is supposed to shave her hair and lead a monastic life when her husband dies, where witch-hunting is common, where wife-beating is pervasive and men are supposed to rule while women are silenced.

The *Bulbbul* of the latter half is the annihilator, the destroyer of evils; she is the repressed incarnate. The transition is evident through her relaxed body posture than the initial reluctant body-image that we see of the young *Bulbbul*. The new *Bulbbul* takes space, her body is spread out; she sits in the style of a queen taking over her throne; she is different. Using the aesthetics of the body to explore and articulate the female experience in the film comes very close to Cixous' idea of writing through the body.

Apart from the legs, there is a lot of emphasis on the hair as well. The hair is constantly underlined to depict the status of a woman. Binodini's well-groomed hair is at odds with young *Bulbbul*'s free-flowing and loosely tied hair. In the latter half, *Bulbbul*'s hair appears to have received a life of their own while Binodini's head is shaved on account of her husband's death. She climbs atop the trees; is one with nature. She flies from one place to another, and her flight is symbolic since a woman's mobility is also seen as threatening to the patriarchal framework. Flying is monstrous. It challenges the necessary fixity that is required of a woman. She represents the dark force of nature which could be destructive.

The new aesthetics are overwhelming, the new language is confounding. It is a world which captures the woman's voice in a tone which has been unheard of. Writing for a woman becomes important because writing for her also means reclaiming her body. The body-politics becomes an important idea here since it is a woman's body which carries the markers of oppression onto it. Writing happens in two ways in the film. One is the female creator of this universe and its aesthetics, which underlines a woman's side of the story. The other is *Bulbul* as a writer, who writes and imagines, and has the potential to document an entire history of women through her pen. The writing also happens in other ways; the redemptive act of the fiery *Bulbul* is a writing which seeks to challenge the very foundation of patriarchy and patriarchal violence in the community. The writing happens in the ways the mutilated bodies are designed after they are thrashed by the 'witch'. The bodies of all the men who happen to be oppressors of the worst kind are inscribed with signs and symbols of justice which only those who are aware of the palimpsest can understand. Gilbert and Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* talk about the idea of women's writings as palimpsests, hiding the narratives of pain. This language which seems to be deviating from the normative patriarchal framework thus requires the male agents to venture out on a 'witch-hunt' to catch hold of the witch who is seemingly dangerous to the community. The witch hunt is a patriarchal response to the 'other side' of a woman who cannot be an ideal, demure entity. She

only appears in front of the doctor who has the ability to read and understand a woman's language. The process of signification is underlined here since he is equipped with the knowledge and the awareness of a woman's body and its vocabulary. The act of writing becomes important for a woman to kill the false woman that is a product of male writing. In a woman's narrative, personal history blends together with the history of all women, making it multiple and heterogeneous.

The film explores the rights of women in late 19th-century India where the anti-colonial movement coincided with the growing interest in women's rights and status. The period is the 1880s and the film makes cursory references to significant historical events related to women's position in society. "It is exactly a decade before the Age of Consent Act, which raised the marriageable age of girls from 10 to 12...1881 was also 25 years after the Widow Remarriage Act had been passed.. Widows were expected to shave their heads, discard their jewellery, live in seclusion, and undergo regular acts of penance. Yet, things had not changed to a great extent, and Dutt shows it accurately through Binodini." (Homegrown)

At multiple points in the film, the new *Bulbbul* can be seen responding to the conversations around her with a piercing laughter. She carries a sarcastic smile on her face; she is laughing at the system, the agents of patriarchy, and the ugliness that muffled whispers carry. When Satya questions her about her relationship with the doctor, she breaks into a loud laugh, mocking the hypocrisy, the insecurity, and fragility of patriarchal ego. The symbolic becomes her language; she does not write with fixed codes, which the normative terms as monstrous. The symbolic is monstrous; the symbolic is threatening; the symbolic seems to turn the structure upside down.

It is interesting to see how the film revises the myth of a witch, a bad woman, by showing her side of the story and deeming her a 'goddess' rather than a demon. The film also takes on the idea of witchcraft and investigates it to dispel the myths and stereotypes associated with the idea of a witch and witch-hunting. The terrifying atmosphere and the violence are actually an extension of the brutal oppression of women in the community. The film in that sense becomes a Laugh of the Medusa, which seems to create a new symbolic vocabulary.

Armitt states, "[the fantastic text], endlessly open and thus non-containable...therefore pose as a dangerous threat to established notions of fixity and conformity, a characteristic that obviously makes the fantastic a particularly appealing form for the exploration of socio-political marginality and ex-centricity" (11). The use of terms like gynae-horror, female fantastic, etc., serve to create an alternative universe where female spirits give it back to the agents of patriarchy. The curiosity surrounding a female body invokes the use of fear and terror in the analysis of a woman's body, which is seen as the source of potentiality, power, dread, and so much more. The fear of the female body goes back to the

concept of *vagina dentata*, which talks about a woman's vagina developing teeth and hence being dangerous and violent. Gynae-horror uses these existing myths and stereotypes related to the female body and tends to revise them by looking at bodily experiences through a female viewpoint.

Aesthetics are a very instrumental feature of the alternative discourse of women's narratives. One can observe how the film makes use of very defining visuals, articulating a vocabulary of the unsaid and the unspoken. As Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One's Own*, there was no sentence ready for use by a woman writer since the existing language stemmed from a patriarchal culture. It becomes significant to use a different syntax to convey experiences that are not marked and captured in the existing normative vocabulary. It is interesting to note how the witch in the film is monstrous because she transgresses the boundaries between the public and the private, unlike the other women in the film who are supposed to restrict themselves within the spaces demarcated for them. Monstrosity also has to be understood with respect to this spatial violation. The aesthetics of the film are important to understand the transition and the power-politics associated with the characters. The past is shown through unsteady camera work where *Bulbbul* is on the edge but not at the centre since she is raw, evolving. The present shows *Bulbbul* at the centre where the camera is zoomed in on her, showing her grandeur and commanding presence. The colours of the attire play a major part in the symbolism of the film. Red as a colour stands tall in the film. The first frame of the film is dipped in red, with the focus on the red adornment. At one point in the film, Satya tells her that he wants to paint the house blue for her to remind her of her mother's house. Blue is nostalgia. Blue is the past, which is fast replaced by red embodying the colour of a woman's spirit. The film in its aesthetics and plot is very strongly rooted in the Indian tradition of folklore, mythology, and visual art. The grass in the film has divine associations, called *Kaash Phool*, which is related to Goddess Durga. A surreal touch is given to the film through the nuanced cinematography. It is also inspired by Satyajit Ray and Tagore's worlds.

The moon acts as a perpetual symbol in the film. The aesthetics of the fantastic and horrifying create a possibility for an anti-discourse that aims to subvert the existing discourse where a woman's voice remains absent. It is different from the narratives and discourse that are a figment of male imagination and serve to please them. In the past, women writers have addressed it, especially in Tribal and Dalit literature, where the narrative has to create a mythical, fantastical, or gothic space for a female voice since they are silent and invisible in the normative world. The lack of neutral spaces for women in the real world necessitates the creation of an alternative space. The only way in which a woman can fully reclaim her spaces in an extremely patriarchal world is through fantasy or the form of a ghost. As David Punter says in *The Literature of Terror* (1980), "Gothic fiction demonstrates the potential of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable, but the very act of speaking it is an ambiguous gesture" (417). The idea of the Female Fantastic has been discussed by critics like Anne Richter and

Gloria Alpini to talk about a literary form where patriarchal concepts can be thwarted and the woman's viewpoint can be brought to fore.

The representative politics becomes important here, for we have a woman filmmaker choosing the aesthetics of a woman's subdued position in society. The film works through images, metaphors, and colours. Anvita Dutt, the director of the film, wanted *Bulbbul* to feel unearthly: "a world that would have mysticism and myths as an everyday part of the fabric," she says (Xalxo, *Rolling Stone*). It is also important to note how the rape scene is played out in the film without being voyeuristic or sensational. Working on Laura Mulvey's conception of the Male Gaze, Tori Telfer explains the Female Gaze as: "It's emotional and intimate. It sees people as people. It seeks to empathise rather than to objectify. (Or not.) It's respectful, it's technical, it hasn't had a chance to develop, it tells the truth, it involves physical work, it's feminine and unashamed, it's part of an old-fashioned gender binary, it should be studied and developed, it should be destroyed, it will save us, it will hold us back" (Homegrown). There is an ecological perspective at work here as well. The name *Bulbul* corresponds to a bird which is very closely associated with the free-flowing, innocent, chirpy girl that *Bulbbul* is. In the latter half of the film, she can be seen climbing trees, becoming one with nature. She is no more an individual; she becomes a force of nature. The forest is seen as her natural habitat that she is comfortable in. However, by the end of the film, Satya burns down the forest in his maddening game of witch-hunting, which can be seen as a masculine violent act to appropriate and conquer feminine nature. The larger association of how men tend to possess nature and women have a more democratic and collaborative relationship with nature is brought to fore.

The film ends with the sound of ululation, a vocabulary rooted in the cultural fabric of Bengal; a warning sign, a victory signal of good over evil. This new woman that *Bulbul* becomes is Cixous' rebellious woman who does not hold back her thoughts. This new woman is also the film that becomes a metaphor for the new writing that is loud, volatile, and uncharted, unlike conventional old writing which required male or patriarchal references.

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