Sexual Cultures and Imaginations of Justice in Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (2020)

Ananya Dasgupta and Sreejata Paul

This paper offers an intertextual reading of a Hindi-language film text, Anvita Dutt's *Bulbbul* (Nightingale, 2020), to expound its depiction of sexual desire, violence and justice in the context of both late nineteenth-century Bengal when the film is set, and the early twenty-first century when it has been released, watched, reviewed and recommended. Intertextuality serves two functions here: firstly, as a methodological framework informing the study of tropes and character formations in the film, and secondly, as a conceptual understanding of the representational possibilities organised by and, in turn, organising the discursive space of a culture. Following the story of a child bride in nineteenth-century Bengal who avenges wrongs against women after she herself suffers violence and betrayal, *Bulbbul* depicts the constraints and prohibitions on women as desiring subjects and their negotiations with the same. It does so through portrayal of an 'avenging woman,' a cinematic formulation dating back to the 1980s and holding new currency in contemporary culture, marked by its discourse on sexual violence and criticisms of procedural justice.

In the wake of the #MeToo movement in India, Mary E. John revises an older feminist formulation by observing that "suddenly sexual violence is everywhere" (138).[1] The emergence of informal and unofficial spaces for testimony in public gatherings, news media and online sources— "lecture halls, TED talks, editorial pages, blogs and online comments sections"—has allowed for a proliferation of public judgements in matters of sexuality outside of state-regulated mechanisms (Gilmore 5). Alongside abolitionist, anti-carceral and informal testimonial networks

with ostensibly feminist concerns, conservative moral policing measures and majoritarian vigilantism contend for a space within sexual culture in contemporary India. Shifts in public space for complaint and judgement are then marked by both an increased pervasion of private actors negotiating notions of justice, and the development of politically varied positions on sexual relations and imaginations of justice outside the purview of institutional law. Within this contentious cultural milieu, *Bulbbul* offers an interpretation of the lives and sexual desires of women in nineteenth-century Bengal while telling the story of a *chudail* (inadequately translated as a witch) who avenges instances of gendered violence.

Bulbbul, set in 1881, focuses on the life and death of the eponymous heroine, first seen as a child-bride struggling to stay awake at her own wedding to a wealthy *zamindar*. Next, we see an older Bulbbul decked in finery as the head of her house, holding court in a large verandah and sitting in judgement over a man who has brought home a second wife. The film quickly informs the viewer of the legend of a *chudail*, fantastically visualised as the subject of children's stories, then as the prime suspect in murders that have recently wrecked the village. *Bulbbul* wastes no time in framing its protagonist as the remorseless killer of men who, it is revealed, all have a history of abusing women. The name of a songbird in Bengali and Hindi and a popular moniker for women, Bulbbul is an evocative choice of name for the lively protagonist who we see grow into adolescence in the opulent, if foreboding *haveli* (mansion). She is the subject of her much older husband Indranil's adoration but cares more for the companionship of her brother-in-law, Satya. Bulbbul's desire for Satya is only ever obliquely suggested—in her initial misunderstanding that he is her husband, glimpses of their childhood together, and a notebook they share and write in. It is when she is no longer quietly enjoying his company but is unable to hide the grief and betrayal at his departure, that she is brutally punished by Indranil and subsequently raped by his

differently abled twin brother. *Bulbbul* dies a painful death, but upon Satya's return, he finds she has already begun her vengeful rampage as *chudail*.

Bulbbul evokes multiple texts, and even genres in regional South Asian cinema, in portraying the relationship between Bulbbul and Satya; in terms of character names, especially Binodini and Mahendra; and through specific narrative devices such as rape-revenge and vigilantism. This paper reads *Bulbbul* for its revisitation of the figural formulations of child bride, widow, avenging woman and *devi*. It does so by treating the film as a cultural text, which is given its intelligibility and singularity through a play of signifying modes and practices. This is where intertextuality as method becomes relevant. With the articulation of intertextuality as an operation always already at play in a text within a culture ("the bounded text"), Julia Kristeva takes a crucial step in understanding the exterior of a text as structures or systems of signification (*Desire in Language* 36). The cultural space is then itself an intertextual space that both limits and enables forms of signification and is, in turn, constituted by them. In this view, an intertextual reading that tracks the invocation and reorganisation of previously delineated tropes, character formations and thematic concerns says as much about the text being read, as about the cultural space within which it is read.

Intertextuality, as conceptualised by Kristeva, does not see a text's thesis as exhaustible in the repetition of discrete symbolic elements that can be traced to other texts, but attributes its singularity to what exists in it as "imprint, trace, figuration," designated as the semiotic (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 25). Following from such an understanding of intertextuality, this paper reads the thesis of *Bulbbul* as resting on the representational possibilities of desire, sexual violence and imaginations of justice reconfigured in its deployment of child bride, widow, avenging woman and *devi*. By focusing on these intertextual figurations in the film, this paper interrogates *Bulbbul*

for what it conveys of the preoccupations and anxieties of the cultural moment it appears within.

The first section examines the evolution of the child bride into a transgressive desiring subject in *Bulbbul* and juxtaposes this portrayal with the enduring Bengali cultural imagination of Rabindranath Tagore's relationship with Kadambari Devi. The second section, further exploring a Tagore connection, reads the figure of the widow for her political import in Rituparno Ghosh's *Chokher Bali* and considers *Bulbbul*'s narrative conservatism in contrast. The third section discusses *Bulbbul* with respect to a genealogy of the 'avenging woman' in Hindi cinema and asks after the imagination of justice the film offers in the face of sexual violence and the place of desire in it. The fourth section reads *Bulbbul*'s framing of its protagonist as *devi* and reflects on the association of the avenging woman with the image of the militant Hindu goddess in Hindi cinema.

Child Brides and Thakur Bari in Bengali Cultural Memory

Bulbbul begins with the protagonist's wedding and subsequent arrival into Thakur Bari, her husband's mansion. After a palanquin journey at night, the child bride alights to look upon her new home. Shot from the young Bulbbul's perspective, with the camera angled up to show the *haveli*'s imposing façade, a memorable if fleeting image evokes the horror in her mind as she stands on the threshold of her marital home. Tanika Sarkar draws attention to how nineteenth-century Bengali women's autobiographies depict "the initiation into married life as a time of great fear" (237). In contrast, such texts portray "middle age—the onset of the infertile period when the sexual connection was usually terminated—as a time of relative power, freedom, status and happiness" (Sarkar 237). This contrast, to Sarkar's mind, is "one way of referring to the unmentionable traumatic episode" of a child bride's marriage (237). In light of Sarkar's delineation of such a rhetorical strategy, one can read the above-mentioned scene as *Bulbbul*'s foregrounding

of horrors in the form of sexual violence that will come to afflict the protagonist's conjugal life. Bulbbul's only source of relief at this terrifying time is Satya's story of the blood-thirsty *chudail* with bent feet who lives on trees, waiting to gobble up the princess when she comes home. This story externalises and keeps at bay the hymeneal horror of the child bride, neatly contained in the fairytale.

Satya and Bulbbul's friendship, forged over narrative, continues into adolescence through stories written together in a shared notebook embossed with the names "Satyajeet Thakur and Mrs Bulbbul Chaudhary." Their textual bond echoes literary and cinematic portrayal of the relationship between Rabindranath Tagore and Kadambari Devi in twenty-first-century popular culture. This much-discussed relationship finds space within major Bengali texts of the 2000s, notably Mallika Sengupta's *Kobir Bouthan* (The Poet's Sister-in-law, 2000) and Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Prothom Alo* (First Light, 2001). Aruna Chakravarti's 2013 English novel titled *Jorasanko*, after the mansion that was the Tagores' home, focuses on the family's daughters-in-law.[2] Kadambari Devi is the focal point of the 2018 musical short film, *Mone Rekho* (Remember Me), directed by Mrigankashekhar Gangopadhyay. Suman Ghosh's 2015 film, *Kadambari*, follows the trajectory of its eponymous heroine's life and death by suicide. The latter, though not generically similar to *Bulbbul*, features a female protagonist and explores desire as self-expression in a manner that proves generative to a discussion of Dutt's film.

Suman Ghosh's film, like *Bulbbul*, begins with Kadambari Devi's entry into the Tagore household as child bride to Jyotirindranath Tagore and highlights how such a figure fits into the structure of the family. The film showcases a pattern whereby girls of poor families, often daughters of the Tagores' retainers, were chosen as daughters-in-law. *Kadambari* attributes this

pattern to the difficulty of finding suitable girls willing to marry the Tagores, who were Pirali Brahmins[3] and who later adopted Brahmoism,[4] both being faiths that attracted social stigma in nineteenth-century Bengal. Girls from lower class and caste backgrounds were thus chosen, who were unlettered and struggled to fit into the sophisticated and erudite mold of the family. In Dutt's film as well, Bulbbul is from an inferior social background and is deemed lucky to find a husband in Indranil, known to villagers as *Bade Thakur*.

Though Kadambari and her companion, the young Rabi, do not write together as Bulbul and Satya do, they do often read together. Whether they are being instructed in reading the rhythmic *payar* (rhymed couplet) of a *panchali* (oral religious narratives, later transcribed in manuscripts and print), or bent over an early printed copy of a Bengali primer, Kadambari and Rabi discover the joys of the written text together. When the pair are grown up, Rabi reads his poetry to Kadambari, who critiques it, suggests changes in wording and pushes Rabi to develop a signature style. Nandan Kanon, the rooftop retreat where colonial Calcutta's elite wordsmiths are hosted in *ashors* (literary gatherings), is a space where Kadambari herself organises performances and serves refreshments. Though there is no analogous space in *Bulbbul*, one cannot ignore the parallels with the abandoned wing of the *haveli* where Bulbbul and Satya sit and write. Satya offers to have this wing painted blue to resemble Bulbbul's natal home, but leaves for London before the job is done. It remains drab and discoloured, in marked contrast to the vibrant *ashors* at Nandan Kanon, though unmistakably referencing the latter, if only in the absence of its lively social setting.

Rabi's term of endearment for Kadambari is "Hecate," after the Greek goddess of night-time, magic and witchcraft. While the *chudail* in *Bulbbul* clearly draws on other genealogies, it is unlikely that Dutt was unaware of Tagore's evocation of Hecate in relation to Kadambari Devi.

Within Suman Ghosh's film, the pair's intimate relationship attracts notice through a poem published by Rabi in the periodical *Bharati*, where he explicitly reminisces about time spent with Kadambari. Their desire, which finds expression through textual means, is imagined to be sexual and causes quite a stir within the Tagore household.[5] The temporal centre of Dutt's film is occupied by the discovery of a similarly transgressive relation and the punishment Bulbbul receives for it. A textual bond, then, comes to symbolise forbidden, complex relations of desire between men and women in caste-Hindu domestic spaces in both films. In *Bulbbul* too, as in *Kadambari*, the transgression is perceived by Indranil to be sexual, though the film foregrounds it as textual. However, *Bulbbul* departs from *Kadambari* when horrific physical and sexual violence descends upon the former's heroine as punishment. After Satya leaves to study law in England, Bulbbul burns the notebook they write in. Indranil finds its remnants in the fireplace and can make out the words "Satya" and "Bulbbul." This discovery causes him to fly into a rage and administer the beating that turns Bulbbul's legs grotesquely outward and breaks her back.

To understand why the discovery of Bulbbul's evolution from a child bride to a transgressive desiring subject causes such upheaval in Indranil's mental universe, one must perceive how her actions seem to violate the claims of superiority behind caste-Hindu marriage. All aspects of such marriage that make it singular—a non-consensual, indissoluble bond forged during childhood, the immolation of widows and celibacy for widows who live on—are geared towards ensuring that "the good woman [...] has sexual contact with only one man over her entire lifetime" (Sarkar 84). The mere suspicion that Bulbbul may garner an illicit desire for any other man would have been enough, prior to the late nineteenth century, to make her offence punishable by death. However, with the emergence of public discussions regarding "an immunity of sorts for her life" (Sarkar 227) at the time, such a sentence can no longer go unquestioned. Despite being

troubled by Bulbbul's conduct then, Indranil is forced to stop himself within an inch of her life.

Notwithstanding the narrative space accorded to this particular consequence of the accusation brought against Bulbbul, there is another charge involved in that accusation that one must note. Bulbbul's illegitimate sexual desire is doubled in her inhabitation of textual space, a space that was public in a manner deemed unfit for women according to emulative models of Victorian domesticity, which were the blueprint of colonial modernity in nineteenth-century Bengal. For a woman to write and have her name imprinted upon a text that could be circulated in a 'market' of print, was a transgression in and of itself. Textual space was, in fact, meant to be a male domain, women's entry into which needed to be mediated and controlled. This kind of mediation takes place, in Bulbbul's case, through storytelling. Satya's fairytales are marked by their cautionary nature and didactic purpose. However, this didacticism does not have its intended effect. The consequences of Bulbbul's transgressive foray into textual space are spectacularly envisioned in the film's horror-fantasy mode when the *chudail* of Satya's stories finally gobbles Bulbbul up, as it were. The fairytale that existed as a threatening possibility and is cinematically situated in the wilderness surrounding the *haveli* comes to the fore after Bulbbul dies a gruesome death. The witch is unleashed and Satya, turned detective, fails miserably at apprehending her; the text can neither contain the horrors of Bulbbul's reality, nor control it.

The Widow in Ghosh and Dutt

Other than Bulbbul, there is another major female character in the film who expresses a transgressive desire[6] and is punished for it. The character in question is Binodini. Feeling that she has been dealt a bad hand in life through marriage with the differently abled Mahendra, Binodini finds in Indranil the opportunity for sexual fulfillment and reaping the material benefits of being

a daughter-in-law of Thakur Bari. This, again, is a violation of the fundamental principle behind caste-Hindu marriage: the exclusivity of a woman's sexual contact with her husband. Binodini's widowhood, then, is a just punishment within such a system of belief. In fact, in nineteenth-century Bengal, widowhood was a worse punishment for women than death. Widows had to wear white, renounce all adornments, shave their heads, and subject themselves to strict dietary restrictions and celibacy. Despite such hardship, widowhood was believed to be a time of "joyous expectation of reunion," exalted by memories of dead husbands (Sarkar 242). Despite legal provisions made for widow remarriage a few decades earlier, the practice did not have the sanction of the community, since the 1956 Act "enabled a situation where adult widows, having experienced a full-fledged sexual relationship with their husbands, could remarry and still count as good women" (Sarkar 83-84). In the context of this failure of institutional law at the hands of custom, the widow emerges as a marginalised subject, as well as a site of radical political possibility.

While *Bulbbul* does not devote much screen time to the widowed Binodini, it does evoke another widow by that name in Tagore's 1903 novel *Chokher Bali* and its film adaptation, released a century later and directed by Rituparno Ghosh. In contrast to her limited role within Dutt's film, Binodini is at the very epicentre of Rituparno Ghosh's. Unlike *Bulbbul*, where she is somewhat relegated to the background (though significantly not eliminated from the narrative) after her husband is killed, Rituparno Ghosh's film foregrounds how widowhood enables Binodini to transcend the domestic and inhabit the national. In the 2003 film, Binodini goes to Kashi to escape the injustices she has faced, but decides to stay on even after she has made her peace with them; Kashi, after all, symbolises to her a vast *desh* (nation) outside the confines of the cloistered home on Darzipara Street where she met and sought sexual union with Mahendra (Chakravarty 107).

This *desh*, which Rituparno Ghosh provides Binodini in a significant departure from the denouement of Tagore's novel, is a space of "self-actualization" that is "larger than what any marriage can offer" (Chakravarty 107). Through the mobility that becomes accessible to her in widowhood, Rituparno Ghosh's heroine emerges as a subject outside of her relationship with a man and his household. Dutt's Binodini, on the other hand, is so firmly entrenched in the economy of marital relations that she cannot conceive of subjecthood outside the domestic.

Unlike Bulbbul whose influence as *Badi Bahu* (oldest daughter-in-law) in Indranil's absence extends beyond the *haveli* and whose transformation into *chudail* takes her into the wild woods surrounding Thakur Bari*,* Binodini is only ever associated with the domestic, trading in gendered, household objects. In a ploy to keep Bulbbul from spending time with Satya, the only distraction Binodini can provide is to oil Bulbbul's hair with *jabakusum ka tel* (hibiscus-infused oil). Caught out by Bulbbul as she gossips to Satya about Sudip's abiding presence in the former's life, Binodini swiftly offers to make *paan* (betel leaf with areca nut) to change the subject; Bulbbul derisively accepts, implying that making *paan* might be all Binodini is good for. In flashbacks that capture glimpses of Binodini's life before widowhood, she shrewdly negotiates a modicum of power and satisfaction for herself within the household in the petty, cunning ways she is allowed. Despite her own transgressive desire for Indranil, Binodini repeatedly highlights the close relationship between Satya and Bulbbul before him and insinuates its illicit nature, driving the film's narrative not through purposive action so much as through suggestion. For instance, Binodini tells Indranil that surely Bulbbul must be consulted while picking a bride for Satya since there is no doubt that she has the first claim over him. Shortly before Indranil beats Bulbbul half to death, Binodini presents a direct instigation, saying it is natural for Satya and Bulbbul to have become romantically involved given they are at "that age". Forced to leave the *haveli* after being

widowed, Binodini accepts her fate in a manner quite uncharacteristic of one who has, so far, unscrupulously served herself when relegated to the status of *Chhoti Bahu* (youngest daughter-in-law) and caught in a loveless marriage. Upon her return at Satya's insistence, the film portrays a diminutive, even fearful, Binodini. The Kotwal comes calling after yet another murder and Satya attends to him; Bulbbul, about to take charge as usual, is told to stay back. Binodini chastises her: "Thakurain hain aap, Thakur nahi" (You are the master's wife, not the master himself), but quickly realizes she can no longer speak to Bulbbul that way. With some trepidation, she clarifies that she meant to ask how long Bulbbul would do everything without help. Notwithstanding such moments of capitulation, Binodini is soon up to her usual tricks, fanning Satya's doubts about Bulbbul's relationship with Sudip, mirroring her slant whispers to Indranil about Bulbbul and Satya.

Within Dutt's film, then, Binodini is the repository of an agency that is, at best, amoral and posited in contrast to Bulbbul's ethical imperative as avenger of wrongs against women and her spectacular singularity. This is a singularity before which Binodini can only exist as a shadow of her former self, in arch looks as opposed to thinly veiled threats, in gossip-mongering as opposed to outright complaint. Within Rituparno Ghosh's film, on the other hand, Binodini's agency is premised on its very lack in Ashalata. This is one way in which Dutt's narrative conservatism with regard to the figure of the widow can be explained against Rituparno Ghosh's radical portrayal. At a metanarrative level, one must also consider how Dutt's aesthetic and political commitments are different from Rituparno Ghosh's. Her opulent and high-production affordances, facilitated by and intended for an OTT (over-the-top) platform,[7] depart markedly from Rituparno Ghosh's bare and realist style. Moreover, Rituparno Ghosh is committed to reclaiming and centralising the marginal in his cinematisation of Tagore's Binodini, while Dutt is self-avowedly interested in establishing continuity with women's plight across time. Speaking to the contemporary relevance

of her period-piece, Dutt outlines this continuity: "It isn't something that you say 'oh this used to happen.' It is still happening" (Pathak par. 24). Thus, while Rituparno Ghosh's political endeavour can be read in terms of his attention and even celebration of the marginal figure of widow in his nineteenth-century setting, Dutt's ostensible purpose is to interpret nineteenth-century domesticity, at large, along ideological vectors of contemporary thought on women's desire and violence against women. This, Dutt does, in constructing the film as a revenge narrative featuring an 'avenging woman,' before whose spectacular force the widow pales in comparison.

The Avenging Woman in Hindi film

Alongside its portrayal of women's transgressive desires in the figures of child bride and widow that conspicuously endure in Bengali films of the twenty-first century, *Bulbbul* can also be read as belonging with several Hindi-language films that present as their protagonist a woman who powerfully (even supernaturally) wreaks vigilante justice against grievous offences that are gendered, if not sexually violent. Set in nineteenth-century Bengal and concerned with gender relations in a caste-Hindu space, *Bulbbul*'s ideological mooring in contemporary times is evident in the configuration of its protagonist as an avenging woman. Thus, the affective valences and political charge of the film, though resting on the nineteenth-century setting, emerge from the transposition of historical figurations of the child bride and the widow onto a revenge narrative. The film, in keeping with this other intertextual affiliation, thus configures ethics, agency and punishment quite differently from the Bengali films discussed above.

In recent times, other films that depict an avenging woman include *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), *Ajji* (Grandmother, 2017) and *Mom* (2017). *Angry Indian Goddesses* follows a group of women on their trip to Goa, where one of them is raped and killed. The women then kill

the perpetrators with the help of locals and accept collective responsibility before the law. *Ajji* follows an aged grandmother as she catches up to the man who has raped her minor granddaughter and castrates him. *Mom* also features a maternal figure, Devki, who confronts the men who rape her daughter when legal institutions prove unable to deliver justice. The especial significance of *Ajji* and *Mom* as contemporaries to *Bulbbul* lies in their depiction of grievous sexual offence against an adolescent girl as cause for the avenging woman's violence.

The cinematic phenomenon of the 'avenging woman,' first referred to as such by Maithili Rao (24), can be traced back to 1980s Hindi cinema.[8] This decade was marked by serious public discussions, parliamentary debate and activism regarding sexual violence and the need for legal reform. Three instances of custodial rape captured political imagination by 1980 and prompted feminist campaigns for legislative change, which resulted in The Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1983.[9] The campaign against sexual violence in the 1980s specifically engaged in negotiations with the law for justice and was able to secure a space for itself in public discourse. In fact, reviewing the feminist demands for legislative reform in the decade, which were only partially enacted and poorly implemented, Flavia Agnes argues that the campaign's primary achievement was the facilitation of public discussion on sexual violence that could no longer remain a taboo subject (WS-19).

Critics note the appearance of the avenging woman in Hindi film in this political climate alongside concerns raised by the women's movement and its challenge to the law. Films featuring a 'wronged woman,' such as *Khoon Bhari Maang* (Blood-Smeared Head, 1988) and *Zakhmi Aurat* (Wounded Woman, 1988), have received attention from both academics and film critics (Gopalan 2002, Sunder Rajan 1993). *Insaf Ka Tarazu (*The Scales of Justice, 1980) finds mention in *The Encylopedia of Indian Cinema* with the following comment:

> This notorious rape movie followed in the wake of growing feminist activism in India in the 70s after the Mathura and Maya Tyagi rape cases, the amendment to the Rape Law and the impact of e.g., the Forum Against Rape which offered legal assistance to rape victims (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 446).

Isha Karki, in an essay on the continuing influence of the avenging woman in two recent films, *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015) and *Pink* (2016), situates them in the political and legal context of the 2012 brutal gang rape of Jyoti Pandey in Delhi, the subsequent protest and campaign for legal reform, and the Justice Verma committee's recommendations that followed.[10] *Bulbbul* appears in the context of this history of the avenging woman in Hindi cinema at a time when the discourse on sexuality is marked by negotiations with the law as highlighted by Karki, as well as attempts at what Melissa Murray sees as "private regulation" by both conservative political groups and feminist efforts such as the #MeToo movement (825).[11]

Within this cultural milieu, the enduring presence of the avenging woman evokes an imagination of justice that goes beyond proceduralist concerns, often in spectacularly violent ways, in the context of sexuality, desire and injustice. The avenging woman trope turns, as it were, on an arresting and even eroticised depiction of violence against and by the protagonist. Films featuring the avenging woman typically depict a turn to revenge in the wake of violence against themselves or someone close to them, when the law proves to be unwilling or ineffective in delivering justice. In *Ajji,* a corrupt policeman looms large over the protagonist's home, refusing even to lodge a complaint against the perpetrator. *Mom* features long-drawn court scenes that question the veracity of Devki's daughter's testimony and the acquittal of all accused. In *Bulbbul*, the titular heroine's transformation into avenger significantly does not happen after a failed appeal to the law, but in death.

Following the protracted slow-motion sequence where Bulbbul's husband beats her with an iron poker, she is seen with legs broken, tied in a cast and held up with bandages hanging from the bedpost. Borrowing from folklore that warns against the *chudail* with bent feet, as well as the notion of toe-rings symbolising restraints on women's desires post-marriage, the film foregrounds this event's effect on the protagonist by focusing on her damaged feet. However, it is not until Indranil has left home and Bulbbul is raped by Mahendra in yet another prolonged sequence, that she dies and rises as avenger. Moreover, even as the violence at the hands of the twin brothers is spectacularly significant in establishing the extent of injustice against Bulbbul, it is the betrayal and grief at Satya's departure that marks the beginning of her transformation into avenging heroine.

Bulbbul features an instance of brutal sexual violence, as do *Angry Indian Goddesses*, *Ajji*, and *Mom.* However, the prohibition on Bulbbul's desire for Satya and his departure from home also constitutes a serious affront that, in the narrative, sees her eventually become the avenging woman. When Indranil, egged on by Binodini, decides to send Satya away to England, a vulnerable Bulbbul tells Satya that she is scared to see him go. Satya, however, is eager to leave and hands her the notebook bearing their names. This notebook is testament to the relationship between them, and Indranil takes it to be evidence of Bulbbul's desire for Satya, breaking her legs brutally as punishment. When Satya comes home five years later, he has not kept his promise of writing to Bulbbul. A jealous Satya objects to her friendship with Sudip (who nurses Bulbbul's injuries) and her place as head of the household. He threatens to write to Indranil and have Bulbbul sent back to her maternal home for her perceived transgressions. Satya also takes it upon himself to hunt down the creature fabled to have killed his brother and other men in the village.

Unlike the maternal heroines of *Mom* and *Ajji*, Bulbbul does not stop at avenging a wrong

done to herself or someone related to her. In fact, she turns vigilante with the ostensible purpose of preventing injustice against other women, after she has killed Mahendra and while Indranil is away. The avenging heroine of *Bulbbul* sentences to death a man who beats his wife, another who brings home a second wife, a man who is about to molest a young girl, and her own rapist. However, it is significant that in the face of abandonment and betrayal by the man she loves, Bulbbul cannot turn to revenge. In fact, the fantastically powerful witch touched by the goddess is wounded by Satya's bullet and the fire sparked by his hand. Bulbbul, then, exemplifies the avenging woman who offers both an imagination of justice for sexual offences with great affective charge as well as the limits of such an imagination. Bulbbul's revenge is ultimately powerless with respect to desire, even though she sparks a self-reflection in Satya, glimpsed in the last disillusioned letter he writes Indranil, making apparent how he too is not left unscathed. Thus, *Bulbbul* shares formal and substantive elements with the avenging heroine intertext in Hindi cinema and stands testament to its enduring value in contemporary concerns of sexual culture that question the possibility of justice with respect to sexual desire. The criticism of spectacular, even gratuitous violence, in the avenging heroine narrative is applicable to *Bulbbul* as well. However, an intertextual reading opens up the avenging woman figure to what Drucilla Cornell calls the "sanctuary of the imaginary domain" in thinking and re-thinking possibilities of justice (23). A speculative space is therefore made possible, where the reflection we see in Satya and the interpretation the film invites remain at the limits of judgement and sentence.

Woman as *Devi* in *Bulbbul*

Bulbbul introduces its child protagonist and the *chudail* of her fairy tales nearly simultaneously. While in Satya's stories, it is the little princess that the *chudail* is waiting to gobble up, *Bulbbul*'s *chudail* viciously murders men. Of mythic significance in much of South Asian storytelling, the

figure of the *chudail* is the vengeful spirit of a woman who is densely associated with a sexual injustice for which she seeks justice.[12] There is another figuration that frequently overlaps with that of the avenging woman in Hindi cinema, namely the *devi.* This is showcased in an amusing and prescient sequence in *Mom*. Devki meets with the private investigator DK, who has offered his services in her search for justice against the perpetrators of her daughter's abduction and rape. They meet in an art gallery and speak with hushed discretion, as he hands her a pen-drive with information on the men she is after. Business concluded, Devki stands in front of a large red canvas, as the confused investigator inquires incredulously about the subject-matter of the painting. Devki replies that it is supposed to depict an image from the *Mahabharata*, which she refers to as the oldest tale of revenge, where Draupadi is washing Dushyasana's blood off her hair. A confused DK asks about the figureless canvas, where is this Draupadi? Devki's reply rings self-referential as she simply states that *this* is modern art.

Hindi cinema has had a long history of invoking the transcendental and the divine, "mobilizing a figural mode" and "endowed with navigational mobility through worldly spaces and locales" (Sen 1). Anustup Basu argues that repeated instances of transcendental intervention into worldly affairs in moments of severe crisis, which "close the gap between fallible human law and a divine ontology of justice," are symptomatic of the contentious jostling and osmotic relations between tradition and modernity that endure in Hindi cinema (3). In Basu's formulation, it is the dynamic assemblage of "evocative powers drawn, often haphazardly, from reason, prejudice, or faith" in Hindi cinema that escapes the grammar of realism and produces utopic, yet contingent, postulates outside the logic of the state, law or patriarchal authority even when the narrative conclusion affirms the same (19). Contemporary films such as *Mom*, in their "complex historical occasioning of myth," have reorganised their formulation of ethical crises and resolutions in

response to changing political discourse, of which feminist thought is a significant participant (201).

Through the centrality of revenge and vigilantism figured in a woman protagonist that brings together the ethics of relations between people and ideals of divine justice, *Mom* and *Bulbbul* both make *devi* out of their avenging heroines. Moreover, as spelt out in the climactic confrontation between Satya and Sudip, the *devi* coincides and contests with the *chudail* in *Bulbbul.* Sudip, having found out the identity of the *chudail*, tries to stop Satya from hunting her down. When Satya asks why Sudip is intent on protecting her, he replies by declaring that she is not a *chudail* but a *devi*. While the fact that Bulbbul is in fact the *chudail* suspected of having killed multiple men is repeatedly hinted at, most significantly with reference to her feet, it is immediately following Sudip's declaration that the film makes apparent Bulbbul's motivations for the murders she commits. In a spectacular montage awash with red, Bulbbul is revealed to have killed them, with supernatural strength technologically effected, as punishment for different forms of violence against women. This foregrounds that it is the ethical justification for Bulbbul's violence, and not the fantastically powerful nature of it alone, that makes of her a *devi* (and not a *chudail*). However, the inverse may also be argued: it is the making *devi* of the avenging heroine that saves her cause from being seen as mere revenge or vigilantism and elevates it to the order of divine intervention.[13]

In the fantasy-horror framing of *Bulbbul*, the goddess Kali, popularly conceived as the patron saint of the occult, is invoked repeatedly through compelling visual analogy. Bulbbul with her hair loose and her mouth bloody when she appears as avenging heroine reproduces popular images of the demon-slaying Kali. It must be noted, however, that the avenging woman is associated with Kali as militant goddess in multiple films that do not share *Bulbbul*'s genre

affiliations. In *Angry Indian Goddesses,* the titular invocation is made explicit in a scene where the seven women who make up the main cast pose together with their tongues out. Earlier films such as *Anjaam* (Outcome, 1994) and *Khoon Bhari Maang* invoke the goddess by the names Durga, Kali and Chandi as justification for their avenging heroines.[14] Taking note of the invocation to the militant Hindu goddess by the avenging woman in popular Hindi cinema, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan reflects on the goddess as representative of *stri-shakti* or woman power (WS-34). Sunder Rajan details the feminisation of ideas of righteousness and justice in the figure of the goddess, which has been called upon in Hindu majoritarian, nationalist, and ostensibly feminist contexts. Her critique of this figure stems from the essentialist notion of undifferentiated feminine power and agency that makes *devi*(s) out of deviant or aberrant women who display superhuman strength and resilience, while not contributing substantially to the well-being of women in society (WS-35). Indeed, the subsumption of pluralistic, non-Brahminical traditions of conceiving the goddess by an undifferentiated essentialist image itself speaks to a disregard for the contentious intertext that the goddess constitutes in various parts of Bengal (where *Bulbbul* is set) and other regions of the country.

The necessary exceptionalism of the avenging woman as *devi* is brought out in *Bulbbul* in how the protagonist cannot figure the principle of the violently just goddess as long as she is alive. Unlike Binodini, who negotiates with her domestic circumstances in both petty and shrewd ways, Bulbbul only becomes avenging heroine beyond mortal limitations of pain and desire and with the aid of computer-generated imagery (CGI). When asked about the binary between *chudail* and *devi* that Sudip articulates, Dutt in an interview argues that it speaks to Sudip's flaws rather than the film's (Pathak par. 23). While Satya is mired in jealousy in his relationship with Bulbbul, Sudip treats her with reverence. In a scene featuring Sudip and Bulbbul engaged in playful banter

in the meeting place she had earlier shared with Satya, Sudip confesses that he has kept his distance because he knows Bulbbul is far out of his reach. To this admission, Bulbbul chides him for what she sees as his cowardice. Even as Satya and Sudip are caught in a tussle, quite literally, each with their own idea of who or what Bulbbul is, both men fail her. Dutt reflects on her film as more tragedy than feminist fairytale (Pathak par. 24), ascribing its tragic nature to how, even as it is set in the nineteenth century, it resonates with issues of sexual injustice in contemporary times. However, another reading of *Bulbbul* as being at least as tragic as it is triumphant is possible if one sees in its protagonist the avenging woman who must sacrifice her mortal limitations to become either *chudail* or *devi.*

Conclusion

Mary E. John suggests that the issue of sexual violence and the failure of procedural law to secure justice have taken centre stage in public discussion in the contemporary moment (138). In contradistinction to her observation, *Bulbbul* shows the law not so much failing as it is absent. In the 1880s, when the film is set, the British administration's intervention pervaded every domain of colonial society, except personal law. Cases relating to such laws were handled according to scriptural prescription and custom, separately for the two major religious demographics: Hindus and Muslims. Punishments and sentences were also delivered by religious authorities designated within each community. Therefore, gendered crimes were not legible before what, in *Bulbbul*, the Kotwal calls *firingi kanoon* (foreign law). When eventually the British passed certain laws to prevent gendered crimes, such as the Widow Remarriage Act (1856) or the Age of Consent Act (1891), custom still trumped institutional measures, at least for the next few decades, so that the illegibility of violence against women remained unchanged well into the late nineteenth century.

In *Bulbbul*, it is the two women at the heart of the household—Bulbbul and Binodini—who display a knowingness about the horrors faced by women in society. Bulbbul's knowing laughter after her transformation into *chudail* is reflected in the widowed Binodini's fearful cowering, while Satya and Sudip both remain in the dark until the climactic confrontation between them. Binodini constructs the domestic space, which houses the sexual relations among the main characters, with rumour, gossip, insinuation and suspicion—all of which have little bearing on the *firingi* law that demands proof. There is no furnishable evidence for Bulbbul's grief or betrayal, and even the murders she commits are so confounding that they become the stuff of legends and not law. The bodily evidence of violence against Bulbbul is seen by her doctor Sudip, who does not report it to the law, and his medicine is presumably of little help to Bulbbul who dies and rises as *chudail*. Ultimately, then, neither Bulbbul nor Binodini have any use for the twin pillars of modernity—law and medicine—that Satya and Sudip stand for, in their attempts to win a measure of justice or recognition for themselves as desiring subjects.

This paper has shown how the cinematic formulations of child bride, widow, avenging woman and *devi* are called upon, reorganised and represented in *Bulbbul* to reflect and weigh in on preoccupations of the contemporary cultural moment with issues of sexual violence and the possibility of justice outside the procedures of law. However, the paper also highlights the question of sexual desire outside the logic of violation and punishment, in the negotiations, manipulations, and failures that emerge among the figures discussed and their relations with each other. Viewed in light of contemporary concerns over extralegal spaces of testimony and judgement in the context of gendered and sexual violence, *Bulbbul* thus offers an articulation of the possibilities and limits of representation of the same. The representational categories of child bride, widow, avenging woman and *devi* in this paper, then, emerge as both limiting and enabling

commentary on the contentious nature of sexual desire and justice, as they respond to contemporary calls for the need to go beyond institutional law.

Notes

[1] The earlier statement, made by Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender" (1994), began with the observation: "Suddenly, 'women' are everywhere" (232).

[2] Shreya Paul observes that Mahendra could be based on an older brother of Rabindranath Tagore's named Birendranath, who suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness (par. 17). She highlights how Chakravarti's novel portrays the physical and sexual violence faced by Prafullamoyi, Birendranath's wife, and the family's shocking apathy at her plight (par. 17-18). Paul compares Chakravarti's depiction of the mother-in-law, Saradasundari Devi, turning a blind eye to Prafulla's visible bruises (par. 18) with Binodini delivering a monologue about how Bulbbul's suffering will bring her material gains the morning after she is raped by Mahendra (par. 25).

[3] Descendants of Mohammad Tahir Pir Ali, a Brahmin who converted to Islam in the fifteenth century and was ostracised by the Bengali society of the time (Dutta and Robinson 17).

[4] A religious movement spearheaded by Rammohan Roy in mid-nineteenth-century Bengal, aimed at reforming Brahminism with the teachings of utilitarian Christianity and Islam.

[5] The trope of a textual bond indexing forbidden romantic desires is also found within Tagore's "Noshtonir" (The Broken Nest, 1901) and its cinematic adaptation, *Charulata* (1964), directed by Satyajit Ray.

[6] This kind of transgression is, by definition, gendered. Claude Levi-Strauss reads marriage as a relationship of exchange between two groups of men, where the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange (115). Gayle Rubin asserts that such "exchange of women" is a shorthand for social relations where "men have certain rights in their female kin […and where] women do not have the same rights either to themselves or their male kin" (177). Both Bulbbul and Binodini claim this right they supposedly do not possess over themselves by desiring men other than their husbands.

[7] Such platforms, as their nomenclature implies, deliver film and television content directly over the internet, bypassing the need for broadcast, cable, or satellite services. This enables them to also bypass national regulatory frameworks which, in India, are particularly restrictive "in the name of protection of moral values" (Bouquillion 108). One must also consider how Netflix, arguably the most impactful player in the OTT ecosystem, adopts a "data-driven narrowcasting" strategy to "develop and distribute as many different types of content to as many micro-targeted audiences as possible," thereby creating a market for original national content (Barker and Wiatrowski 9). It is this market that Dutt caters to, a market aimed at attracting "urban and youth" audiences through significant investment in production design, VFX, etc. (Bouquillion 110).

[8] Earlier formulations such as the swashbuckling vigilante dubbed "Fearless Nadia" in 1930s Bombay cinema exist, but the focus on injury done to woman/women and her violent revenge across a significant number of films developed in light of political and legal developments in public discourse and cinematic history in the eighties.

[9] Mathura, Rameezabee and Maya Tyagi were raped by policemen and the latter women's husbands murdered, leading to widespread protests in the country and significant feminist interventions culminating in a 1983 amendment to the law against sexual violence.

[10] *Pink* does not feature women violently avenging a sexual injustice and can be read as a courtroom drama. Nonetheless Karki traces a genealogy of preoccupation with rape and women who fight back in the 'avenging woman' trope, which she argues *Pink* draws from and alters.

[11] In the Indian context, politically conservative attempts at regulation of sexual lives are evidenced in allegations of love-*jihad*, instances of moral policing, and violence against inter-caste couples.

[12] *Bulbbul* can be named alongside recent horror films such as *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* (2007) and *Stree* (2018) that draw upon the *chudail*, retaining the motive for her revenge in the face of a sexual injustice. Both *Bhool Bhulaiyaa* and *Stree* depict the spirit of a beautiful woman (a courtly dancer and a sex worker respectively) whose beloved is murdered by jealous men, while she is imprisoned or killed. In death, the *chudail* becomes a threat not just for her perpetrators but the whole family or community, even generations later. This excessive and blind revenge—in that it continues even in death and across generations finding new targets—is the source of horror that must be dealt with.

[13] The distinction mounted by the two tussling men, Sudip and Satya, between the *devi* and the *chudail* in terms of the figuration of divine justice on the one hand and blind revenge or bestial violence on the other is not tenable as they collapse into one another in the figure of the bent-footed, bloody-mouthed Bulbbul in the forest.

[14] Kathleen M.

Erndl (2013) focuses on how women in Bollywood films are figured as militant Hindu goddesses in her analysis of *Anjaam.* Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's chapter, "Name of the Husband: Testimony and Taboo in the Wife's Discourse," in her 1993 book outlines references to the Hindu goddess in *Khoon Bhari Maang* (90).

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Ananya Dasgupta

Monash University

ananya.dasgupta@monash.edu

Sreejata Paul

Monash University, IIT Bombay
Sreejata.Paul@monash.edu