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Oppressed and Reclaimed: A Feminist Lens on Women and the Supernatural

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The media has for long had a fascination with the concept of supernatural. From books to movies, the idea of the supernatural has been repeatedly explored, and in the last few years, its popularity has seen a sharp rise. The rise of its popularity can be considered indicative of societal fascination with the concept. It has never been clear where this fascination stems from, but one could hypothesize that it is rooted in the human need to explain phenomena that cannot be explained through science and logic.

Among the various functions that the supernatural fulfils, one of its roles within society and the media, has been to label and oppress women. Cultures across the world use supernatural connotations, like labelling women as ‘witches’ and ‘demons’, if they do not fit within conventional norms that have been set for them. In India, there are an abundance of stories which explore the idea of a *chudail* (witch) who seduces men and then kills them.

Feminist critiques of supernatural art and literature often discuss the role of supernatural connotations as a tool of gendered oppression. More recently however, the very tool used to oppress women is being used to reclaim power by women. More recent films like *Bulbul* (Netflix India, 2020) have explored the idea of women embracing the imagery of the witch and empowering herself. This raises questions of why supernatural connotations are effective tools of gendered oppression and what makes them valuable enough to reclaim to power? Through a feminist lens, this paper aims to use thematic analysis, in an attempt to understand why societal fascination with the supernatural has aided the patriarchal structure to oppress women and how effective is its reclamation.

Key Words: *Media, supernatural, culture, oppression, women, feminist, patriarchy, societal norms, labels, reclamation.*

Introduction:

The media has for long had a fascination with the concept of supernatural. From books to movies, the idea of the supernatural has been repeatedly explored, and in the last few years, its popularity has seen a sharp rise. The rise of its popularity can be considered indicative of societal fascination with the concept. It has never been clear where this fascination stems from, but one could hypothesize that it is rooted in the human need to explain phenomena that cannot be explained through science and logic.

There are multiple ways through which this fascination of the supernatural has been exploited across the years. Use of the supernatural can be seen extensively in literature, movies and TV shows. It is also interesting to note that this trend is not limited to specific cultures or certain parts of the world. Globally, there has been a rise in the materials of mass media that makes use of the same. However, among the multiple functions that the supernatural fulfils within the society and the media, its most common and frequent manipulation has been the use of the supernatural to oppress women (Murga, 2016). Feminist critiques of supernatural art and literature often discuss the role of supernatural connotations as a tool of gendered oppression. Across cultures, one can find that women who move away from pre-determined societal convention are often labelled 'witches' or 'demons.' This paper aims to use thematic analysis, in an attempt to understand why societal fascination with the supernatural has aided the patriarchal structure to oppress women and how effective is its reclamation.

Oppression of Women through the Supernatural

Across time and cultures, the pattern of submission and oppression of women through the supernatural can be seen. Many feminist writers acknowledge the power that the supernatural has within societies to achieve this. One of the most well-known instances of this can be seen through the Salem Witch Trials (1692). Even though this event is known in isolation, in reality the event was a chapter in a long series of such trials which took place since the 1300s onwards. Here it is also interesting to note that the event of 1692 began with the illness of two young girls (aged nine and eleven years). When the symptoms of illness did not go away through medication and prayers, the only plausible conclusion was that of witchcraft (Salem Witch Museum, n.d). Arriving to the conclusion that a woman's symptoms of illness are simply a result of witchcraft has been common across history. Even mental

illnesses of women were often classified as 'hysteria', 'madness' or 'witchcraft' instead of paying any attention to the care that needed to be provided (Felman, 1975).

Similar traditions of oppressing the women have been seen across other cultures. A study conducted on Zulus in Africa tried to recognise how folktales portrayed women and how that impacted their perception in the community. Within the Zulu community, witches are looked at as enemies of the society. Folklores often portray witches as women who are domineering and powerful. The idea of a domineering and powerful woman is a stark contrast to how a woman within the society is expected to behave (Masuku, 2005). Representing a powerful woman as a witch, which is synonymous to an enemy to the society has deeper implications of oppression, preventing women from rising to positions of power.

It is common for a lot of media pieces to incorporate this idea within their content. In *Wide Sargasso's Sea* (Jean Rhys), the fictional character Christophine is known to practice Obeah (a form of sorcery practiced specifically in the Caribbean). It is acknowledged in the book that she ends up in jail for practicing the same, since it is considered to make her 'bad' (Murga, 2016). In India as well, using the supernatural as a tool of oppression towards women is seen to be very common in the media. In all its cultural diversity, the trope of the villainous women being a *chudail* (witch) or a *dayan* (demoness) is seen across. Netflix India released an original film in 2020 titled 'Bulbul' which explores this concept. Set in Bengal, the movie follows the child marriage of a girl who moves to a village where eventually there is a rumoured witch, out to murder only men. *Bulbul* makes the use of interesting motifs to drive home the difference between a 'good' woman and the witch, which will be discussed later in the paper.

Given the fact that the use of supernatural as a form of women oppression is seen to be successful, it is important to wonder how it functions. What about the use of the supernatural, makes it an effective tool for oppression? To answer this question, I would like to refer to a Bengali story, authored by Arnima Rai Choudhury titled '*Dayan*.' The story follows a girl in a village who is approached by the village headman out of lust. When she denies him, he spreads the rumour that she is a witch. The rumours spread enough that eventually, for fear of her life, she is forced to escape from her home village and into the city (Choudhury, 2010). The story proves that a woman is by default perceived as a threat within the society. She is one who has to be kept 'in line' lest she defies societal expectations and brings shame to said society. Given this, the supernatural becomes an additional means to

oppress her. An unexplained force, overpowering the woman, and therefore leading her threat to manifest.

As mentioned previously, *Bulbul* makes the use of certain key motifs in its depiction of a witch. References to the witch are always surrounded by a tint of red, in alignment with her lust for blood. The movie also portrays the witch to have long curly hair, which is left loose and clothes which reveal a lot more skin. Compared to this, the ‘good’ women within a society are meant to have their hair combed out and tied and wear clothes which are ‘decently’ covering of their skin (Netflix India, 2020). This clear distinction between the qualities of a witch in sharp contrast to that of a ‘good’ woman is key to the argument of supernatural being used as a tool of oppression. The witch stands for everything a woman in the society shouldn’t be, since she is defying the very norms that are supposed to bind her. What makes *Bulbul* even more interesting is fact that the lead character in the film is eventually revealed to be the witch. She is shown to prey only on men to abuse the women within the neighbourhood in any way.

The trope of women taking pride in being labelled a witch and defying societally binding norms is a new development within the media. This process of reclamation of the very label used to oppress the woman is interesting to understand. What is extremely relevant to ask in such a situation is how effective is the process of reclamation of such an oppressive tool?

Reclamation of the Supernatural

Making use of the very tools used to oppress communities has been seen in multiple situations over time. It is a powerful move to be able to take claims and rights back as a community from those who oppress them. Making use of supernatural elements as a subversive route is also an interesting trend that can be seen across different communities of women.

Among the Zanzibari women, cultural regulations prevent women from openly discussing sex and sexual relations. There are rules in place about a woman’s place in society in relation to her husband, wherein she is expected to have sexual relations only after marriage and with her husband. There are beliefs regarding the possession of women by spirits, during which if a woman were to push her husband from bed, or partakes in sexual intercourse with the ‘male spirit’, it is forgiven (Thompson, 2010). While there is the definite

problem to acknowledge regarding the lack of sexual freedom that women have in this situation, this also has the potential to serve as backhanded routes of freedom for women.

There are other cultures across which recent instances of the reclamation of power through the label of the 'witch' can be seen. In fact, a lot of these instances the women don't have merely backhanded escape routes, but the space to reclaim freedom and power. With Latin-American countries and communities, women have bonded in a spiritual manner over the fear that the image of powerful women (as portrayed through the supernatural) creates and have started to take control of it. A lot of female author within the community have started to make use of the same to paint the picture of a stronger woman, thus using it as a tool to break through the patriarchy that attempts to subdue them (Murga, 2016).

Similarly, *Bulbul* (Netflix India, 2020) also attempts to take back the idea of a witch as a threat and manifest it through a lens of protection and power. The lead character, who ends up taking the role of the witch has been violated by men across her life. She is meant to be married off and tied down as a child and later has her legs mutilated by her husband who suspects infidelity (even though he also has extra marital affairs). Along with this, she is also sexually violated while she is recovering from her physical abuse. Owing to the series of events, she takes up the role of protecting the woman in her village. The film was widely acknowledged by critics and the public for how powerfully feminist it was.

While reclamation is a powerful tool, it is also important to question how the supernatural as a tool of reclamation is effective in reality. While movies and literature attempt to create an idea of feminist ideology in the process of reclamation, the question that arises is who is this process of reclamation aiding, and which women are being left behind?

Problems with Reclamation

Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 formed a critical theory within feminist ideology called intersectionality. The idea follows that even within the oppressed there is a hierarchy of power. Individuals are bound by multiple identities which exist together. Each of these identities together create a unique identity, and within these unique identities, those have more oppressed identities bear the most brunt of the oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). When understanding feminism, intersectionality is an important theory to acknowledge.

If all women are treated as facing the same vulnerabilities in their life, owing to their position as a woman, then the unique identities which add to their vulnerability is being

ignored. Certain communities of women are more vulnerable than others, and often end up being oppressed by women from more privileged communities as well.

In the position that a woman takes within the patriarchally constructed societies, there are communities of marginalized women. These marginalizations could exist owing to colour, caste, religion and sexuality among other markers. If one would claim that a white cis-gendered woman was as vulnerable as a white transwoman, they would be omitting and invisibilizing the unique and more marginalized position of the latter. The media often portrays marginalized women as more deviant from traditional femininity, therefore leaving them more vulnerable to certain forms of punishment and crimes. It also demonizes them more than women from comparatively less marginalized spaces (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2016). The idea of intersectionality within the feminist discourse of reclamation therefore becomes an important point.

Bulbul follows the story of an upper caste Hindu women, making her more privileged in an Indian society. Popular literature and media that uses the reclamation of the supernatural as a tool for feminism often follows similarly privileged women. The demonization of women in the margins is neither acknowledged nor is any effort put into including them in the process of reclamation. The reclamation of the supernatural as an effective tool in feminism is thus brought into question if it leaves behind the unique and vulnerable position of women from the margins.

Conclusion

Since it has been acknowledged that there is an inherent societal fascination for the supernatural as a medium to cover grounds of things which cannot be explained through science and logic, it can be considered that the ability of supernatural to be an effective tool is oppressing women arises from the same roots. However, times are changing and women are attempting to reclaim the label of the witch by embracing the portrayed power and independence attached to the label. While this can be perceived as a victory through some feminist lens, from an intersectionality perspective on feminism, it is incomplete. It leaves behind the women on the margins, who need most to be given the space to regain power. The reclamation of the supernatural as a tool to give power to women cannot be considered effective unless it provides power to the unique position of all women.

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