Bulbbul Review

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'Bulbbul', directed and written by debutante Anvita Dutt, and produced by Anushka Sharma, is exactly the kind of cinema that OTT platforms were created for. It's original, boldly imaginative and visually sumptuous. It follows the story of the eponymous protagonist as she is married off as a child in 18th Century Bengal. She is married to the zamindar Mahendra, (wait the references to Chokher Bali by Tagore don't end right here!) who lives in a mansion with secrets as grotesque as it's outstanding beauty. There's the mysteriously enigmatic sister-in-law Binodini (an absolutely delicious role that Paoli Dam lavishly bites into) and as Bulbbul grows (played by luminous Tripti Dimri), the makers throw into this lascivious mix the stunningly handsome younger brother, Satya (Avinash Tiwary). What begins as a seemingly unwitting tale of unexplained murders of gruesome proportions, soon turns into a serpentietale of relationship and individual dynamics which goes on to very subtly examine the position of women in our society and the suppression they undergo in the face of a society that has been patriarchal in its workings since time immemorial. However, what distinguishes this 90 odd minute morality tale with questionable subversions of feminist tropes from the matrix of most other films of this genre, is that the screenplay isn't designed to make you guess the 'who'. If you pay attention closely the answer lies right in front of your eyes, courtesy the plethora of symbols and leitmotifs the frames are peppered with. What the film does ask you to do, however, is to ask 'why'. What is the extent to which patience can be exercised in the face of suffering? Can all relationships be defined by conventions? Can poetry ever actually die? What does it take for the Mother Goddess to transform from the Demure, Domestic Gauri to the harbinger of Death and Vengeance that is Kali? And finally, what is the morality of a nation whose patriarchal conditioning doesn't stop its men from worshiping a demon devouring female deity?.

To this effect the scenes are bathed in a rich red shade and framed against feet, sometimes covered and mostly uncovered, and there is of course the recurring image of fire. There's the fire of passion, the fire of revenge and the fire of absolution. Not to mention the titular heroine who is literally named after a bird (come to think of it it really is a tale of clipping the wings of femininefreedom and liberty), horror tales of a witch who roams in the forest and a toe ring which is designed to clip the unfettered chains of individual feminine expression. Scene after scene of graphic violence, shot in the most visually aesthetic way possible, are followed by stretches of silence, framed against murals from the eighteenth century and age old Baul tunes that heighten the process of cross referencing. The lavishly conceived production values and meticulously crafted background score serve to elevate a horde of fine performances. The ever reliable Rahul Bose is magnetic as the commanding zamindar and Paoli Dam holds her own against him in a cleverly written scene where she explains to Bulbbul the choices that she has been forced to make. Her face registers a lifetime of hurt and just an iota of defiance. It's a masterful performance. Avinash Tiwary, who had alreadh wowed us with 'Laila Majnu' once again delivers and it is his arc, nicely tied up in a climactic voice over dripping with hurt, that throws light on the systemic privilege that men enjoy owing to their own sex. In spite of a singularly inspired performance, Parambrata Chattopadhyay as the demure Dr. Sudip comes off as a little distant, but the fault isn't as much of his own performance as that of the screenplay. In it's attempt at detailing what is otherwise a very generic female revenge saga, the screenplay falters in the climactic stretch, and asks the viewers to make a leap of faith that raises more questions than the answers it provides. There's also the very important question of addressing the use of (spoilers) rape as a narrative device to further the causality of the story. But in the end one must acknowledge that despite all its lackings, 'Bulbbul' really is the triumph of Anushka Sharma. From 'NH10' to 'Pataal Lok' here's a woman who has repeatedly invested her money in films and concepts that would otherwise be considered too niche for mainstream audiences and despite its eventual misgivings, 'Bulbbul' shall always be remembered among the canon of films which paved for better, more original and more inclusive content in Hindi cinema.'