Boksi (Witch): A Social Construct

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Abstract

This article intends to explore the Nepali cinema Boksi Ko Ghar, written and directed by Sulakshan Bharati. It concentrates on the way the movie tells us what/who is a Boksi is and why/how one becomes a Boksi. Boksi Ko Ghar delves deep into the hardcore socio-cultural aspects of a rural Nepali community and the psychology of the villagers living there. The methodology commissioned here is a qualitative analysis of the elements of cinema, such as actors, narration, dialogue, and symbols, to meet the objectives of this paper. The lens employed to analyze the text is Foucault's theory of discursive formation. This paper anticipates the ways in which Bharati constructs the boksi. The construction of the Boksi can be divided into two broad categories: individual and social. The individual category incorporates appearance, education, and events, while the social category incorporates setting, school, parents, husband, in-laws, maternal and paternal in-laws, villagers, the Jhankri, the lady journalist, Prateek, and the filmmakers. Junu, a small, intelligent, and naïve girl, is made a Boksi because she encounters child marriage, rape by her husband and father-in-law, her husband's death, widowhood, the blame of being inauspicious by her in-laws, and the blame of being a Boksi by the Jhankri and other villagers. The study concludes that the "Boksi" is a social construct used to marginalize women who have been victimized by traditional power structures.

Keywords: Boksi (witch), cinema, social construct, socio-cultural, psyche.

Introduction

The subject matter and content of cinemas are associated with a particular context of that society, culture, and socio-cultural practices, including the life patterns and ways of life of the people of that particular cultural and social context. The cinema serves as a reflection, mirroring societal paradoxes, disappointments,

dreams, and ambitions. It explains the appropriate course of action that one must take in a certain social scenario through its compelling notions or the projected screenplay. Cinema helps in informing and persuading people and helps in molding their opinions. Nepali cinema mirrors Nepal and Nepalese society by replicating the art, culture, tradition, complications, ecstasies, hurdles, and contradictions of the society.

Boksi Ko Ghar (House of Witch), written and directed by Sulakshan Bharati and released this year, materializes as a poignant specimen of mirroring Nepalese society by presenting a multilayered depiction of the locale, as "The cinema through its visual image and fluidity is a proximation of reality" (Jain 3). This paper intends to find out who/what the Boksi is, and for that, the elements of cinema such as its narrative, theme, and dialogues are taken into consideration and analyzed.

Boksi Ko Ghar, released in 2024, is a psycho-socio thriller set in a village in Nepal that explores the Boksi (witch). The basic issue raised here is the domestic social violence women face because of the superstitions prevalent in Nepalese society. The cinema is produced by Badri Adhikari, with Keki Adhikari in the lead role. The cinema narrates the story of a girl who later turns into a Boksi. As Simone de Beauvoir asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman"; in a similar fashion, a Boksi is not born, but rather becomes a Boksi. The society compels one to become a Boksi; hence, society produces the Boksi. Different institutions, individuals, and elements in the society work like production houses which set directives, rules, and regulations and prepare a frame/scaffold to produce a Boksi.

"The female psyche can be studied as the product of the construction of cultural forces" (Showalter 16). The intention for this inclination is that the Boksi in Nepal that the cinema critiques necessitates a comprehension of the structure, which is imperceptible, that shackles the human being in its claws to continue the formation and existence of the Boksi as the locality entreaties. Adhikari's cinema orbits around this theoretical skeleton with the objectives of portraying how a human being chokes beneath the compression of castigating parameters. This research paper, hence, aspires to explore the cinema to investigate the techniques used to produce a Boksi. Not only this, but it also inquires how this individual contests the forced manufacturing and how she attempts to turn the power relations, counterattack, and negotiate with regulatory authorities. The cinema Boksi Ko Ghar, released this year in Nepali cinema halls, is the primary text.

A qualitative research method and Michel Foucault's theory of discourse

analysis are employed to achieve the set intents of this paper. As Michel Foucault contends, power and knowledge are indistinguishably interconnected, devising the word "power/knowledge." According to his theory, knowledge is intricately woven into power systems and is not only a means for gaining power. According to Foucault, power relations shape knowledge systems, which determine what constitutes recognized truth.

Primarily, the paper showcases how a Boksi is produced/manufactured/constructed, in which the process of construction is elaborated upon. This includes the individual's growth (physical and psychological) and the authorities (mother, father, teachers, friends, husband, in-laws, Jhankri, neighbors, villagers, the writer, and the director of the cinema). The paper also concentrates on how this individual resists hegemonic traditional rules and regulations but unfortunately does not succeed and finally is killed. So, the paper's canvas is the locale which portrays the journey of an individual from a girl to becoming a Boksi.

Social Constructionism: A Lens to Study Society

To study society, one needs sociological theories which scrutinize the systems that help the participants of that particular society manufacture and discern their societal authenticity. There are various theories and concepts which deal with social constructionism. These theories span innumerable disciplines and propose different viewpoints on how social spectacles cultivate and are sustained.

The Social Construction of Reality (1966) by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann is the foundation of social constructionist theory. The authors contend that human interaction socially constructs reality, where the connotation and perception of the world are created through social progression. Similarly, the theory of symbolic interactionism, principally advanced by George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, emphasizes the techniques in which people generate connotations on the basis of their collaborations with others. It furthers that people's acts depend on the connotations they perceive about things, and these connotations are resultant of social collaborations and are customized through elucidations.

In addition, Harold Garfinkel advanced ethnomethodology, which analyzes the techniques individuals employ to construct their perception of their daily life. It emphasizes the commonplace, unremarkable behaviors that build and maintain social reality by concentrating on the manner in which social interaction processes generate social order. In a similar vein, the work of developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky, particularly his theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), demonstrates the vital role that social contact plays in the development of cognitive abilities. Psychology's social constructivism emphasizes how crucial culture

and the social environment are to comprehending human development.

Michel Foucault's discursive formation is one of the prominent theories which investigates how language and social practices shape knowledge and truth. According to Foucault, social structures and power dynamics form the knowledge and truth that we accept. Foucault in The History of Sexuality claims gender norms do not come into existence naturally; rather, they are created by discourses that specify and define what is thought suitable or acceptable (Foucault, History 95). The observation of power dynamics within discourses is the foundation of Foucault's ideas. This is especially important to the study of gender since, according to him, persons in charge of dominating gender discourses have a big impact on social perceptions and expectations.

The mechanisms by which institutions and authorities continue these discourses to maintain control are described in The Birth of Biopolitics, which is a result of Foucault's examination of the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, Biopolitics). Furthermore, gender analysis resonates with Foucault's idea of historical changes in discourses. In his writings, such as Discipline and Punish, Foucault emphasizes that gender standards are not fixed but change through time in response to the prevailing social attitudes and values. We may track how cultural ideas of masculinity and femininity have changed by examining the development of gender discourses, which sheds light on the constructed character of gender identities.

In Madness and Civilization, which is an example of Foucault's investigation of the pathologization and medicalization of gender identities, he reveals the function of discourses in classifying and restricting non-normative gender manifestations. This emphasizes how discourses and power structures interact to influence how people perceive deviation and normalcy within gender categories. Subjectivity and identity construction are intricately entwined with discourses in Foucault's theoretical framework. Understanding how people define their own identities is profoundly affected by his claim that discourses construct both individual and social identities.

Foucault's emphasis on the intersectionality of discourses is crucial because it prompts us to think about the connections between gender and other axes of power like race, class, and sexuality. His discourse theory's thorough understanding of gender depends on this dynamic, which is fundamental to his broader philosophy. Foucault's discourse theory also highlights the possibility of subversion and resistance within dominant discourses. This topic underlines that underrepresented groups have the power to question and reshape socially constructed standards,

leading to societal change.

In conclusion, Michel Foucault's discourse theory offers a powerful analytical tool for dissecting and comprehending how identities, norms, and power dynamics are created, maintained, and challenged through language, knowledge, and societal practices. This tool draws on a wide range of Michel Foucault's writings. The Boksi is seen via this lens to be a complicated and dynamic construct that is inextricably tied to historical settings, power relationships, and the interaction of different discourses.

Over the past two decades, scholarly and critical attention to Nepali cinema's representations of women has ascended substantially. Early cinemas specifically situate women in symbolic, familial roles that were to serve moral or nationalist ends. Twenty-first-century cinemas shifted to a broadening of women-centered narratives where cinemas explored widowhood, ritual violence, labor migration, sexual subjectivity, queer desire, and women's experiences on the margins of labor and urban life. From symbolic maternal figures in Aama to the queer intimacies of Sungava, the cultural horrors portrayed in Jhola, and labor-centered protagonists in Saili and Bulbul, Nepali women-centered cinemas have widened both theme and form over six decades.

The critical literature tracks these developments with cautious optimism: representation has diversified, festival and independent circuits have created openings for risk-taking, and women's labor (onscreen and behind the camera) has become a recurring focus. Yet structural inequalities in production, distribution, and cultural reception continue to constrain full transformation. Future scholarship should combine formal cinema analysis with production and audience research to capture the changing political economy that will determine whose stories about women can be told in Nepal and how they circulate regionally and internationally.

To date, there are three characteristic roles of women in the Nepalese cinema industry: the Romantic role (women as providers of sexual pleasure), the Moral role (women as gatekeepers of morality, ethics, and culture—wife), and the Caretaker role (women as providers of warmth—mother). This justifies that cinemas replicate the society. The cinema Boksi Ko Ghar too tells us how the Boksi (witch) is constructed by the society in the society.

Summary of Boksi Ko Ghar

The cinema Boksi Ko Ghar portrays a superstitious locale where a girl child turns into a Boksi. Junu and her mother live in a village happily. Their bond as mother-daughter is very strong. Junu is in her elementary school, and she is a very brilliant student. She is naïve. She used to study in school during school time and

help her mother in household chores after school. Junu's father wanted to marry off his daughter, but the mother refused as she was a child. In a male-dominated society, men's decisions matter; hence, we watch Junu getting married to a man who is three times older than her, named Prakash.

The scene of the marriage ceremony brings tears to the eyes of the audience, where an innocent girl is made a bride due to the patriarchal traditional culture. As she was a child, she was unaware of her responsibilities as a married woman. Late at night, we watch as she goes to bed with a glass of milk for her husband Prakash, who holds her tight, pulls her towards himself, shuts her mouth with his hand, and rapes her. The next day she reaches her maternal place, where it is shown that the mother is oiling and heating the body of the daughter as it was hurt because of forceful intercourse. She asks her mother, "k Baba le pani hajurlayi esari nayi maya garnu hunx" ("Does dad also love you in this manner?"). The mother slaps her, and when she starts crying, she hugs her tight.

Later, it is witnessed that their sexual act was not reciprocal; it was controlled only by Prakash. One day, while going to the nearby market, he drowns in the river while crossing it via ropeway. After the death of Prakash, she was compelled to face hardships. She was blamed as the cause of her husband's death and hence called inauspicious. Draped in a white cotton dhoti, with messy long untidy hair, she visually signifies her pathetic condition. As she was inauspicious, her mother-in-law forced her to live in a cowshed. She was not safe in her house either. She was raped by her father-in-law, who threatened her to keep her mouth shut. Once, while raping her, he was caught red-handed by his wife. Instead of punishing her husband, she punishes Junu. She calls the Jhankri and tries to prove her a Boksi so that the villagers will drive her off from the house and she will get rid of her.

The in-law family abandons her, and all the villagers force her to leave the village. So, she goes to live in a Pipal tree at the outskirts of the village, which is later called Boksi Ko Ghar. In the end, the villagers stone her, and she falls on the earth, bleeding heavily.

The Construction of Boksi

The construction of a Boksi can be divided into two broad categories: individual and social.

Individual: Junu as a Boksi

Junu's Appearance

At the individual level, it is found that her appearance when she was a child, a married woman, and a widow was normal, but as she is abandoned by the family,

her appearance becomes frightening. The way she drapes her white and sometimes red dhoti, her messy black long hair, her dark face with kajal-applied big bright eyes, and bare feet all project her as a Boksi. Her abnormal staring eyes, coarse voice saying "ma Boksi ho" ("I am Boksi"), her crawling, climbing the Pipal tree, hanging from the branches, roaming aimlessly, and collecting stones and pebbles all support making her a Boksi. As Bordo notes, "The body is not only a text of culture. It is… a practical, direct locus of social control; it is a metaphor of culture" (Bordo 13).

Education

As a child, she is a bright, intelligent student in her elementary school. She is shown as a clever girl who is good at her studies as well as among her friends and teachers. She is naïve. As she is forced to marry, she is not able to complete her studies; hence, the lack of education turns her too weak to protest against all the atrocities she faces, which leads her to become a Boksi.

Events

The events in her life play a very important role in making her a Boksi. Born in a poor family, raised only by her mother, quitting school early, child marriage, marrying an old guy, strict husband and in-laws, the early death of her husband, rape by her husband and father-in-law, scolding by her mother-in-law, the Jhankri event, and exile from the village—all these events turned into milestones in the constructing of the Boksi. When a boy dies in the village, the villagers blame the Boksi for his death. On top of that, the Jhankri also charges her with his death, so all the villagers go towards the Pipal tree to kill the Boksi and finally stone her, and she falls bleeding.

Social Setting

A rural peasant illiterate community, a big Pipal tree amidst the road near the bank of the river, hanging ribbons and dhotis from the tree, the shrieking sound in the background, and the darkness painted in the scenes all conspire and support the making of the Boksi.

School

The school there in that village is a primary school. The infrastructure of the school signifies the poverty of that locality. The teachers and the other staff all seem to be in very pathetic condition. The teachers in the school too believe that there is a Boksi, except for one English teacher. A girl gives a speech on the Boksi where she says, "Boksiko dherayi shakti huncha re" ("Boksi has great power"),

"Boksile tantra mantra garera je pani garna sakchcha re" ("Boksi can do anything with the help of spells"), "teasayile rati pipalko rukh chewchaw jaan hudayina re" ("that is why no one should go near the Pipal tree during the night"), "kinaki pipalko rukh bhaneko boksi ko ghar ho" ("because the Pipal tree is the house of Boksi").

Among them, only one teacher seems to be modern, who shuts up a girl by saying, "maile Boksi hunna vaneko hoin?" ("Haven't I told you that there is no Boksi (witch)?"). It was the same teacher who insisted Junu's mother stop her marriage, and later he was the only person who insisted she continue her studies. As the school and the authorities in the school were mere observers and could not do anything to stop the marriage and continue Junu's education, they are also responsible for the fate of manufacturing Junu as a Boksi. Education plays a vital role in society. As Junu's mother and father both were illiterate, they agreed to the child marriage of their daughter, which later led to the making of the Boksi. Apart from this, the society too was traditional and less educated; that is why the super-stitious belief of the Boksi still exists there.

Maternal House

Junu's maternal house is a small hut on the top of the village where she used to live with her mother. She and her mother are both shown busy with their house-hold chores. The condition of the house speaks out loud about the poverty and the pitiable life they were living. The poor condition compelled the mother to agree to her daughter's child marriage, which becomes one of the causes of the atrocities she faces and later helps in making her a Boksi.

In-laws' House

Junu's in-laws' house was a reputed person's big house in the village where she came to live with her husband, mother-in-law, and father-in-law. As she came there as a child, she is fearful of all living there. The very first night she is raped by her husband. Later, it is shown that the sex between Junu and her husband was not consensual; that also triggered the pain which later turned into a psychological wound which helped in forming her as a Boksi.

Junu is raped twice: primarily by her husband when she was a child, and later by her father-in-law. Junu's father-in-law is caught red-handed by his wife. As a young widow, it was difficult for Junu to maintain her chastity because "after the death of the husband, she 'ceases' as a person and passes into a state of 'social death' which also signals her 'sexual death'… As a widow, she is reduced to a

void, a zero" (Mukherjee 219). As she is turned into a zero and has now become a threat to her mother-in-law's reputation, the mother-in-law wanted to drive her off from the house but could not do so without charging her; so, she thought of charging her as a Boksi. The mother-in-law calls a Jhankri who charges Junu and names her a Boksi. Junu is proved to be a Boksi by the Jhankri, and the villagers also misbehave with Junu and drive her off from the village. Later, she is stoned to death. Finally, the villagers turn Junu into a Boksi.

Villagers

The locale of this cinema is a remote village. The villagers are superstitious because most of them are illiterate. One of the villagers says, "Boksi mantra sikna das din lagcha kati din bhayo tyo keti ayeko?" ("It takes ten days to learn the Boksi spell. It has been how many days since the girl came here?"). They were talking about the journalist who came there to write an investigative story about the Boksi. As the villagers are in the majority, Junu cannot resist; hence, they charge and name Junu a Boksi. Villagers torture her and compel her to leave the house and the village. Later, villagers kill her because the Jhankri charged her with being a Boksi.

Jhankri

The Jhankri is called by Junu's mother-in-law, who wanted to drive her off from her house. The Jhankri tries to prove Junu is a Boksi. He uses different techniques to torture and insult her so that she loses her mind and accepts herself to be a Boksi; this is the reason Junu names herself a Boksi. She says, "ho ma Boksi hu" ("Yes! I am a Boksi"). This justifies that the Jhankri uses the power of his position to transform Junu into a Boksi. Lastly, he is successful in his intent of making Junu a Boksi and driving her off from that house and the village. At last, she is stoned to death because she is charged with being a Boksi. It is this Jhankri who finally names Junu a Boksi.

The Lady Journalist/Prateek

In the beginning of the cinema, the audience encounters a character, Swechya Raut, who is a journalist from Kathmandu, focusing the light of a torch towards the Pipal tree in search of the Boksi. She is there in that village to find out who the Boksi is, and she wanted to prepare a story about the Boksi. Prateek gave some information about the Boksi to her, so she is there to write about her. Although she raises questions like "Boksi vanne hunn" ("there is nothing like a witch"), later in a conversation with Prateek's sister-in-law she says, "tapayiko ni usko jastayi man

chcha hoin ra?" ("you also have a heart like her, don't you?"), "tapayi pani ta u jastayi mahila hoin ra?" ("you are also a woman like her, aren't you?"). This also shows that they are also involved in the making of the Boksi. Later she asks Junu, "tapayiko naam k ho?" ("what is your name?") and she herself replies, "mero naam Boksi" ("My name is Boksi").

Story/Director/Screenplay/Writer/Actors

Sulakshan Bharati is the director, screenwriter, and writer of this cinema. It claims that this cinema is based on true events. The cinema is about the superstitions prevalent in Nepali society. Bharati rightly picked up the issue of the Boksi, but the point is how he picturized the Boksi in his cinema. Primarily he tried to portray that the Boksi is a psychological thing. It is only the superstition of the people. The way he presented the plot and the characters all supported the idea of the making of the Boksi.

The level of violence faced by the women is portrayed very vividly, which is suggested to be the main cause of Junu becoming a Boksi. The characters—Junu, the children in school, the journalist, teachers, mother, father and in-laws, villagers, Jhankri, Prateek, his brother and sister-in-law—all are well-characterized and well-fitted into the roles that support his theme. Apart from this, the use of darkness in the scenes, the makeup of the characters like the Boksi and Jhankri, and the dialogues all supported his vision. The actors too support the roles they are in, which has supported the making of the Boksi.

The main argument lies in: if the Boksi is a matter of superstition, then why in this age of science and technology has he surfaced this issue? Not only this, but he also shows how the Boksi is made, and in the final scene, we see that the journalist also shrieks like a Boksi. What does he want to convey to his audience by this? Does he want to say that the process of making a Boksi is still going on? In addition, he shows that Junu lies bleeding on the ground after the villagers stoned her. This also is not clear whether she is dead or still alive, only wounded. So, this is an open-ended issue where the audience is left with their choices to decipher the meanings on their own whether the Boksi exists or not.

Cinemas, Society, and Culture

The historical role of cinema in the transformation of society and culture is a very important concern regarding the apparent need for more in-depth research throughout the creation period of Nepalese cinemas. The neglect from academics not only decreases the excellence and thoroughness of the cinema production but also constrains cinema's capacity to accurately portray the intricacies and sub-

tleties of Nepalese society. This disparity curtails the potential of the medium as a reflection of reality and as a vehicle for societal change, as cinemas struggle to engage with and tackle the real issues and dynamics of the communities they represent.

Nepalese cinemas have mostly failed to uphold gender balance and neutrality in the cinema industry, demonstrating how women in Nepalese cinema are frequently pushed to the sidelines. They are often depicted from a male perspective, objectified, and their roles are limited to minor characters with little development or influence. This portrayal not only mirrors but also reinforces societal clichés, which hinder cinema's potential to confront and reshape gender norms. Nepalese cinema needs to move away from conventional storylines and adopt more empowering and intricate representations of various individuals and groups, including women. In doing so, cinemas can contribute to the broader feminist movement, advocating for gender equality and challenging patriarchal structures in Nepalese society and culture.

Conclusion

The Nepali cinema Boksi Ko Ghar, a social thriller, vindicates the issue of the Boksi. After exploring and analyzing the whole cinema, it is now clear that Junu is made a Boksi; thus, the Boksi is a social construct. She is constructed as a Boksi by the society, which includes two large categories: individual and social. The individual encompasses appearance, education, and events, and the social category incorporates setting, school, parents, her husband, in-laws, maternal and in-laws' houses, villagers, Jhankri, the lady journalist, Prateek, and the story writer, director, producer, actors, and all the technicians involved in the making of the Boksi.

Small, intelligent, naïve girl Junu is made a Boksi because she encounters child marriage, rape by her husband and father-in-law, her husband's death, widowhood, the blame of being inauspicious by her mother-in-law and father-in-law, and the blame of being a Boksi by the Jhankri and other villagers. Finally, she is stoned because she is a Boksi, and she falls on the ground bleeding. Later, the journalist is also shown sitting on the branch of the Pipal tree and screaming in a similar sound as Junu, signifying that the making of the Boksi is still going on. Hence, it proves that the Boksi is merely a social construct, and until and unless the society is literate enough, the constructing/manufacturing/producing of the Boksi will continue.

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