

**Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues**  
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**Lecture-28**  
**Through the Lens of Gender Textual**

Hello everyone, so far, we have been talking about Indian feminism from the 19th century onwards in terms of its chronological history. Now you have to remember that feminism in India is an ongoing process, just as activism has impacted feminist theory; theory has also impacted activism. In the last two lectures I teach you about how to apply a feminist intersectional lens to read and analyze a text and a book.

And finally, we will summarize all the major points discussed so far. Now let us begin with the analysis. It has been an ongoing anxiety in feminist criticism as to how to read subject creation and object formation when it comes to intercultural and intra-cultural representations of a subalterned woman. Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her article under Western eyes argues that the division between first and third world where the first world is seen to be the epistemological center results in a cultural reductionism of the third world.

Thus, Western feminism depends on the stereotypical assumptions where the third world woman is always already objectified, homogenized and is seen to be oppressed by similar patriarchal structures across times, spaces and cultures. By fixing such notion Western feminism removes all contingent material condition that affect the third world women and renders them a historical fixed in time and space not perceiving any change that might be arising from the change of time and events and also a political incapable of any agency.

By claiming to have knowledge about the third world women Western feminism asserts its superiority as theory generator, whereas the third world women remain evidence providers. Such assumptions replicate the colonial binary of self and the other where the self is Western feminism which flourishes at the expense of the other or the third world feminism. And such perception seemingly inclusive at the outset operates through a process of object formation in order to acquire a subject position for itself.

Represented thus the third world woman appears either forever victimized or a subaltern who needs to be spoken for because the subaltern cannot speak. Such representation or a critique of such representation becomes problematic when we come to the figure of Phoolan Devi globally known as the Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi has remained and continues to remain a huge spotlight figure.

Perpetually described as a victim of sexual oppression the reasons being marital rape by the husband and cast rape by the upper caste people and a ravaging Kali or powerful Durga Phoolan Devi's image has undergone innumerable interpretations and representations. Here we will see how the film Bandit Queen and the book that inspired the film India's bandit queen the true story of Phoolan Devi on the pretext of presenting a true story in fact both the texts claim this authenticity.

They actually end up being capitalist products. This becomes crucial in their temporal trajectory because 1991 was the time when India plunged into the entire process of globalization and liberalization by encouraging foreign direct investment in the free market rather than a government-controlled nationalized market system and thus we will see how the book which was published in 1991.

And the films released in 1994 are directly connected to the changing economic system of India. It is interesting to see how through these two texts Phoolan's figure almost gets written in the overlapping structures of caste gender and globalization and this is where I intend to see whether in Spivakian terms such representation becomes a portraiture known as *darstellen* a Phoolan Devi or whether it speaks for her known as *vertreten*.

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak in her seminal can the subaltern speak critiques the transparency assumed by the first world author while representing the third world. She argues that Western intellectuals tend to assume that they know the condition of the others and thus the non-western subject becomes visible through the benevolence of the western intellectual who speaks for them.

Such consolidation of the other into its own subject status erases the interest of the western intellectual and renders him transparent. Spivak speaks of two types of representations by Western intellectuals. Representation as speaking for *vertreten* and representation as portraiture

or representation darstellar. She criticizes the Western intellectuals' attitude of merging the two different terms into a simplistic compression.

And thereby claim that the oppressed subjects speak act and know for themselves, it leads to an essentialist utopian politics. She also criticizes the subaltern study scholars whose rendering of voice to the subaltern often becomes nativist and ends up in reproducing the Western representation of the other. In both cases of representation what we come across is an epistemic violence.

Where the knowledge of the subaltern gets destroyed in order to maintain the power hierarchy within knowledge where the West remains the center of knowledge creation and the non-west becomes the location of evidence providers. Keeping the Spivakian critique of transparency in mind in the present context of the representation of Phoolan Devi in the global market the questions we need to ask are who has the authority to speak and who is the target audience.

Such queries would invariably lead us to Stuart Hall's idea of representation. In his article the work of representation he talks about three approaches of representation; the reflective the intentional and the constructionist. He asks does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events. Does language express only what the speaker or the writer wants to say his or her personally intended meaning or is meaning constructed in and through language.

Although he sets language as the premise of discussion, we can easily translate them into our discussion of Bandit Queen and India's Bandit Queen because they too raise questions such as whether they are based on already available popular images of Phoolan Devi or whether they create an image of Phoolan Devi and to what extent or whether at all that creation is intentional.

When perceived through the complex net created by globalization where a text floats from the local to the global audience due to its wider circulation, it is no longer possible to limit the meanings intended or implied only to a local and national audience living within a historical and political boundary; such action which signals a new world order where borders no longer remain significant whether in economic or cultural exchange.

The representation of Phoolan Devi brings out a more crucial factor that the gender and class-based representations of subaltern women have turned them into figures who must be represented by the elite nationalist politicians who claim to speak for them as elected representatives or the native intellectuals who claim to portray the individual subaltern. Leela Fernandes writes the transformation of Phoolan Devi into India's Bandit Queen provides a striking case of the ways in which the power affects the production.

And consumption of cultural forms spillover the territorial boundaries of nation states and cannot be cast into a singular model of meaning. To read these two texts about Phoolan Devi would therefore make us look into which structures of popular representation they follow and which structures of oppression they claim to resist. We can look at the book as material means of production.

Mala Sen's book delineates the social and political nuances of Indian culture and painstakingly delineates fact from fiction in the telling and retelling of the story of Phoolan Devi which has taken on mythic proportions in Indian folktales. The way the book attempts to maintain transparency is by giving various versions of controversial events regarding Phoolan's life. But at the same time, it claims credibility through the actual interviews with Phoolan Devi and her family and the drafts and narratives which are apparently told by Phoolan herself.

Thus, on the one hand we get a popular media image of Phoolan Devi by MJ. Akbar. She wears jeans, she carries a stun gun which she can use with great accuracy and without any mercy she belongs to a backward caste and she hates the upper caste thakurs because they have oppressed her and her community. She has been abducted and raped repeatedly by two thakur gang leaders who killed her lover and got her.

She became a dacoit after she was born by her husband and spat upon by society. Today she is the most powerful dacoit in Uttar Pradesh and she will have her revenge on both the thakurs and the society. In contrast the book claims to represent Phoolan's words untampered. When I spoke to her, she was reluctant to speak of her bezathi or dishonor as she put it at the hands of the thakurs.

She did not want to dwell on the details and merely said un logo mujhse bahut mazak ki those people really fooled with me, I was not surprised by her reticence to elaborate. First of all

because we had an audience including members of her family other prisoners and their relatives. And secondly because we live in societies where a woman who is abused sexually inevitably ends up feeling deeply humiliated knowing that many will think it was her fault or partly her fault that she provoked the situation in the first place.

Such textual representation of Phoolan's life history positioned between the genres of biography, interview and transcriptions of her oral narratives highlight the constructed nature of biography which claims that the representations are authentic. Moreover, by mentioning that these are taken from various sources either directly or indirectly related to Phoolan. Mala Sen an elite intellectual who comes from London to hear the story of a lower caste woman in Uttar Pradesh herself remains a transparent position where she as a native informant now presents the unadulterated version of Phoolan's life to the English-speaking readers.

Such benevolence on the author's part provides the commodified subject who now possesses the acute object position with adequate sympathy which the low-caste woman would not otherwise have gotten because she being an illiterate cannot speak the language of the elite. And considering how this book was published when Phoolan Devi was still in jail and soon after the publication her release followed.

It also throws light on how the book accelerated the commodification of the figure of Phoolan. Now let us take a look at the book as a form of resistance. However, to look at the book's value only through its temporal and material means of production would take our attention away from its resistant aspects which the book repeatedly wants to foreground and this is where we move from the conventional individualized representation of Phoolan Devi as a sexually oppressed lower caste woman to a political narrative of selfhood.

This becomes possible by Phoolan Devi's engagement with wider structural forms of oppression as faced within and outside her community. From the very beginning the book presents the family feud over land ownership between her father and her cousin Mayadin as the central concern which motivates Phoolan to resist. In fact, as elaborated in the narrative Phoolan's life gets determined through this act of defiance against Mayadin who beats a Phoolan and kidnaps her by a gang of decoys and continues exploiting her family as well.

Here therefore along with the individual Phoolan who takes or is rather accused to take personal revenge on her rapist, we see another image of Phoolan who struggles against political issues like land ownership and so on. It comments on the contemporary political party's engagement with the Bandits of Chambal valley with regards to the issue of catching the low-caste bandits in order to ascertain the block votes by thakurs.

Phoolan Devi successfully evading the query for 2 years and assumedly killing 22 people in Bahamai becomes the face of media as a low-caste bandit woman fighting for social injustice. This book brings out three different levels of oppression through Phoolan's character. First at the level of intracaste and class where men like Mayadin who belong to the same caste but situate in higher class practice oppression over Phoolan's family.

Secondly at the level of intercaste where the upper caste thakurs and the local policemen sexually abuse her and thirdly at the level of state where social and constitutional justice perform contradictory roles in determining an individual's rights and ownership. On the one hand the society abandons the lower caste woman who seeks the rightful ownership of her land and on the other hand the state tries to catch the lower caste decoys in order to please the upper caste leaders.

Thus, by presenting Phoolan and not by claiming to speak on behalf of her the book becomes port richer rather than standing in. Now let us take a look at the book as temporal means of production. Explaining the emergence of testimonial literature in the first world marketplace with I, Rigoberta Menchu. Robert Carr argues that such temporal history of testimonials gets involved in an ongoing history of mappings of otherized communities and their worlds dehistoricized and deterritorialized for the accumulation of knowledge.

And power by Bourgeois ruling class Anglo-Americans and their descendants. However, autobiographies and biographies written in English had been in the Indian literary scenario for a very long time. Thus, along with the diaries and travelogues by upper class men in early colonial period the biographies and autobiographies of the elite nationalist male leaders such as Nehru and Gandhi.

And also, prominent women such as Sunity Devi and Indira Gandhi had huge market base in India. In 1989 the Stree Shakti Sanghathana published a volume titled we were making history

which documented the experiences of women's participation in an armed struggle in the Telangana movement. As an alternative form of women's testimonial literature written by feminist intellectuals about the non-upper caste upper class women.

Mala Sen's book however appeared with more sensation because the erstwhile feminist famous Phoolan was claimed to have spoken through Mala Sen in this biography. This book was creating an audience as especially in India who wanted more knowledge about the lower caste woman. Now let us take a look at the film and do a comparison with the book. What brought Phoolan Devi to the media forefront and gave her the name Bandit Queen was basically the Bahamai Massacre in 1981 when she accursedly killed 22 upper caste men who had raped her.

However, this remains a conjecture till date because Phoolan herself never accepted this accusation and the statements of the witnesses remain highly contradictory. Added to this was her successful evasion of the police force and her laying down of arms before the picture of Gandhi and goddess Durga which furthered the glamour she received in the media and news channels and established her as the low-caste female champion who fights for social justice.

Thus, when the film Bandit Queen was released in 1994 there was already a ground prepared in the popular imagination in which the film now got added. Directed by Shekhar Kapoor and commissioned by channel 4 a British public television channel the movie becomes a remarkable example of a collaborative project that disrupts easy opposition between third world production and first world consumption.

But at the same time, it undermines certain stereotypes about the third world in order to satisfy a global audience. Soon after its release the film caused a huge approach with comments ranging from Arundhati Roy who vehemently opposed the representation of Phoolan Devi especially in the film as primarily a rape victim to Mala Sen who claimed that Phoolan Devi had consented to the production of the film to Shekhar Kapoor who argued that the film was an expression of his own anger towards caste and gender discrimination in India.

The consequent legal ban on the film and censoring of it made it even more popular and continues to be so in the present scenario. Based on the book the film depicts the life of Phoolan who is forever a victim of sexual oppression whether it is by her husband or the upper caste

men or the police. In fact, the movie begins with her marriage to a much older man thereby depicting the misfortune that is to follow.

However, it is the rape scenes and the massacre scene that caused the most uproar due to Phoolan Devi's own attempt to stop the film from being screened in India. According to Mala Sen's book she never comments on the rapes and so far as the massacre scene is concerned the film causes a factual misrepresentation by accepting her participation in the massacre which she herself completely denied.

In response to this Kapoor argued that through this film he was resisting the middle-class morality in India which portrays rape as the ultimate misfortune for a woman and encourages silence in this regard. By projecting Phoolan Devi as a Dalit woman taking revenge on her upper caste rapist Kapoor claims that he presents a critique of both the caste system in India and gender violence which being at the lowest rung of the society the lower caste women experience the most.

In the film we see the individual Phoolan fighting for her personal Justice. Now let us analyze the film as a material means of production. Along with the counter hegemonic possibilities the film can also be seen as participating in the hegemonic politics of production and consumption of cultural texts in the international markets by privileging certain issues over others such as land ownership.

Here I do not intend to make any value judgment but my focus is that both the text and the film appear with their individual politics of representation. In our article showcasing India gender geography and globalization. Rupal Oza gives an example of beauty contest for women becoming a battleground between the government and certain local groups. While the government showcases it as a marker of globalization and liberalization local groups take a rather nativist position arguing that such contests distort the Indian tradition between all this hustle and bustle what gets lost is the woman herself.

Caught in the mesh of global versus local the woman becomes a commodity to be showcased but never to speak or be heard. Phoolan Devi in both the film and the book seems to be acquiring such commodified object position because we never really hear her speak; it is the author and the director who as native informants speak for her. At the same time, it confirms



the native subaltern women's authorized position by making the text seem like it is speaking in her voice.

As Fernandes says the production of the figure of India's Bandit Queen provides a significant site for an interrogation of the production and consumption of the modernist authenticity by the third world subaltern woman within the shifting, fragmented and destabilized movement of post-modernity in the late capitalist nation states in the West. Such projection and production of Phoolan Devi renders the speaker transparent because it is a collaborative project of the West and the third world.

And also maintains the modernity tradition binary which seeks to preserve the essential traditional India. Now let us analyze the film as a temporal means of production. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her book *Real and Imagined Women* shows how often the proper and the popular visual representations maintain binarism. Referring to *Khoon Bhari Mang* Rajan writes the motive of revenge in *Khoon* derives mostly from the genre of the vigilante film.

A recent phenomenon in the Indian Cinema that reflects a growing popular belief that the forces of justice and order having been broken down in a basically lawless society only the righteous who is invariably single and male but may sometimes be a gang and sometimes even female can punish the guilty. Thus, at the surface level while one may read the second marriage of the widow in the film as challenging the dominant Indian patriarchy which keeps widows in seclusion.

A deeper understanding of the film shows how it ultimately foregrounds the mother figure and justifies her revenge on the grounds that she was protecting her children released in 1988 and popular among the mass *Khoon Bhari Mang* already prepares a crown for movies like *Bandit Queen* which depend on the trope of victimized woman's successful revenge considering that it does not go beyond the realm of the personal.

In *Bandit Queen* such juxtaposition occurs in two ways by explaining the caste and gender oppression as peculiarly Indian and thereby different from the West and second by presenting India as a failed narrative of modernity. By highlighting the systems of caste, child marriage caste and also gender-based patriarchal oppression the film asks for a sympathetic audience who sigh at her misfortune.

And ironically such attempted critique of oppression in India accepts caste as a system given by birth and continuing through ages. Resistance thus fails to address the roots of the caste system. Instead, it takes a nativist position that tries to preserve the essence of the lower caste their values and practices. Such perception renders the lower caste people and the lower caste women as fixed and a historical and fall short of noticing the dynamic nature of the group.

How they get affected by the changing social political and economic situations of the nation and the globe. This becomes apparent in the issue of land ownership which the film refrains from highlighting. Ownership of land is a modern concept which is closely linked to capitalism. Phoolan's direct confrontation with Mayadin regarding the rights to own land presents a different picture of a lower caste woman fighting not just for personal vengeance but also material political conditions.

Moreover, Phoolan's resistance is portrayed in the film as a challenge to the upper caste men; intracaste patriarchal system does not come into focus. The film almost rewrites the discourse of modernity in India through the representation of the government officials ranging from the police to the doctors as violent and corrupt. The film shows that despite the constitutional democracy India has failed to become modern as compared to the West.

Such portrayal neatly fits into the stereotype of the third world as the new orient where unrestrained violence continues to be performed. The only challenge the film poses to such third world nation caught in the grid of oppressive tradition is through the repeated sequencing of the rape scenes. As mentioned earlier while one may read the narrative of resistance through such depiction but seems to be forgotten is the very fact that Phoolan Devi herself had preferred silence over the matter.

Assuming the authoritative position when the director assumes to speak the pain on behalf of the victim a question that arises is does a resistance always need to be spoken aloud or can we read silence as resistance too. While the globalized audience feels sympathetic with the film's narrative and raises voice for a more liberal India the figure of Phoolan no longer remains important.

She becomes a cult towards a better and progressive India. From being a person, she becomes a symbol of a new woman a bandit Queen and Phoolan therefore is robbed of all kinds of agency and is left to stand for certain ideas. In Spivakian terms Phoolan becomes the figure standing in for all lower caste women homogenized as rapes and speaking on behalf of them. Spivak answer essay can the subaltern speak with an account of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri suicide as a classic challenge to the dominant regulative psychobiography which gets embedded in the psyche not as inherent.

But as deliberately constructed through tradition and practice. However, according to Spivak this against the grain suicide succeeds in becoming interventionist by not being an alternative psychobiography. In other words, by not getting Incorporated within the dominant structures of representation and by not becoming another dominant form of representation. Bhuvaneshwari suicide retains its resistant subaltern position.

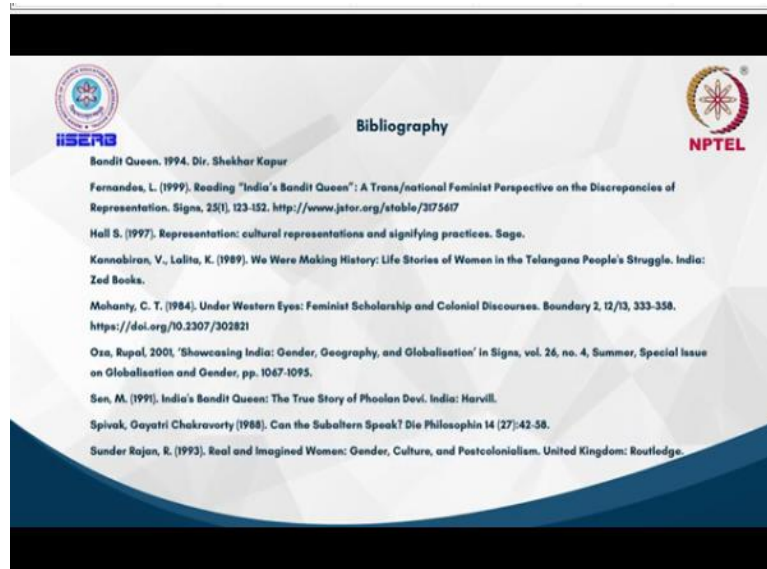
Her suicide makes us consider that it is not like she cannot speak but it is us who cannot hear her. In case of Phoolan by projecting her as an individual creating an alternative psychobiography and becoming famous in the world market, it precisely robs the resistance factor from the scene. What we get instead in both the book and the films are a colorfully packaged back view of a woman head tied in a red band.

And holding a rifle above her head, inviting the global audience to hear her story as presented by the author and the director, but at the end of the day we are left with the question what happens to Phoolan Devi, does she ever speak? Now let us summarize today's lecture. This analysis of the book and the film a Phoolan Devi we see how it highlights the following points.

First the ways in which caste, gender and class intersect to create specific situation for Phoolan. The problematics of representation and self-representation, as we see the depictions of Phoolan do not comply to the dominant representations of her. In fact, dominant representations reproduce the castiest sexist assumptions about her which leads us to the third observation.

Feminism is also a self-reflexive process where we as speakers learn about our own privileges and drawbacks and should make sure that these assumptions do not get imposed on the people. In other words, we must learn to speak as the woman not for them. This is how it can become an achieved position. Thank you.

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