

MAKING OF A BANDIT: A DALIT WOMANIST READING OF PHOOLAN DEVI'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY I, *PHOOLAN*

*Lalitha Joseph, Assistant Professor, Department of English,
St. John's College Anchal, (Affiliated to the University of Kerala)*

Abstract:

Indian Dalit activist researcher Cynthia Stephen applied the phrase “dalit womanism” to designate the diverse lived experiences of dalit and other subaltern groups of women in India. This concept is employed in this paper to probe into the social, economic, and political features of injustices that have given rise to gendered destructive practices comprising of discrimination and violence. The paper, intends to map out the different planes of exploitation and resistance of a female bandit from a dalit womanist perspective. Phoolan Devi's life is dictated by the hegemony created through a matrix of gender, caste and economic differences. The lived experience of discrimination and exclusion, lend support to the fact that social-inequality in India, is a stark reality. The paper investigates on how Phoolan Devi relates to, and challenges the caste stigma, economic exploitation and gendered roles by exploring the dynamics of oppression and resistance. It also brings to fore the contexts that are blameable for making a female bandit and thereby, calling social attention to the ignored areas of dalit women empowerment. All kinds of discriminations and systemic violence wielded against dalit women will be studied in detail so that these can be easily identified, rectified and the dalit women could be sensitized about their integral role in the society.

Key words: *Dalit womanism, patriarchy, feminism, womanism, discrimination, exclusion, caste stigma.*

Hegemonic caste and class play an integral role in subjugating the Dalit communities in the society. Dalit women are positioned at the intersection of gender and caste. Violence and abuses these women have faced within home and society have failed to enter the canons of Dalit and feminist movements. The woes they suffered, are generalized, and eclipsed as the homogenized sufferings of the marginalized and women. Cynthia Stephen, an activist and independent researcher, has found that “feminism” is an umbrella term and is preoccupied with issues of privileged women in general. In order to incorporate the specific experiences of the women from lower rungs of the society with diverse experiences, Stephen believed that a specific theory has to be formulated. “Dalit women are slowly attempting to come to grips with their invisibility in the discourse, and are beginning not just to speak out, but also to theorise and build wider solidarities so as to earn the place, hitherto denied, under the sun” (Stephen). Taking cue from Alice Walker, Cynthia Stephen found the word “womanism” more appropriate than “feminism”. Walker in her seminal work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1983) elaborates the term “womanism”. This concept applauds women's culture and strength and defies all western material yardsticks of beauty. It celebrates the grit and resilience of the black women. Moreover, it is a consciousness that integrates race, sex, economics, politics and socio-economic considerations. Dalit womanism incorporates not only the experience of the dalit women in general, but also provides space “for the expression of the diversity of the experiences of religious minorities, tribal and ethnic identities who are presently termed subaltern...” (Stephen). It aims at empowering Dalit women and equips them to fight back when humiliated, to demand their rightful wages, to do away with social and religious hierarchy and to get rid of conventional norms of beauty. It also has the objective to evolve an eco-friendly life style by preserving indigenous culture by

putting an end to untouchability. Thus Dalit womanism specifically caters to addressing the social, economic, emotional, political and psychological problems of unrepresented subaltern groups. This concept aims to address these issues in tandem with feminist and womanist groups and at the same time act in unison with Dalit and other subaltern movements. "Dalit womanist discourses not only question the mainstream Indian feminism's hegemony in claiming to speak for all women, but also the hegemony of Dalit men to speak on behalf of Dalit women" (Saroja 446). Feminism in India gave little space to describe the struggles and diverse experiences of women belonging to different castes, religion and economic background.

The embarrassments, deprivations, suppressions and segregations are an integral part of a Dalit woman's consciousness. She has to narrate her life by bringing to focus three hegemonic planes of oppression: class, caste and gender. Phoolan Devi's life is dictated by the domination created through a matrix of gender, caste and economic differences. The lived experience of discrimination and exclusion lend support to the fact that social-inequality in India is a stark reality. From early childhood, Phoolan Devi was troubled with the social equations that was difficult to comprehend. In her autobiography *I, Phoolan* she expresses this trauma: "It was as if I wasn't allowed to exist in my village, as if my family was worse than the fleas on a dog. Was it just because we were *mallahs*, poor people?" (9). The autobiography was written to testify to the world the gravity of injustices she suffered, to inspire women who have undergone similar pain and disgrace, and strengthen men who are continually exploited. Being the first woman from her community who got the opportunity to express the truth, Phoolan as the representative of the *mallah* community, "... wanted to prove that we all have our honour, whatever our origins, our caste, the colour of our skin or our sex" (496).

Autobiographies, as Satchidanandan remarks, are attempts at "self-expression, self-construction, self-understanding and self-transcendence" and women's autobiographies are "explorations of female-selfhood". It is a means of "survival for women, a way of seeking freedom from patriarchal definitions, stereotypical images and expected social roles" (7). A woman finds it difficult to carve an identity for herself as she is torn between a culturally defined self, constructed by the patriarchal society and the self that deviates from the dominant cultural prescriptions. The eventful life of Phoolan Devi was marketed by many in order to make money. She was illiterate but couldn't stand the way her life was written by others. Therefore she consented the publisher of *I, Phoolan Devi*, to record her story on an audio tape. Two writers transcribed her words. Later, it was read to her and she approved it by putting her signature on each page. This was a challenging task but in his note from the publisher, Bernard Fixot writes: "After everything she lived through, she deserved to be given the chance to tell her story herself" (500). The autobiography is an assertion of her identity and a recapturing of self-respect. Phoolan's life was appropriated by the media, photographers, movie directors, politicians and policemen. "They all thought they could speak about me as though I didn't exist, as though I still didn't have any right to respect. The bandits had tried to torture my body, but others tried to torture my spirit" (496). Phoolan Devi is the representative of a community muted by history, caste and class.

Biographies of dalit women are resistance literature, fraught with a history of stigmatization. The "I" in the title *I, Phoolan Devi* emphasizes her identity and assertion that she is capable of narrating her story. She becomes a voice and a representative of many voices that are stifled by casteism and patriarchy. Phoolan's family has been subjected to economic and social exploitation. Refusing to adhere to the dominant social norms, Phoolan has etched out her identity as a dissenting woman with a revolutionary fervour. Her autobiography resounds the poverty, subjugations and miseries that were an integral part of her life since she was born. Deviant manners from accepted gender norms distance Phoolan from society and gender. Her auto biography is a mapping of the self and society. It is a proof of how "dalit women are gradually attempting to speak out their traumatic experiences as well as theorizing their pain, their anger in their stories, novels, memoirs and autobiographical writings" (Saroja 446). Phoolan Devi's

autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi* is not restricted to her sufferings alone. It is a tale of survival, hope and courage intended to inspire. The book, begins with this short message from her:

This book is the first testimony that a woman of my community has succeeded in making public. It is an outstretched hand of courage to the humiliated and downtrodden, in the hope that a life like my own may never repeat itself. I should be dead today but I am alive. I took my fate into my hands. I was born an underdog, but I became a queen - Phoolan Devi, 1995

This autobiography becomes a chronicle of human misery and vulnerability, a tale of survival and a saga of a woman's journey that transcends social boundaries.

Child marriage is customary in many dalit communities. The girls are married off before they come of age. It takes place with the approval of society and religion. The major reasons are many: poverty, no concern for female education and health, the worry about paying a large sum as dowry if the girl is in her 20s, the fear of social disapproval if daughter is unmarried, and, above all, the attempt to control female sexuality (Will Child Marriage 9). Phoolan was married at the age of eleven to thirty year old Puttilal. The custom was that the girls remained at their own home till they attained puberty. Phoolan's father refused to send her with Puttilal. "Taking an eleven-year old was like taking a slave, with the difference that we were the ones who paid him" (Devi 88). Puttilal insisted that there is none to cook or do chores at his home and Phoolan was taken to her husband's place. "Regardless of their age, women and children are positioned through forced marriages as victims, as properties or commodities in a system that devalues and dehumanizes children and infantilises women" (Caputo 202-203).

Patriarchy carries with it, gender inequality, authority, control and violence. It infiltrates into society through socially endorsed institutions like family and socialization processes. Men, by default, take moral charge of women and children and even exercise power over the body of them (Meera 43). This authority is maintained through the use of force. Thrashings, as per accepted belief, remind a woman to be loyal to her husband. This justification asserts the view that a woman's sexuality is her husband's possession (Tolton 39-40). Violence against child brides is a method of mastering them. It roots the idea that their inferior position is natural and irredeemable. In child marriages, children who are ignorant of their own body are subjected to the atrocities of men who see women just as bodies. Phoolan's age was just a number for her husband, Puttilal. Regardless of her age, he forced her into a physical intercourse under the guise of a game. She mistook his penis as a "serpent" and thought that he was beating her with it as a punishment for some misdeeds. While she was reeling under unbearable pain, he took a knife to rip open her genitals and she managed to flee from the house (Devi 98-105). The trauma of this incident remained with her throughout her life. The innocent child's complaint to her father is not about trivial issues but serious sexual abuse.

Oh, Pa. That man hurt me. He tortured me. He wanted to put things in my belly. He was going to cut it open....He had a serpent and then he took a knife because the serpent couldn't go in, and then he did like dogs in the village. It hurts so much, Pa, I can't even go to the toilet (Devi 110).

Male power, prejudice and domination are an integral part of patriarchy. They exert it through sexual violence. The trauma created by such acts is difficult to heal and creates psychological damages. Sexual exploitation of dalit women is a privilege enjoyed by the upper castes. A woman who is abandoned by her husband is treated as a public property. She could be raped at any time. "...rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of the would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear..." (Brownmiller 72). Domestic violence is sanctioned by law and society. When Phoolan returns to take vengeance, her anger is directed at Puttilal's penis. "It was the serpent in him that I wanted to destroy". She crushed his "serpent". The note left on his body stated: "Warning: this is what happens to old men who marry young girls!" Phoolan takes revenge on all other sexual abusers in a similar manner. "The only thing to do with

men like that was to crush their serpents, so that they could never use them again! That would me my justice!" (Devi 281-282). Sarpanch's son, Pradhan's sons, Babu Gujjar, Shri Ram and thakurs from the village of Behmai, all molested her. Apart from causing physical wounds, they left incurable bruises on her mind. "Teaching a lesson to Dalit men involves many times a violation of their apparent 'property' albeit, the bodies of Dalit women. In them is said to reside the honour of their fathers, brothers, husbands, and the larger patrilineal group. Thus the idea of 'showing Dalits their place' by humiliating them often takes the form of sexual violence against Dalit women" (Saroja 445). Phoolan was intentionally raped to demoralise her dissenting spirit. There was "...some force in me they were all trying to crush, a force that made me retaliate, a force that made me desperately to survive" (Devi 199-200).

The female bonding that emerges from empathy scaffolds each other, even if it lasts only a brief period. The women who came out hearing the wail of Phoolan form the integral part of an empathetic sisterhood that dissipates in fear at the presence of a domineering patriarch. The women consoled her but had no courage to speak against Puttilal, as he was the owner of his wife. Still an old woman argued with him for molesting his young wife. Puttilal asserted his authority and dragged Phoolan home in front of the villagers. "He could beat me and abuse me as much as he pleased. That was the custom and that was the law" (Devi 105). Wives are forced to follow and accept what men devise and formulate. Female experiences, opinions and perspectives are undervalued. Woman's unquestioning obedience to husband is interpreted as the law of the land.

Girls are required to negotiate their lived experiences in ways that are often ignored by institutions like family and law. A married girl's prolonged presence in her father's house is viewed suspiciously by the society. Even if she has fled from the in-laws fearing for her life, it is viewed by the community as a sign of bad upbringing. They remain silent about the abuses they suffer, keeping in mind their parent's respect which is at stake. Phoolan went for the last time with Puttilal to safeguard her parent's honour in the village. She was treated as an outcaste servant and was refused food and entry into the house. She had to sleep in the cowshed (Devi 145).

Unequal distribution of resources is one of the main features of caste division. Dalits were either unpaid or underpaid. Self-reliance and economic independence are the foundation of women empowerment. The evolution of Phoolan to a courageous young woman began after being abandoned by Puttilal. The first step she adopted was to demand wages for the work done. Thakurs often forgot to pay, postponed or would dismiss her with lame excuses. She was not ready to go back without getting paid for the work she has done. Even her own family and community disowned her for her robust reactions and decisions. She insisted that it was her right and decided to elicit her rightful money. Forced labour was thrust on Phoolan's family by Pradhan. He and his family had little respect for the time and service of Phoolan's family. In return for tiresome labour, they would be thrashed if they asked for food, grains or money. Phoolan resisted with tooth and nail. The Pradhan and his sons jointly attacked Phoolan's parents and her sister Chotti but she didn't let go. In spite of the severe lashes she suffered, she was determined to work and live in dignity (Devi 154-167).

Caste stigma forms the dominant theme of dalit autobiographical writing. The constant rebuke by thakurs using phrases like "mallah whore" creates social stigmatisation. Shri Ram, Vickram's guru, a thakur, often abused Phoolan as a bitch of backward caste trying to lure him (314). Even when Vickram Mallah was educating her on the rules of caste, Phoolan couldn't come to terms with it. She was against sparing Mayadin from vengeance as he was the member of the family. "...I couldn't accept it, I couldn't abide by it, because I was a woman. I had no place in the hierarchy of caste. I was lower than all of them, and the demons I had to slay were more devious. Whatever caste they belonged to, they were all men" (298). The most powerful exclusion that is ever present in dalit writing is from access to the otherwise common resource of water, the very basis of life without which the possession of land itself would be rendered meaningless" (Chakravarty 138). Phoolan was treated as a pariah as she has gone to jail. Women

chased her saying that she was unclean and refused her water from the public well Sarpanch, decided that Phoolan's family has to give a deposit of eleven hundred rupees to draw water from the public well (Devi 212-213).

Shared stories of sufferings empower the marginalized. The abuses and reminders from the upper castes that they are underlings hurt their dignity and self-respect. Their dissent is not only targeted at individuals but also at the hegemonic hierarchy that makes possible such segregation. Vickram Mallah and Phoolan Devi belong to mallah caste. Vickram has witnessed the pride, greed and lust of thakurs in banditry. Phoolan Devi, being a woman has to suffer more. Her body is the site to establish this pride, ego and lust of thakurs. Driven by poverty the members of mallah community wear worn out cloths. Thakurs are always immaculately dressed and look down upon the "ugly" mallahs. Hatred for these men and their deeds unite Vickram and Phoolan. Most of the villages raided by Vickram Mallah belong to thakurs. When Shri Ram, who belongs to thakur caste is released from prison and takes charge as the chief of dacoits, his first aim is to kill Vickram Mallah, for he is perceived as a threat not only to Shri Ram but also to the entire thakur caste.

Men, for Phoolan Devi were embodiments of power, lust and violence. Therefore she disliked men in whole. Vickram Mallah, the dacoit treated Phoolan with respect. She was not used to such ways. In her village, all men demanded respect but Vickram asked her consent to be her husband. Apart from this, he asked his gang members to promise allegiance to him and treat all women with respect. He assured her that she wouldn't have to undergo the disgrace and humiliation she suffered before. Her fear of dacoits gave way to respect and pride when Mallah became the chief. She sought his assistance to avenge Mayadin and deliver her and to impress upon the people of her village that she was not a pariah, but a human being (Devi 259-265).

Education empowers an individual. Phoolan is illiterate but she is sensitized about the ways of the world. Her transformation into a bandit happens under the training of Vickram. He trained her to be a leader. She was taught to be firm in decisions, to talk authoritatively, not to trust anyone, and use the rifle. Vickram Mallah explained to her about the universe, the earth, the sun, the sea and the countries. He also taught her to count the currency and to live with self-respect without stooping in front of the upper castes. Phoolan understood that dacoits were not born but made by the circumstances. "They had been caught up in the land disputes or family feuds like my fight with Mayadin and because they couldn't get justice from the police, they had taken it into their own hands" (Devi 286-287). Phoolan was treated with respect by the bandits in spite of the absence of laws and restrictions. In the village everything was based on customs and duties and men behaved like dogs. Therefore Phoolan liked the uncertainty of jungles and hills more than the crude life in the village. After Vickram's death Phoolan understood that survival was her destiny. She started looting the rich and establishing justice by distributing it among those who have nothing.

Phoolan was a true leader. She respected the confidence and trust of the men in her group. She ensured they were properly fed, clothed and protected. She was the last to run when there was a police raid ensuring the safety of her gang members. She refused to surrender because she was a woman. Unlike men she will be stripped naked and humiliated to establish their power. Miseries and consistent threat to life make one suspicious of the people and environment. Even after being careful and vigilant, ignorance of technology and language caused trouble for her. Phoolan was cautious while talking with the police officer Rajendra Chaturvedi. In spite of that, he managed to get her snaps. Phoolan negotiated her conditions for surrender. Even though most part of it is judiciously formulated, traces of ignorance can be discerned in many places. Even though she lacked skills acquired by learning, she knew "how to sniff out their traps, read their faces and interpret their words" (Devi 456-457).

The mystery and exotic elements embedded in the life of Phoolan made her a commodity of high market value. The police and administration made a public show of Phoolan before her surrender. She was given back her uniform, unloaded rifle and cartridges. She was instructed to tie the red cloth over her

forehead and garland the chief minister. She was placed on the roof of the car and displayed in front of the crowd. The journalists annoyed her by taking photographs of whatever she did. Movies on her life was made without her permission. Prison staff bribed people to show Phoolan devi to strange visitors. Even they offered her a share of it which she refused. She protested saying she was not there to entertain anybody (Devi 471-482).

Phoolan Devi was born a feminist. She refused to conform to the stereotyped gender roles and behaviours assigned by the society for women. She rebelled, answered back and walked alone provoking the patriarchal society. Her father's submissive attitude to the rich and powerful men infuriated Phoolan. Phoolan didn't become a dacoit because of greed for money.

At an age when young women wait patiently for their husbands, squatting by the fire and cooking chapatis. I was a stone in the jungle, a stone without feeling or regrets. I was no longer a woman. A stone couldn't marry a man when it was the man who made the stone (Devi 487).

Even in prison Phoolan rebelled and fought against corruption, laziness and filth. She twice went on hunger strike. She admired to strong women, one from politics, Indira Gandhi and another from administration, Kiran Bedi. She liked Indira Gandhi, as she upheld and respected the agreement Phoolan made with the government. Besides being knowledgeable and powerful Kiran Bedi had authority and used it powerfully to fight corruption. Bedi initiated steps to free Phoolan, ordered the prison officials to leave her in peace and take good care of her. She was released in February 1994 (Devi 489-495).

Geographically certain places disown while others accept Phoolan. Displacement and being on the move empowered Phoolan. Suspicious of the people and surrounding, she developed a sense to identify danger. Social boundaries overlap geographic boundaries to make situations worse for her. Margins of exclusion hinders Phoolan to exist in society with dignity. She not only defies these margins, but also violently react against those who draw and insist on margins

Inequalities reinforce each other to make life miserable for the dalits. Domestic violence and abuse, marital rape, child marriage, kidnapping women, all social injustices find a space in Phoolan Devi's life and her autobiography. In spite of all miseries, sufferings and setbacks, Phoolan is not cowed down. Instead, she gathers courage, take decisions and leads her group with great self-confidence. The conflict Phoolan experienced in her mind is stemmed from social injustices. As a result, she suspects every man. Suspicion coupled with fury prompt her to put an end to all injustices with a gun. Dissent is channelized to improve social conditions. Apart from a few men like Vickram Mallah, many men viewed women as a commodity and had least respect for them.

Dalit womanism as a movement has great responsibilities ahead. It has to create awareness in dalit women of inequalities that are normalized and naturalized, and probe constructive ways of promoting equality by doing away with biased customs and traditions. Phoolan is an image and symbol and her autobiography is an inspiring tale of survival. Her life depicts the evolution of a battered, powerless and submissive woman to an assertive, challenging and confident woman.

A bandit is an outlaw who engages in plundering. Phoolan Devi was a bandit. She robbed the rich and fed the poor. Bandity gave her an opportunity to assert her identity and to establish equality in the society. The real robbers were the rich like her uncle Bihari and cousin Mayadin who robbed Phoolan's father of their land and pushed the family into poverty. Sarpanch, Pradhan and other thakurs who didn't pay wages to workers also were dacoits. The upper caste, who robbed the dignity and self-respect of the marginalized, the police who acted in accordance with the rich and the powerful, the media fabricating news of her identity and capture, and the movie makers who had little respect to verify the details with her before exhibiting her biopic are strands of the wide network of banditry. The only difference is Phoolan didn't get the protection of law while all others were either emissaries of law or people who enjoyed its safe protection.

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