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**From Heroic Durga to the Next Victim of
an Oppressive Patriarchal Indian Culture:
Too Many Variants of Phoolan Devi's Biography**

SUMMARY: Phoolan Devi (10.08.1963–25.07.2001), the famous Bandit Queen still appears in stories about famous Indian women. However, while in India, mainly among poor villagers, she is usually described as a heroic defender of the poorest, in the West Phoolan is seen primarily as another victim of Indian patriarchal culture. Moreover, although most of books about Phoolan are based on interviews with her, every version of her biography differs from one another, which raises the question whether these differences are the consequence of a conscious manipulation of a person who tries to justify certain dark aspects of her life, since the famous dacoit owes her fame to her bloody act of revenge on Thakurs in the Behmai village, which was the biggest crime committed by bandits in India until then.

The most popular story about Phoolan's life is the film *Bandit Queen* made in 1994 by Shekhar Kapur, based on the book *India's Bandit Queen. The True Story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen, who is also the author of the screenplay. The autobiography of Phoolan Devi, who tried to stop the release of the *Bandit Queen*, claiming that it shows a false story, was written in response to those two works. By constructing her image in the autobiography, Phoolan Devi tries to appear as a very strong woman who could achieve a lot, in spite of adverse conditions. Yet it is hard to resist the impression that the autobiography of Phoolan Devi, despite of its very realistic elements, is to some extent a false testimony. The question remains whether it was the publisher, who decided to construct the story this way to satisfy the tastes of the Western readers and respond to their needs, just like the movie of Shekhar Kapur, or maybe Phoolan, deliberately or unknowingly, presented herself as a victim in search of sympathy after the massacre in Behmai.

KEYWORDS: Phoolan Devi's autobiography, manipulation, justification, violence, sexual abuse

Phoolan Devi (10.08.1963–25.07.2001), an illiterate woman from Gorha Ka Purwa,¹ a small Indian village in the Jalaun District of Uttar Pradesh state, became a charismatic leader of bandits, and as such she appears in essays about famous Indian women, although mainly in popular ones. The life story of Bandit Queen, which has been successively presented by Richard Shears and Isobelle Gidley, Mala Sen, Irène Frain, Roy Moxham, Shekhar Kapur, Phoolan herself, Dimitri Friedman and many other authors of minor articles, clearly shows that while in India, mainly among poor villagers, she is usually described as a heroic defender of the poorest,² in the West, even if compared to a female Robin Hood or a modern day Count of Monte Cristo, as noted on the cover of her autobiography, Phoolan is seen primarily as another victim of the oppressive Indian patriarchal culture and the caste system. What is more, both sides focus mainly on two aspects of her life—the sexual violence she suffered from and her revenge on molesters—ignoring other, potentially more interesting issues, and, although most of books about Phoolan are based on interviews with her, every version of her biography differs from the previous one. Therefore, this situation raises the question whether such serious differences result from the fact that some of the details were forgotten by Phoolan, or if they are the consequence of a conscious manipulation of a person who,

¹ The transcription of some names differs in individual biographies (e.g. Gorha Ka Purwa/Gorhapurwa, Vikram/Vickram, Putti Lal/Putttilal, etc.), therefore, the quoted passages may contain some inaccuracies.

² Some passages, similar to the one cited below, which describe support given by Phoolan to the poorest, can be found primarily in her autobiography: “One day, a villager invited us to his daughter’s wedding. We often went to the festivities in a village, and if parents were poor, Vickram and I would give money to help the bride’s father pay her dowry. Sometimes I would perform the *kanya-daan* ceremony in place of the bride’s mother, giving presents to the groom. It was because the money of the rich went to help the poor that the villagers protected us, and I hadn’t forgotten the way my family had struggled and starved to be able to pay our dowries.” (Phoolan Devi 1997: 319).

increasingly becoming famous, tries to justify certain dark aspects of her life.

Phoolan Devi owes fame to her bloody act of revenge, known as the Saint Valentine's Day massacre. On 14th of February 1981 a gang of bandits led by Phoolan killed 22 Thakurs, upper caste villagers, in Behmai, a village with a population of 400, which is located on the east bank of the Yamuna River, about 75 miles from the city of Kanpur. Although Phoolan constantly denied her participation in the attack, witnesses' testimonies differ significantly on this matter. Describing the event, Roy Moxham, who strongly defends Phoolan in his book, recalls the biography of the Bandit Queen, written by Irène Frain. He states that the author had interviewed two survivors of the massacre for the book, and, according to her, both men, who had survived under the pile of corpses, were clear that Phoolan had not been directly involved in the shooting. Moxham informs his readers, that the killing had been led by another bandit, Ram Avtar, who had shouted the order to execute the gathered men. However, a closer examination of another biography, written by Shears and Gidley, who describe the Behmai event with many details, shows that the involvement of Phoolan Devi is much less unambiguous than Moxham would like to see it:

[...] She looked around at the bandit leaders, Man Singh, Ram Avtar and Balwan Singh. Mustaqim had lent her some of his men but he himself had not come, saying he was ill. She suspected that was an excuse, and that he knew she was going to teach the Thakurs a lesson. Kidnapping was more his line. She caught the eye of Ram Avtar and nodded. He shouted an instruction to the dacoits and the villagers were herded off. [...] Phoolan Devi had a look of victory and he had seen her nod to the other dacoit who seemed to share command of the gang. It was clear that this had all been arranged. They had come to the village to kill Thakurs and all those robberies, all those insults, had been games leading up to the big event. [...] Phoolan Devi surveyed the scene from the higher part of the track. "Here is your revenge, Phoolan Devi", Ram Avtar called and fired another shot into the tangle of bodies. She nodded and turned back towards the village. The bandits followed as she walked past the crumpled form of Surendra Singh and headed away from the main square. The dacoits gathered up armfuls of stolen goods: rifles, clothing, ornaments [...] Despite the stars, the night was pitch black. The day just passed would long

be remembered. Never before had a Sudra killed so many of higher caste. Never before had a woman been responsible for such a terrible crime. [...] Women had been raped. Children had been kicked out of the way. Phoolan Devi had taken personal command of the shooting and had watched while the men were gunned down. She had stood on a rooftop singing a love song, her voice soaring above the bloodletting. Then she had shouted through the megaphone, “No-one will forget the name of Phoolan Devi!” (Shears, Gidley 1984: 119–129)

Recalling, among others, the work of Shears and Gidley, the biography of Mala Sen in turn clearly shows how Phoolan changed her testimony about her involvement in the crime, or even the presence in Behmai:

[...] The *Illustrated Weekly of India*, part of the *Times of India* consortium, published an extract from a 1984 book (*Devi*, by Richard Shears and Isobelle Gidley) which records her reactions at the time:

Q: Why did you take your gang to Behmai?

A: What should I say? What can I say? We all had to take revenge for what Lala Ram and Sri Ram had done. For many days after they killed Vikram they did *mazak* [made mockery] with me.

Q: What do you think about the Thakurs of Behmai?

A: They are dogs. Dirty dogs. I won't say more.

In the *Indian Express*, rival English-language newspaper to the *Times of India*, Chand Joshi reported (in his article “Phoolan now only a Jangle of Bangles”, 6 March 1983) that when asked about her involvement in Behmai Phoolan replied:

“I was not there at the spot on that day and God is my witness. I would not attack a village where my so-called enemies were not even present. I have killed with my own hands only one man in my life, but I will not give you the name. I was on the other side of the village when the massacre took place.” Another journalist following the story for the *Indian Express* had been their correspondent in Madhya Pradesh for some years and knew the terrain well. Referring to the period after Vikram Mallah's death, he asked Phoolan Devi:

Q: What happened to you?

A: I was taken to Simra. It is the Jalaun district of UP.

Q: You were taken to Behmai or Simra?

A: I was not taken to Behmai. I was not there.

Q: Who was responsible for Behmai then?

A: (Pause) Four other gangs were there—Ram Avtar, Raghunath and Rampal. (Sen 1997: 154–155)

Regardless of whose version is more convincing, Phoolan confirms in her biography not only that she was taken to Behmai after death of her guardian, but also that she was present in the village when the massacre took place, even if she denies her active involvement in the murder:

We decided to split into three groups. Baba Mustakim was to lead his men around one side of the village and I would take my men around the other. The third group, led by Balwan and Ram Avtar, was to take the main path into the village. Shri Ram would have no choice but to retreat. Then we would have him in our trap. We were counting on Balwan's group to drive him out and into our crossfire. As I came around my side, I could hear Balwan yelling from the village and rifle-fire cracking like thunder. His men were terrorizing villagers. [...] As we hoarded back along the path towards the village, I heard women wailing and the shouting and whooping of Balwan and his men as they fired shots in the air. "Long Live Phoolan Devi! Victory to Phoolan!" they were shouting. More than twenty men were killed that day, twenty thakurs. [...] Balwan wanted to torch the village. "Imbecille!" Baba Mustakim yelled at them. [...] Instead, Baba Mustakim gave the order to retreat. "It is a disaster for us", he said. "The newspapers will be full of it! And the police in India will be chasing us! If we stay together now we haven't got a hope. We must split up." (Phoolan Devi 1997: 405–407)

The Behmai massacre was the event, which drew a lot of attention to Phoolan, since the murder was the biggest crime committed by bandits in India until then. The famous dacoit used to consider herself to be an incarnation of the revengeful Durga, repeating many times in her autobiography how she was worshipped by some villagers, how the goddess helped her, and even describing how she received aid from wild animals, which, it seems, had a profound impact especially on Dimitri Friedman, who unusually creatively develops these motives in his book *The Ravines*. Yet, even if Phoolan considers her actions to be a kind of expression of the divine will, her vengeance, or the revenge committed on her behalf, was treated rather as a manifestation of cruelty and not as an act of punishment committed by a righteous goddess. It was then necessary for the dacoit to explain how the massacre happened, and reveal, among others, all the sufferings

she experienced from Thakurs in Behmai, to receive the readers' favor. However, explaining what happened in the village turned out to be problematic, because it concerned the intimate spheres of her life, which, naturally, she did not want to share with a wide range of readers. This is why, despite the fact that Phoolan describes the Behmai events rather laconically, she gives a lot of information about the sexual violence, which happened to her before to gain sympathy. Indeed, this strategy proved to be right, since in some quoted excerpts of reviews related to the autobiography of Phoolan, we can find phrases like: "No reader can fail to be on her side", which seem to justify her cruel act, but which also in a more or less conscious way confirms her involvement in it. Yet, in the majority of writings about the Bandit Queen, it is not charisma, but the low status of Phoolan and the fact of her being a woman, which are still considered to be the main causes of all the events leading to the horrific finale in the village of Behmai. And so it is not her actions, but gender and her low status which remain the main reasons that Phoolan Devi has become so influential, and why the world still wants to know her story.

Phoolan Devi was born as the second of five siblings in a very poor, low-caste family of Mallahs, originally composed of boatmen and their families. Despite the official ban on child marriages in India, Phoolan's parents, being unable to collect the dowry for their daughter, married her off when she was just eleven years old. Putti Lal, chosen to be her husband, was twenty years older than the girl. During the marriage, Phoolan experienced a lot of violence from Putti Lal, who did not only continually abuse his wife physically, but also sexually molest her, even though she had not even reached puberty. After three years of suffering, she fell ill and returned to her village, but in order to avoid disgrace, the family sent their daughter back to her husband. Meanwhile Putti Lal had found a new woman, and now, the two of them started to beat and starve Phoolan, forcing her to work. Finally, she ran away and came back to her village, where she became embroiled in a conflict with her rich relatives, who arranged for bandits to kidnap her (Moxham 2010: 3). The other versions,

including the autobiography, say that the conflict had started before, being even the cause of the unhappy marriage. According to Phoolan, an influential relative cut down a tree, which belonged to her family, being planted for the wood to pay for the girl's future dowry. Deprived of money that she could offer to her future husband, the not-so-pretty girl could only count on an old man, ready to marry any girl he was offered. The reason for the abduction by bandits also changes, being described by some biographers as caused by previous contacts, which Phoolan and her cousin Kailash had with the gang, or, as stated by Phoolan herself, by arresting her on charges of banditry, which attracted the attention of the gang operating in the area. The bandit's leader, Babu Singh, wanted Phoolan as his mistress, but another member of the group, Vikram Singh Mallah, who came from the same low caste as the abducted girl, decided to save her. He killed the high caste Babu Singh and Phoolan stayed with him. Having been kidnapped by bandits, Phoolan could not go back home without stigma, but her new life with Vikram was a pleasant change after all the humiliations experienced in the village. Phoolan's situation changed dramatically when Vikram's gang joined up with an upper-caste group of bandits, commanded by Singh brothers, Babu Ram and Sri Ram, who decided to take revenge for the death of Babu Singh and killed Vikram. After the death of her guardian and his men, Phoolan was taken by Babu Ram and Sri Ram to the Behmai village, where she was constantly raped by the gang and the other villagers. She escaped, and joined another gang, forming later a new group with Man Singh. In 1981 bandits commanded by Phoolan attacked Behmai, the place where she was raped earlier, and after the massacre, which was, as already stated, the most cruel act of banditry in that time, the government mobilized thousands of police officers to catch the dacoit. However, it was impossible to arrest Phoolan, who could always get aid from the low-caste villagers thanks to their sympathy, as Phoolan would like to see it, or simply because of fear. Finally, the Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi, authorized the police to negotiate a surrender deal. In February 1983, Phoolan and her men ceremonially surrendered to the Chief Minister

of Madhya Pradesh, and were taken to Gwalior Jail, without appealing in front of a court. In 1996, about two years after her release, Phoolan stood for election to the Lok Sabha from the Mirzapur, and won. She then lost her seat in 1998, but was reelected in 1999. In 2001 she was assassinated by Sher Singh Rana in an act of revenge for the Behmai massacre.

As mentioned above, there are several biographies of Phoolan Devi, but the most popular story about her life is still the film *Bandit Queen* made in 1994 by Shekhar Kapur, based on the book *India's Bandit Queen. The True Story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen, who is also the author of the screenplay. The major interest in Phoolan arose after her surrender, in 1983, and her release from jail eleven years later, but she is still remembered and some new stories based on her life appear from time to time. A good example may be an opera by Shirish Korde, which premiered in New York and Toronto in 2015. Some authors, as already stated, compared Phoolan to Robin Hood, but there were also a few for whom the notorious dacoit was a new incarnation of Rani of Jhansi and even Joan of Arc. What is interesting, however, is that if other famous feminine warriors are usually a symbol of strength and independence, regardless of the times and place they were born, Phoolan, even when compared to Rani of Jhansi or Joan of Arc, remains inseparable from the small Indian village, and her caste. All the astonishing achievements of Phoolan Devi seem not to be the result of her great charisma. On the contrary, one of the most dangerous women of the Subcontinent remains a victim of violence. The only act she is able to commit is revenge, but still she is always punished for every act of vengeance, being not only a victim of the caste system but also of corrupt Indian law. A good example of this kind of victimization is the fact that, in contrast to the information we may find in the note of the publisher of her autobiography, even if Phoolan did negotiate surrender on her own terms, most of the agreements made before her capitulation were broken after Phoolan went to jail, where she spent more years than she was promised. Furthermore, she was sterilized there in order to stop her from giving birth to similar rebels, which

is another example of violence against women, committed, in this instance, according to the law, as if those injustices she had already experienced were not enough. Even the tragic assassination of Phoolan can be seen as another act of punishment, and an injustice, since she denied that she was directly involved in the Behmai massacre. It is then clear that it is almost impossible to escape from the image of the victim in the case of Phoolan Devi, and, no matter how much she tries to do it, even she fails to present herself as a different person. This perception is seen, for example, in a note written after her death in which we read:

Not only had she the temerity to be born a woman, but Phoolan was also “low caste.” Though officially the caste system of India was abolished in 1948 when the nation achieved its independence from England, it continues to be deeply embedded in thousands of villages. Phoolan was married off at the age of 11 to a rich man (he owned a bicycle) three times her age who “consummated” the marriage by rape. (Forman 2002: 8)

The entire note composed in a similar style does not say much about what in fact Phoolan did, focusing mainly on all things which happened to her. However, the most remarkable is the way in which the author emphasizes the specific Indian context in which all the tragic events of Phoolan Devi’s life took place. Of all the wealth of information on the charismatic, uneducated political leader from a low caste, the author describes primarily her early marriage, adding some specific information about the wealth of villagers from the region. The man chosen to be the girl’s husband was rich, because he owned a bicycle—even if any of the biographies and Phoolan’s autobiography never said anything about the wealth of Putti Lal, he is shown here in a particular way—to present to the Western reader a distant, completely different, exotic world in which possessing a bicycle is considered to be a sign of wealth.³ This passage was not chosen accidentally—it does

³ The issue of the bicycle is an interesting element of the story because the biographers’ accounts are divergent also in the matter of Phoolan’s dowry. The authors of the book *Devi. The Bandit Queen*, for example, note that families in Uttar Pradesh villages have a different dowry custom than people living on the other side of the Chambal River in Madhya Pradesh, where the bride’s

not only perfectly capture a very widespread way of describing the life of Phoolan Devi in India, and in the West, but it is also the same approach which she uses in her autobiography.

The canonical determinants of the autobiography, described by Philippe Lejeune in *The Autobiographical Contract*, state that the autobiography is the transposition of one's own life into the form of a story in prose, with the inclusion of individual experiences in the central plan. Therefore, the author of the autobiography presents the story of the shaping his own personality, usually from early childhood to the beginning of writing. The goal the author sets for himself is to reliably recreate his life, and his personality in the literary text. What guarantees the authenticity of such an act is the pact, which helps the reader to recognize that the author and narrator are the same person. The importance of this kind of agreement is demonstrated by the fact that it defines the reader's attitude towards the text. If the reader is confronted with a fictional work, he will look for similarities with the biography of the author, but if the identity of the author and the narrator is emphasized, he will look for inaccuracies (Lejeune 1975: 38–40). What is more, writing about the autobiography, Anna Turczyn adds that the author always make choices, by organizing and integrating experiences in accordance with the requirements of the literary rules. Thus, it transforms empirical facts into artifacts and as such can be regarded as "a fiction in prose". Writing an autobiography implies a kind of act

relatives have to give it. The tradition of the village of Phoolan says that the girl lives with her family even after marriage until the groom pays a dowry in order to claim her (Shears, Gidley 1984: 38). According to Shears and Gidley, and to Mala Sen therefore, the bicycle was given by Putti Lal as the payment for his young wife, having in fact a similar function here as in the quoted note by showing to Western readers that the life of a young Indian girl is less important than a bicycle, and her fate is to be her husband's slave. What is interesting, however, in Phoolan's autobiography, it is clearly said that her parents were unable to pay the dowry after the cousin cut their tree, and stole the wood. It was then poverty which forced them to marry their daughter to an elderly man.

of the imagination, and not just a passive compromise achieved against one's own inhibitions, which appears in every act of self-disclosure, it is therefore an attempt to explain not the past, but the author's current situation (Turczyn 2007: 205–206).

The autobiography of Phoolan Devi was written in response to the book by Mala Sen, and to the film of Shekhar Kapur. Mala Sen met Phoolan on many occasions and interviewed both her and people from her family and her village, but Phoolan at some point decided that she was betrayed by Sen, especially after the author of the biography started to work with Shekhar Kapur on the film. Phoolan tried everything to stop the release of the *Bandit Queen*, claiming that it shows a false story.⁴ When this attempt failed, she decided to bring

⁴ Understandably, the main problem Phoolan Devi had with the film was the fact that she was depicted as being present in Behmai in the day of the massacre. She claimed also that the film differed from the Mala Sen's book, although it had been scripted by her. According to Phoolan, too much emphasis was put on animosities between low and high castes instead of informing that her problems started from the conflict with her relatives (Moxham 2010: 78). Of course, we can discuss these allegations, especially that in her autobiography Phoolan also often emphasizes that the injustice she faced was caused by her gender and the low status. In one place, however, her allegations, meticulously written down by Moxham, are clearly not in line with the truth. The author writes that the film "had invented an upper-caste molester of Phoolan in the village, who had never actually existed", and that this fact was confirmed by her in an interview (ibid.: 78). However, such an excerpt can be found not only in the biography of Mala Sen, which, of course, could have been updated later, but also in the later version of Phoolan herself, who in her account does not stop at the description of vulgar taunts, as did Mala Sen and Shekhar Kapur, but informs her readers that after molesting her on the field, the young man came back in the night, and raped her in front of her parents: "[...] Lost in her own thoughts she had not noticed the bicycle pull up in the dust track behind her. When she heard a man's voice calling her name she had been startled at first, then relieved at seeing it was Suresh Chand. [...] Eventually he had approached her, still casual and friendly, and

out her own version, this is then a special case, in which the author of the autobiography decides to disprove the facts quoted by others, but considered to be unfair, and who clearly tries to justify herself. This tendency is particularly visible in three aspects of Phoolan's biography, which distinguish her version from the earlier ones and which were the core of the criticism she brought against the film by Shekhar Kapur. The first is the reason why she was first married in her childhood, and later kidnapped by bandits, the second are sexual relations with men, who appeared in her life, and finally the aforementioned involvement in the Behmai massacre.

In fact, it is difficult to consider the book *I, Phoolan Devi* to be the true autobiography of Phoolan, because she did not write it herself. The book is a result of a series of interviews given by the young dacoit after her release from jail. From two thousand pages, which came as a result of the transcription of the whole recorded material, only some events were selected for the book. Of course, such a selection raises

placing his hands on her shoulders said something like, «They say you are good in the fields—that you make a man feel he can never have enough»” (Sen 1997: 50–51).

“He grabbed me and started touching me all over in front of his friends. Before, he had contented himself with saying dirty things as I passed, but that time, there was an evil glint in his eye. I panicked and slapped him hard. He let go of me, and his friends pelted me with stones as I ran away. [...] There was a gang of them: the Sarpanch's son, who had a rifle in his hands, and another man I thought I had seen before, but in the dark, I couldn't recognise the others. I shut my eyes in terror. Flattened against the ground with one gripping my hands and another holding my feet apart, I heard them slapping my mother and insulting her, telling her to watch. And I heard my father, crying and begging: «Oh sir, don't do that! Please sirs, I beg you, spare my daughter. We will take her away tomorrow. We will leave this village and take her with us. Please, don't do it...» My spirit flickered like a lamp and began to fade. All the cries and grunts and all the insults seemed far away. Two bodies; two hurried rapes. I shut my eyes tight and gritted my teeth so hard my gums bled.” (Phoolan Devi 1997: 169–172).

questions about the basis of the choice and how much Phoolan herself participated in the process of bringing out the book. Although the publisher notes that the book has been read to Phoolan, and she accepted it page after page (Phoolan Devi 1997: 499), the same way she accepted earlier everything that Mala Sen had recorded and used in her book, which she later refused. The autobiography of Phoolan Devi is not a mere collection of transcribed interviews with her, so we can expect that some elements have been slightly retouched, and certainly written by a skilled person. Still, regardless of all these questions and inquiries, we can say that the story presented in the book *I, Phoolan Devi* is a record of real events, at least according to Phoolan Devi herself. Why then are all the interviews given to Mala Sen earlier slightly different from the version presented later? It seems that the key problem here is the film, as Phoolan clearly explains some events shown by Shekhar Kapur and presents her point of view.

Yet, even though the biography by Shears and Gidley at times is very far from what Phoolan describes in her book, developing especially the erotic aspects of the story,⁵ and, as has already been mentioned,

⁵ The authors of the biography not only introduce the figure of a married man with whom Phoolan had an affair, but also combine this information with the supposedly typical approach of the inhabitants of the Subcontinent to sex, which is rather a typical, inspired mainly by *Kāmasūtra* Western approach to Indian culture: “They met often by the river and Phoolan fell passionately in love with Kailash who was obsessed with her too. She was determined to become his wife and was dismayed to learn one day that he was already married with children. Furious that he had not told her, she resolved to continue the relationship anyhow, and began to scheme to get him for herself. She knew what to do—withhold her favours. To Hindus sex is one of the most enjoyable things in life and an Indian woman establishes a strong hold on her husband through the union of lovemaking. It is her armour against his family and the temptations of the outside world. The Indian scriptures are quite definite that «women enjoy sex eight times as much as men», and Phoolan Devi knew that Kailash, who was enjoying her more than his wife, was under her spell” (Shears, Gidley 1984: 49–50).

clearly involving her with the crime in Behmai, Phoolan seems not to oppose other biographies as much as the film. What can be the reason: why did the work of Kapur made such a bad impression on her? The answer lies probably in the fact that the medium, which was used to present the story of Phoolan Devi by Shekhar Kapur, was different than the one she already knew. In the case of books, which the illiterate woman was unable to read, and whose content could have been partially hidden from her, now, probably for the first time, she could fully experience how the world perceives her story. Furthermore, in spite of being a film and showing things instead of describing them, which can be quite shocking already, the version by Shekhar Kapur is made in a new way. Many authors of the books written about Phoolan Devi present themselves in their works. They often describe their meetings with Phoolan as if in this way they tried to remain neutral, emphasizing that what is presented in their books is not their point of view, but only the recording of the story they heard and describing the events in which they take part. Perhaps the reason behind this attitude is again the uncomfortable issue of the massacre in the Behmai village, which is evident in the fact that, even if the authors take the side of Phoolan, they only quote her statement, leaving the question of Behmai unanswered.

The film does not present Shekhar Kapur as a part of the narration, and this fact can give the impression that it objectively shows everything as it happened. While this approach used in the book would not

Also interesting in this context is the description of Phoolan's behaviour in relation to other gang members, because it opposes the image of trauma and its impact on her subsequent contacts with men, which Phoolan presents in her autobiography: "Her new-found security had changed her from a brash teenager to an earthly young woman. She had begun to flaunt her naked charms in front of the men. She enjoyed seeing the desire in their eyes as she flirted with them or changed her clothes in their midst. Phoolan Devi was beginning to feel power. Not only could she use a gun proficiently; the sexual hold she had on Vikram gave her a feeling of equality with the gang leader. There was no doubt his attentions were as strong as they had ever been. He shared his thoughts with her; she shared hers with him" (Shears, Gidley 1984: 86).

necessarily have convinced the reader of the version presented by the author, in the case of a film, the events shown on the screen can be more easily perceived as real ones. This fact is undoubtedly influenced by the impression of reality—one of the key concepts by which film theorists try to explain the specificity of the medium and how it works on the viewer. Although the film has long been not considered a window on the world, being perceived rather as a door which invites the viewer to enter another reality (Demby 1994: 19), it is still a world in which realism, even if in fact it is a fiction, is very easy to believe. As Lucja Demby emphasizes, the world of the film is a kind of reality for the viewer, even if in fact it remains an illusion, because the viewer has no access to the world he is watching. However, the reality shown by the movie really existed, as some real elements were filmed, but for the viewer who elaborates it rather than watches it, it becomes a quasi-reality, because through contact with it, it is the viewer who becomes unreal in some sense. Moreover, the cinematic memories, which are recollections of situations that the viewer never lived through, knowing them only from films he watched, have an additional influence on his smooth transition from reality to the fiction (Demby 1994: 20–22). Furthermore, the very essence of the film, which additionally bases itself on the real events, claiming that the presented story is the truth, makes it then extremely easy to believe what is presented on screen, even if the cinematic work is not a documentary.

This process, as a result of which Seema Biswas, who played the main character, was identified with the Bandit Queen herself, made Phoolan so violently opposed to the work of Kapur, since it was very easy for her to perceive the nudity of the actress as her own nakedness, even easier in comparison to others, because the film tells the story of her life. Another obvious reason of aversion to the film was the fact that, according to Phoolan, it gives an impression that she was responsible for the death of Behmai's Thakurs, and this could have unpleasant consequences of two kinds. At the time when the film came out, Phoolan was already a well-known figure, therefore, such a presentation of the delicate issue of the Behmai events, as rightly pointed out

by Roy Moxham, could not only harm the image of Phoolan, but also threaten her life. Viewers, convinced by the film's illusion of reality that she was guilty, could easily try to bring justice on their own (Moxham 2010: 78). However, if we look closer at the sequence of the massacre, it can be noted that Phoolan, as shown by Kapur, shot only two people in the legs, and did not kill anybody, just looking at what others were doing. And even if one of the following scenes shows the leader of one of the gangs saying that nobody should kill without reason, the accusation is not directly addressed to anyone. Of course, it is difficult to expect that all viewers treated the film with the appropriate focus. On the contrary, the opinions about Kapur's work prove to testify something completely different. Yet the question whether the film actually caused the death of Phoolan Devi, who was killed in an act of revenge for the crime of Behmai, remains unanswered, especially since, as reported by the sources, her killer planned his retribution before the film was made (Moxham 2010: 196).

Kapur's film opens with two headers; the first one says that the film is a true story, in the second the director presents a quote from *Manusmṛiti*, saying that animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten, although without specific information in which part of the work this statement can be found. The recall of the classical texts, which sanction violence against low castes or women is a fairly typical act—a similar quote appears for example in *Water* (2005, Deepa Mehta). What is important is the fact that at the very beginning of the film, these quotations announce that the key issue presented by Shekhar Kapur in the film is going to be the oppression perpetrated on Indian women and lower castes (as Phoolan Devi rightly observed, while criticizing the director's work). However, while blaming others for a stereotypical approach, in her autobiography she proves once again that she thinks in a similar way:

I was born with my mother's anger. "I vomited everything I ate when you were inside me", she once told me. [...] Every time she moaned at me because I was a girl, or because I had made her ill, or because I only brought her worries, I wanted to cry too. But I didn't. I kept quiet or I did mischievous things instead, so she beat me, and carried on wailing at the God who had given her just one boy. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 12)

In the village there were mothers who kissed and cuddled their children and gave them nice things to eat, but our mother couldn't have loved us the way they loved their children. "Our Amma is a demon", Choti said. "She's always angry with us". We had mouths and stomachs, so we were always hungry, and we were girls. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 19)

I was discovering piece by painful piece how my world was put together: the power of men, the power of privileged castes, the power of might. I didn't think of what I was doing as rebellion; it was the only means I had of getting justice. But it was then that my rebellion began, when I was fourteen or fifteen years old and struggling to survive by any means I could. I was a woman who belonged to a lowly caste. Faced with power and rupees, I used any trick I could. I encouraged the other girls to sabotage the crops if the landowner wouldn't pay us. I reminded the landowners that we were the ones who ploughed their fields, we spread the manure, we sowed the seeds and gathered the harvest, and they had to pay for our back-bone and sweat. I warned those who refused to pay what we asked that they would see nothing growing on their land next season. I didn't realise that by doing this, I was making many enemies. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 154–155)

Critics felt that by focusing on such topics Kapur created a movie for a Western audience, interested primarily in the situation of "exotic" women. This accusation is actually correct, since there are many stereotypical scenes in the film, such as the one in which an old woman quietly witnesses her son raping his eleven-year-old wife. But in the autobiography of Phoolan we can find similar descriptions, depicting not only men's sadism but also the cruelty of women. Phoolan describes different women: the strong and the weak ones, the good and the ruthless ones, but those who are victims appear only in the context of her own kindness toward the oppressed ones, when she helps them and defends them against men. Other women in need are therefore presented just like Phoolan herself, who, as already noted, functions rather as a passive object to whom all injustices are done. Interestingly, such presentation, in which Phoolan appears as a defender of mistreated women, can be regarded as a conscious manipulation made by a person, who thinks primarily about her political career and who knows that, as stated above, being unable to avoid her involvement in the Behmai massacre, she must convince her future readers differently. The reactions to her autobiography and to the allegations made against Kapoor's film proved this strategy to be right, but at the same time all

situations, where Phoolan appears as the savior of other women and the slayer of men, lose much of their authenticity, becoming more a political slogan with frequent references to caste divisions, even though she herself criticized Kapur for bringing those issues to his film.

Much more authentic and therefore interesting are contrasted descriptions in which Phoolan is seen not as a progressive defender of women, but rather as a person limited by old traditions and beliefs. Being wronged by men, she wants to punish not them, but their women in order to bring them disgrace:

I wanted revenge on them. I wanted someone to do the same thing to their wives, so they would know how it feels to suffocate from shame and humiliation. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until I found someone, because I knew I couldn't achieve what I wanted alone. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 173)

“Someone came to the village, that's why Amma was angry. They went to the Sarpanch's house, and everybody from the village came out. The Sarpanch and his son weren't there, so they beat the women and they took off the sari of one of the women while everybody was watching! And then they shouted insults at them”. The next morning I heard from the other girls that the woman, whose sari had been ripped from her by a thakur was the Sarpanch's wife. He had warned her that if her family continued to mistreat the poor women of the village, he and his men would come back and do the same thing to her!

I was joyful, a joy I had never felt before. I had been avenged, I was delivered from my shame. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 179)

Those moments not only emphasize the authenticity of the story, but also show that the later development of Phoolan's character is not completely honest, being rather a transformation from an impulsive avenger into a cold-thinking politician concerned only about a future election.

Beyond his concentration on caste problems, Shekhar Kapur was criticized mainly for the lack of a broader view of the whole context, and for focusing exclusively on the issue of sexual exploitation of the main character of his story. Phoolan argues that the main reason she became a bandit was not the rape committed by her husband, but a conflict with her relatives. Still, she starts her autobiography by the prologue in which she describes how she was molested after marriage:

Phoolan! Where are you hiding, my little pigeon?” It was Putti Lal’s voice. “Now that we are married, I’ll show you what married people do... Don’t be scared. I’m going to teach you a new game... (Phoolan Devi 1997: 3)

Of course, as already mentioned, it is difficult to determine whether it was the choice of Phoolan herself, or the publishers of her autobiography decided in this way to encourage readers to buy the book. But if what they assured is the truth, that the whole was read to Phoolan, and she accepted the book, she had to agree also to the fact that the sexual violence had become so much an integral part of her persona, that only by incorporating shocking, intimate confession to her autobiography will she be able to attract readers and face the accusations with their support.

Phoolan, as shown by Shekhar Kapur, is a vulgar and uncouth peasant, who cannot achieve much without the help of men. Although it is not an image which differs from the books’ descriptions, including the story of Phoolan herself, in which she does not work alone, as evidenced by the above-mentioned passages describing the “punishment” of other women, such a presentation weakens the message of the film and leaves the viewer dissatisfied. The main query which appears after watching *Bandit Queen* is the same question, which rises after reading all books about her, including the autobiography—how it is possible that she became the leader of the gang, and how she was able to command a large group of unscrupulous men. The lack of development of Phoolan’s character from an illiterate villager to a bandit, to a politician from a mere bandit, and above all to the fierce Durga from a scared girl, is actually quite a serious drawback of the film. However, none of biographies, including the autobiography shows this transformation in a satisfactory manner. Phoolan describes this process in the passages devoted to the fight between two gangs, but since the result of the fight was Vikram’s death, she is unable to focus enough on her development, and the bravery of the fearless goddess is somehow lost. Phoolan gives a lot of information about the psychological abuse, omitting however descriptions of sexual violence, which happened to her after she lost her guardian, and accuses Shekhar Kapur of showing it on the screen.⁶

⁶ “They had shown me naked to the press. People come up to me and say I look very sexy. I find all this humiliating. Kapur and Bedi want to cheat

And she is not the only person concerned—Arundhati Roy, Shoma A. Chatterjee, and other Indian feminists also reflect on the problem of how much the presentation of the humiliating scenes on the screen is another manifestation of violence towards Phoolan, who is once again raped and stripped in front of a crowd (Chatterji 1998: 149–150). Of course, the biography of a living person usually raises some controversies and oppositions, not only in the hero of the story, but also among the relatives of such a person. In the case of Phoolan Devi's life story, however, the recipients accept the written versions of it, and reject the film, even if the former are more cruel. As has already been mentioned, Phoolan introduces to her autobiography certain, sometimes very detailed descriptions of sexual violence, which naturally appear in the film. Yet, those attacks, which Phoolan described in detail (especially the brutal assault of her husband and policemen, who rape her in front of her father), are only marked by Kapur. He develops, however, those violations which Phoolan is silent about (mainly the violence of Babu Gujar, who was later killed by Vikram, and the public humiliation of Phoolan, when the Singh brothers strip her and force to draw water from the well in front of the whole village). While the lack of a child rape scene in the film can be easily understood, the fact that Babu Gujar described by Phoolan is not allowed to be violent towards her, proves that not only Kapur focuses on the caste conflict in his film, but she does as well.

According to Phoolan, Vikram rescues not a violently raped woman, but a woman of his caste, not willing to allow her to be used by a man with a different status:

Suddenly he was surrounded by five or six of Baboo's men, pointing their rifles at him. Warily, he watched as Baboo, who still had me by the hair, stretched out like a fat bullock on the khat. "Why are you trying to protect her?" asked one-eye. "Why her? We've had so many other girls before. What is about this one? You're on her side, is that it?" "I told you not to touch her. She belongs to my community". "So what? Who cares? You don't even know her. She's not one of your family". "If you touch

me. They want to use my name to sell a fake story to the world. Why else haven't they shown it to me?" (Moxham 2010: 74).

her, I'll shoot you", said Vickram. [...] Was he protecting me just because I was a mallah? It seemed I wasn't the only one who didn't understand. The men were murmuring that they had never seen Vickram like this before; they were asking what was wrong with him. I could only hope it was because he was a mallah, and even though he was a bandit, and I was just a poor peasant, he had taken pity of me. Whatever the reason, it was the first time a man had ever tried to defend me. I couldn't believe it. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 240–241)

Phoolan not only omits the rapes committed by Babu Gujar after her abduction. Also describing her life with Vikram and his gang, she focuses on the descriptions of the fraternal friendship that connected her with individual men, although, as has already been mentioned, Shears and Gidley do not spare their readers the spicy details about Phoolan stimulating the senses of the men around her. In fact, it is mainly Phoolan's relationships with men, which distinguish her story from the one by Kapur. The film shows her as Vikram's lover, while Phoolan emphasizes mostly the platonic aspects of their liaison:

Vickram still hadn't spoken to me directly. But I sensed he was watching me. Why, I didn't know, nor did I care. He had saved me from humiliation and perhaps death. He was the first man who had ever been able to defend me. My father had only ever cried and begged impotently. Even if I was only the bait for their ambush, Vickram had avenged me! Even if I had to die, I thanked Durga and Kali and all the gods and goddesses for this one satisfaction. Vickram was the first man to treat me like a human being, not a slave, or a piece of flesh. If he let me go, I resolved to request one more kindness from him. "Brother", I decided I would ask him, "avenge me of Mayadin. Deliver me from that demon. Make the people of my village treat me like a human being too. Tell them Phoolan Devi is not a pariah. Give me the taste of victory, as I have given it to you..." (Phoolan Devi 1997: 259–260)

"[...] But right now just listen to me. I'm not going to force you, I'm not angry, I don't want to hurt you. If you like me, if you want me, one day you will tell me of your own free will. Stay here on the bed, I'll sleep on the floor next to you. Don't be afraid, Phoolan..." (Phoolan Devi 1997: 269)

Considering the fact that Vikram was not her lover and omitting her later relationship with Man Singh, although many biographers mention that he became her third (and not the last) husband, Phoolan once again

situates herself in the place of the victim. She informs that Vikram married her, but still prefers not to talk too much about their relationship, as if she believed that she dishonored her family. She was still married to Putti Lal, and besides, the relationship with the dacoit was certainly not a source of pride, so, as already mentioned, Phoolan knows that she needs to share her painful experiences to gain sympathy, but at the same time she remains extremely afraid of being accused of misconduct. As a result, she strongly emphasizes that no one in the village knew that she was raped by her husband or other men:

I could see the flames of a torch moving above our wall. It was our neighbours, curious to know what had happened. Mother blew her nose and straightened her sari, then she looked at me purposefully. "Don't say anything about this to anyone, you hear? You will get a bad reputation. You were sick, you were given nothing to eat and nobody looked after you, that's all. You hear?" (Phoolan Devi 1997: 122)

I couldn't even breathe. I was choking with pain and humiliation. What has happened to me as a child with Putti Lal had been dreadful, but it wasn't a public dishonour for anyone, not even for me, because I was married to him. I belonged to him and that had meant he could do as he pleased with me. This time it was different. Now I understood what the great danger was that my mother always warned me about, and now my life was ruined. The only course left to us was to keep silent, to close the doors, cover our heads, and say nothing. But I didn't know how I was going to keep quiet, or how I was ever going to be able to sleep... (Phoolan Devi 1997: 173)

If you kill yourself, everybody will say it was because you were pregnant. You must show them you didn't do anything wrong. You can stay here and eat here at home with us. You're our daughter, we love you. (Phoolan Devi 1997: 213)

According to Phoolan, the "fallen woman" label was thrust on her only after she spent time in prison, but rather because of being in such a place than the violence she experienced. Even if some of the villagers suspected what had happened to her, it could not be confirmed. Then, at the same time, she accuses Shekhar Kapur of showing a false scene in which young men from the village humiliate her in front of the panchayat and her father, but still describes how she was raped in front of him, since the abuse, of which only the family is witness, is

not the same abuse which happens in front of the whole community. This is why even the most cruel rape committed in the presence of the family is different from the humiliation experienced in front of the entire village and above all before the cinema viewers, who become similar witnesses of events as silent villagers looking at Phoolan from their homes.

By constructing her image in the autobiography, Phoolan Devi tries to appear as a very strong woman, who could achieve a lot, in spite of adverse conditions. However, in terms of morality, she remains the same repressed illiterate villager just like the other women around her, who think only about the honor of their families, and do nothing against the strict rules of society. Paradoxically, this complicated image makes the narrator really authentic, or at least much more authentic than the person shown by Shekhar Kapur, who briefly glides by subsequent events in the life of a clever village girl who could get enough sympathy from the men around to become famous, and he does not try to create a psychological portrait of his heroine. Yet it is hard to resist the impression that the autobiography of Phoolan Devi, despite its very realistic elements, is to some extent a false testimony. The question remains whether it was the publisher who decided to construct the story in this way to satisfy the tastes of Western readers and respond to their needs, just like the movie of Shekhar Kapur, or maybe Phoolan, deliberately or unknowingly, presented herself as a victim in search of sympathy after the massacre in Behmai. It is very important to remember that it was owing to the fact of her being a rebellious woman from an Indian village which led to Phoolan becoming such a recognizable person, regardless of how much she did herself, and how much she owed to the men around her. And whether it is because she was a woman-victim or a woman-warrior, this is still a matter under consideration by subsequent biographers.

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