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# Can We 'Ever' Hear the Subaltern Speak?: A Critical Inquiry into Phoolan Devi's Subaltern Voice

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# CAN WE *EVER* HEAR THE SUBALTERN SPEAK?: A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO PHOOLAN DEVI'S SUBALTERN VOICE

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“February 1981: at the age of twenty-four a village woman, born into poverty in the state of Uttar Pradesh, is labeled ‘the Bandit Queen of India’” – thus begins Mala Sen’s *India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi*, first published in 1991, while Phoolan Devi was still in jail (xix). According to Bishnupriya Ghosh, Devi attracted the attention of the press because as a low-caste Dalit (Untouchable) woman, belonging to the sub-caste of Mallahs, “designated as MBC/Most Backward Castes in state parlance,” her actions challenged hierarchies of caste and gender in rural India where caste politics, intersected by gender issues, assume a complex feudal scenario (459). The prevalent feudal caste system is also brutally patriarchal and subsumes the identity of the female subaltern in its suffocating hierarchical framework (Sen 57, 44). Upper caste men in the village often take sexual advantage of the lower caste women and sexual exploitation of such women by both the upper caste men and corrupt police officers frequently went unrecorded during Devi’s childhood and outlaw career (Sen 48-49). Devi’s experience forms part of this scenario. Sen concurs: “[Phoolan’s] personal story, extraordinary as it is, reflects many aspects of life as experienced by thousands of women in rural India who continue to strive against a feudal order” (xxiii).

Understandably, Devi’s “exploits” captured attention because of her gender and caste because “(n)ever before in the history of rural banditry had a low-caste woman been accused of killing so many high-caste men” and because, despite a “massive paramilitary operation,” she eluded the police and the State and Central Governments successfully for quite some time. Her frequent raids were reported infrequently; but her alleged gunning down of twenty-two upper caste Thakurs (who formed a vast majority of the rural vote bank) compelled the Indian Government, then led by Mrs. Indira Gandhi, to conclude the “embarrassing saga (for the

lawmakers)" by negotiating a Gandhian surrender (Sen xix). Devi was released from prison in 1994 after an extended term in jail. She then ran for election from her own state of Uttar Pradesh and won a seat in Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament) in 1996 and then again in 1999. Her political goals included equal opportunities for education and employment among the poor, lower castes, and women. While her political career was fraught with severe criticism, Devi's rise to the position was nevertheless a testimony to her extraordinary life and tenacity. Devi was assassinated in 2001 by men who confessed they were seeking revenge for murders allegedly committed by her in her bandit-life.

Along with newspaper reports that alternatively hailed Devi as a gendered force threatening age-old hierarchies in rural India and demonized her as an unlawful murderer, the critical popularity of Shekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* and a host of European ghost-written accounts and translations of Mala Sen's definitive biography through the 1990s drew attention to a subaltern woman's agency. The flurry of intellectual and creative focus on Phoolan Devi and the recreation of her life also reveal the tenuous question of a subaltern woman's re-presentation by and for elite consumption. The following essay will examine the (dis)service elitist attempts at representation offer to the subaltern woman despite the avowed commitment of intellectuals, recalling several postcolonial feminist scholars' cautionary remarks against (mis)appropriating and silencing the voice of the subaltern woman. Eventually, we recognize that we *never* hear Phoolan Devi 'speak'.

My discussion has a three-fold trajectory. I begin with the Subalternist school's investment in attempting to retrieve traces of subaltern consciousness and agency; then I proceed to the problematic involved in representation; and then conclude that Phoolan Devi, in extant representations, is silenced and misrepresented. I will refer to Mala Sen's account of Devi (recognized as her definitive biography) as an index for measuring the liberties two elitist-intellectuals have taken in (mis)representing Devi's life, Shekhar Kapur in his film *Bandit Queen* and Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali in their ghost-written account, *I, Phoolan Devi*, in collaboration with Devi.

## Subaltern Consciousness and Agency and the Intellectual

In *The Modern Prince* and *The Prison Notebooks* Antonio Gramsci defines the 'subaltern' classes as those excluded from any meaningful role

in a regime of power that subjugates them. The subalterns have no independent space from which to articulate their voice because hegemony conditions them to believe in the dominant values. Gramsci believed that the intellectual has the responsibility to “search out signs of subaltern initiative and class consciousness and effective political action” (Mapping 28). Following Gramsci, the Ranajit Guha-led Subaltern Studies Group engages in the task of identifying subaltern agency and consciousness in the Indian national movement. While early Subalternist writings focused on Indian peasants as ‘subalterns’, later Subalternist work invests in recovering voices (and consciousness) and histories of tribals, Dalits, migrant workers, and Indian Partition-sufferers, among others, in India. In *Subaltern Citizens* Gyanendra Pandey writes that the use of the word ‘subaltern’ intensifies the responsibility of critical historiography, whether Marxist, feminist, anticolonial or minority, “to recover subject positions, lives, possibilities, and political action that have been marginalized, distorted, suppressed, and even forgotten” (7). Also, late Subaltern Studies engage with the responsibility of the investigator. In “Voices from the Edge: The Struggle to Write Subaltern Histories” Pandey reflects on the 25 year long work in the Subaltern Studies Project and sums up the trajectory of the project, in all its variety: the Subaltern historian works with the “‘fragments’, ‘traces’ (in Gramsci’s phrase) that survive in available narratives to tell of other suppressed narratives and perspectives” (Mapping 282). Intrigued by the suppressed voice of the subaltern, in her famous essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (published in 1988 soon after the first few articles of the Subaltern Studies group) Gayatri Spivak is concerned about the doubly silenced subaltern woman who is always spoken for. She calls upon postcolonial female intellectuals to question the muting of the subaltern woman and not simply attempt to give a voice to the silenced subaltern.

An important question both Gramsci and Spivak raise remains crucial: the question of retrieval and representation of the subaltern voice and consciousness and the intellectual’s responsibility in the process. Spivak suggests that in order to avoid an essentialist construction of the subaltern, the historian (or postcolonial intellectual) must be able to read silences and welcome information retrieval in silenced areas but not claim to assume and construct subaltern consciousness. The position of the investigator needs to be questioned because the intellectual should engage with speaking *to*, and *not for*, the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman (Spivak 295).

## The Politics of Representing

In “Feminism in/and postcolonialism” Deepika Bahri identifies “(r)epresentation” as a key concept in the discursive field of ‘postcolonial feminist studies’. While delineating the different debates about representation of minorities that characterize the field of postcolonial, feminist, and women’s studies, Bahri states that “lack of representation” has often been compensated for by (mis)representation of minorities by the powerful in any discourse of power differences. Thus, “(t)hose with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen” (204-5). Bahri also notes that even when “motives are benevolent” some scholars remain concerned about the possibility of “misreading” (206). Some of the issues raised by Phoolan Devi’s representation in print and celluloid echo the concerns of most postcolonial scholars: who represents her? How do they represent her? To what end is she represented?

### Mala Sen’s Phoolan Devi

Mala Sen’s narrative, *India’s Bandit Queen*, has gained currency as the “definitive biography” (Ghosh 461) because it acknowledges several sources in order to persuade the readers of the credibility of her narrative: books like Taroon Coomar Bhaduri’s *Chambal – The Valley of Terror*, that help Sen inform readers of the legend of banditry in the Chambal ravines; Devi’s prison diaries; police records and interviews with police officers who had personally interacted with Devi; newspaper and magazine articles from *Esquire*, *India Today*, *Hindustani Times*, *Times of India*, and *Onlooker*, among others; and Sen’s personal travels through Northern and central India to interview Devi’s family and friends. Sen acknowledges the translators, “Mandakini Dubey” and “Anjula Bedi, who translated the bulk of Devi’s prison diaries with great care and attention” (Sen xiii). Sen also refers to her knowledge of Hindi in order to establish her claim about recording the actual words of Devi’s family members about their now-famous relative. Also, by describing in detail her chance meeting with Devi outside the Gwalior court in a “12-by-6 foot room” filled with “armed guards,” Sen convinces the reader about her actual experience with the Bandit Queen (19). Thus, although Sen’s account does not claim to be a testimonio, it comes closest to knowing the “truth” about Phoolan Devi. Moreover, Sen concludes her Acknowledgments page with a disclaimer that alerts the reader to possibilities of discrepancies in her narrative: “...we have tried to untangle fact from fiction. Still, I am aware

that here, in India, the imagination runs wild and the story changes as it is told and retold” (Sen xiv). Such admission to her readers ensures her credibility as a narrator committed to the truth available to her.

### **Mala Sen’s Devi and Shekhar Kapur’s Victim**

Shekhar Kapur’s film *Bandit Queen*, based on Sen’s book, may have begun as a venture to make Devi heard on a wider scale by using celluloid as a medium and by collaborating with UK-based production firms in order to evade Indian film censorship rules. But the film exposes the problems of “essentialism and usurpation” identified by Spivak as being inherent to any project of representation (Bahri 206). Kapur ignores the fact that class and gender issues, combined with caste politics, complicate and shape Devi’s experience. Numerous instances of deviations between Sen’s text and Kapur’s film illustrate the elitist liberties Kapur takes in representing Devi’s life. In an interview with Udayan Prasad, a UK based film maker, for *Sight and Sound*, Kapur asserts that the film “needed (his context) as a director” (14). Portraying her as a victim of gender and caste oppression and multiple rapes, while ignoring her innate strength, individuality, and the challenge she poses (her subaltern consciousness and agency), Kapur establishes Devi’s tale as one of dishonor and caste oppression. In Prasad’s interview, Kapur defines his goal in the film: “to provide non-Indian audiences with at least a notion of the oppressive nature of this odious social structure” (Prasad 16). The intellectual-representer usurps the reality of Devi’s individual context and makes of her a ‘token’ who “represent(s) a certain essential category” which, effectively silences her (Bahri 208).

While Sen provides detailed accounts of the family feud between Devi’s father and her richer, exploitative cousin Maiyadin which influenced Devi’s resistance to injustice in her early life, Kapur begins the film with Devi’s marriage to a much older Putti Lal. Divesting Phoolan of her courage to threaten older influential men, Kapur shows Devi as a helpless victim of sexual exploitation whose body becomes the site of enactment of masculine and caste power. From the first few scenes, in which Putti Lal is shown exploiting a pre-pubescent bride, Kapur fetishizes Devi’s sexual identity as her only identity.

Similarly, according to Sen, Maiyadin contacted Gujjar, a bandit leader, to kidnap Devi when she physically abused the former for stealing her father’s neem tree, his only remaining asset that could fetch some income.

Devi's challenge instigated Maiyadin to use his money and power (friendship with upper caste Thakurs) to crush her threatening presence. But Kapur shows the upper-caste village headman's son summoning Gujjar's gang to capture Devi when she thwarted his sexual demands. Kapur overlooks Devi's agency and instead portrays a story of gruesome caste oppression that could win accolades from a Western audience. Madhu Kishwar castigates Kapur in her scathing review of the film in *Manushi*:

A more educated brother cheating his illiterate brother out of his land or the story of a wily cousin using his money to buy support in the village panchayat and with the local police has nothing "oriental" "exotic" or "third world" about it. Make it a case of upper caste tyranny over a lower caste woman and it becomes an instant hit formula in the West (qtd. in Ravi's "Marketing Devi" 145).

Kapur continues to depart from Sen's narrative in order to paint a stereotypical image of repressive patriarchy and caste system that victimized Devi. Sen writes that Vikram, a Mallah-member of Gujjar's gang, protects Devi from Gujjar's repeated rapes and eventually becomes her lover and the leader of the gang. But Kapur depicts interaction and a mutual attraction between Vikram and Devi even before her abduction by Gujjar. It is no surprise then that Vikram defends her honor when Gujjar repeatedly rapes her (in the film). I want to suggest that Kapur denies Vikram his sense of unconditional respect for women by projecting an already existing affection between them. Thus, Kapur, in order to preserve the notion that in caste-ridden Indian patriarchy men do not respect women and their honor unless there is a socially-recognized relationship between them, portrays a budding romance between Devi and Vikram that would justify his claim. Thus, an elitist perspective of subaltern values precludes in representation the inherent sense of respect a subaltern man may possess for women.

Sen observes that after Devi had been with the baghis for a while, her lover Vikram was attacked and killed in an intra-gang conflict and Phoolan was taken captive. This is where Kapur deviates again: instead of showing caste-based intra-gang fights that victimized many bandits, Kapur shows a blissful couple torn apart by sudden death. It helps to maintain the notion of sudden danger and its deadly nature in this world, argues Kapur. He defends his directorial decision by insisting he felt the need to "create a sense of uncertainty. Not knowing where the next bit of oppression is coming from, not knowing where the next bullet might come from...(he)

didn't want (the audience) to enjoy it, (he) wanted them unprepared, defenceless" (Prasad 16). But it robs banditry of its own rules and power-games that result in such deaths. Instead of showing the ongoing struggle among the gang members, Kapur focuses on the unpredictability of bandit-life. He colonizes the outlaw life and refuses to see any order in it because that order does not fit into his elitist expectations of subaltern lawlessness.

The two most famous incidents depicted in *Bandit Queen* that propelled the film into controversial fame include Devi's multiple rapes and her naked parade and her alleged massacre of twenty-two Thakurs in Behmai. The differences between Sen's account and Kapur's directorial decisions accentuate Kapur's deliberate negligence of the subaltern's lived experience. Mala Sen observes that what happened to Devi after Vikram's death has many versions. She quotes a reticent Devi who said, "(those people really fooled with me)" (125). Sen also quotes an American journalist, Jon Bradshaw, who reported on the multiple rapes in Behmai. However, Sen again quotes from Devi's diaries about her being "locked up for three days without food and water" from where she was rescued by a local priest, also referred to by Bradshaw. Devi never mentions her rapes in her diaries. But *Bandit Queen* became famous for its controversial gang-rape scenes, chilling in their crudity and simulated reality, and also for the scene in which a naked Phoolan is paraded through the village by her tormentors. Under threat of censorship in India, Kapur justifies this scene in his film: "I don't see why, when we are showing something that does happen on a regular basis in India, why we should censor it out" (Prasad 17). Kapur, after reading Sen's book, which includes both quotes of Devi and Bradshaw, chooses to depict the more sensational one explicitly. Arundhati Roy, a virulent critic of the film, agrees:

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that whenever Phoolan says "*mujhse mazaak ki*" (those people really fooled with me) she does in fact mean that she was raped. Do they have the right to show it? In all its explicit detail? This raises the question of an Individual's Right to Privacy. In Phoolan Devi's case, not just Privacy, Sexual Privacy. And not just infringement. Outright assault (Roy).

Roy underscores the audacious liberty Kapur takes with the events in Devi's life and interprets them from his own elitist perspective and misrepresents Devi by compromising her privacy.

Roy notes that Kapur "has openly admitted that he didn't feel that he needed to meet Phoolan. His producer Bobby Bedi supports this decision

'Shekhar would have met her if he had felt a need to do so.' (*Sunday Observer August 20th [1994]*)." The director and producer refused to show Devi the uncut, international version of *Bandit Queen*. When Roy met Devi and described the scenes in detail, Devi was horrified and protested. "In...(some)...(news) papers Bobby Bedi had dismissed Devi's statements to the press – 'Let Phoolan sit with me and point out inaccuracies in the film, I will counter her accusations effectively' (*Sunday Observer, August 21st [1994]*)." When Devi called Bedi in front of Roy to ask for a date to watch the film, Bedi refused to fix one ("The Great Indian Rape-Trick I"). Kapur went ahead with his film and released it to a wider audience outside India. Devi, the silenced subaltern woman, becomes a bystander in the re-enactment of her own life on celluloid. It is intriguing to observe the difference in Roy's chastisement of and Prasad's endorsement of Kapur's standpoint. On one hand, a feminist committed to listening to the subaltern, Roy comments: "... re-creating her degradation and humiliation for public consumption, was totally unacceptable to me. Doing it without her consent, without her *specific, written repeated, whole-hearted, unambiguous*, consent, is monstrous.... I cannot believe that it is not a criminal offense" (Roy). On the other hand, Udayan Prasad defended Kapur's film, arguing that "the film was financed by a British television company and the film's sensibilities are not Indian; its banning in India cannot have come as a surprise to Kapur" (17). But Prasad forgets that the subject *is* Indian and *about* an Indian subaltern woman who was deeply offended by Kapur's violation of her sexual privacy, as Roy argues in her essay "The Great Indian Rape Trick." Since the film was never shown to Devi, Roy condemns the injustice of the whole issue: "... (h)ad I known that she had not seen the film, I would never have gone (to watch it)" (Roy).

Yet another famous scene in the film shows the massacre of twenty-two Thakurs in Behmai, an incident Devi claims she was not involved in. Although Sen quotes Devi and her then partner, Man Singh, about her not being present at the scene of the massacre, Kapur depicts Devi lining up the men and watching their being gunned down by her gang members. This Behmai massacre created a furor in the country that compelled Mrs. Gandhi to increase pressure on the top police officials to take control of the situation. Although Devi was finally apprehended because of the Behmai massacre, she never admitted to being involved in it. In her interviews with Sen, Devi asserts: "I was not there at the spot on that day and God is my witness...I was on the other side of the village when the massacre took place" (Sen 155). But Kapur portrays her participation,

albeit subtly, by making her humiliate the Thakurs but not pull the trigger. This scene negates Devi's statement to the police during her surrender, as recorded in Sen's account. Roy condemns the scene in the following words:

Phoolan Devi denies having murdered twenty-two Thakurs at Behmai. She has denied it in her statement to the Police. She has denied it in her "writings". She has denied it to Mala Sen. *Bandit Queen* shows her present and responsible for the massacre of twenty-two Thakurs at Behmai. What does this mean? Essentially I did not kill these twenty-two men.

Yes you did.

No I didn't.

Yes you did.

Cut, Alter and Adapt? (Roy).

Thus, in spite of being an extremely well-made film, Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* fabricates events that Phoolan Devi denies having participated in. In his melodramatic conclusion, Kapur appropriates Devi's real-life negotiations with Rajendra Chaturvedi, the then Superintendent of Police of Madhya Pradesh, on the terms of her surrender. Sen's account captures the fierceness of a wary woman as she carefully negotiates her terms of surrender, the fifteen "demands" Devi made that Chaturvedi had to get approved from the state Chief Minister before she agreed to capitulate (Sen 212). Devi was not a vanquished Dalit girl who bowed her head in submission. Rather, the state government made accommodations to secure her surrender. Nevertheless Kapur uses his only voice-over in the film in which we hear a broken-voiced Devi acquiescing to the terms passively. In his re-presentation and re-creation of Devi's experience, Kapur creates a Phoolan, a victim of caste and gender oppression, which is palatable to a Western audience.

While Kapur's misrepresentation is amply evident, one must be alive to the possibility of Mala Sen having essentialized Devi's character in her account. However, since her account was based on dictated writings from an imprisoned Devi, it is perhaps the only resource closest to the 'truth' of Devi's experiences. Nevertheless, the fact that Sen was actively involved in Kapur's film creates a double-bind for scholars: on one hand she has had direct access to Devi's lived experiences; on the other, she collaborates with Kapur in misrepresenting Devi's life and agency in celluloid. While Sen's reliability becomes questionable, scholars have no reliable alternative to her account of Devi. Said and Spivak's warning to intellectual-representers against misusing their power and 'speaking for' the subaltern manifests itself in Sen's engagement with Devi.

### Mala Sen's Devi and Cuny and Rambali's Force Sacree

Recalling the title of Rigoberta Menchu's testimony, *I, Rigoberta Menchu*, about the Guatemalan subaltern struggle, Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali's *Moi, Phoolan Devi, reine des bandits* (Paris, Fixot) or *I, Phoolan Devi* (1996) bluntly recasts Devi in the familiar colonial image of the 'exotic Other'. In "Marketing Devi" Srilata Ravi lists the various publications on Devi's story in Europe that reiterate proof of continuing Western interest in the myth of Indian exoticism: Shears Richard and Giddy Isobelle's *Devi: the bandit queen* (1984), French translation of Mala Sen's account, *La Reine des Bandits-La veritable histoire de Phoolan Devi, traduit de l'anglais par Claude Seban et Elie Nicoud* (1994), and Marie-Therese Cuny and Paul Rambali's *Moi, Phoolan Devi, reine des bandits* (1996), and Irene Frain's *Devi*. Ravi argues that 'force sacree' (sacred force), that became a familiar trope for the Indian woman in French imagination since colonial times, reincarnates itself in the profound interest in Devi's experience. Although Ravi discusses Irene Frank's approach to Devi in *Devi*, I shall read Cuny and Rambali's ghost-written account of Devi's "autobiography" in order to contend that the Indian Dalit woman's French portrait combines the exotic and the sacred. In the process, Devi's "real" voice is suppressed by the French ghost-writers' agenda because "(r)eality is transposed into images and images become myths wherein the signified undergoes total deformation with respect to the signifier..." especially when the writers generate stereotypical "images" about the unfamiliar (to the West) and propagate images as "myths" which deform the "signified" (the poorest and low-caste Indian woman) (Ravi 137).

David Stoll accuses *I, Rigoberta Menchu* of trying to "win a mass audience by appealing to Western expectations about native people," a claim Arturo Arias critiques in "Authoring Ethnicized Subjects: Rigoberta Menchu and the Performative Production of the Subaltern Self" (82). Cuny and Rambali, like Kapur, however, do fulfill Western expectations of India's gender and caste oppression. Arias argues that Menchu was right in "craft(ing) a strategic discourse" in her collaboration with Elisabeth Burgos-Debray to garner international support to prevent the "continued genocide of her people" (83). But although Cuny and Rambali's text in collaboration with Devi may be read as a strategic collaboration, it is replete with opinions and observations that render the text suspect. For example, their focus on male physiognomy echoes a Western anthropologist's voyeuristic gaze while their projection of Devi as a sacred force perpetuates the colonial myth of the exotic native. Some

believe Cuny and Rambali's book preceded Phoolan's political plans to become a Member of Parliament, and thus her ghost-writers followed a definite agenda to demonstrate her sense of social responsibility. For a detailed analysis, I will refer to selected passages in Cuny and Rambali that illustrate how the French writers impose a voice on Devi that seeks revenge by enunciating sacred powers, thereby creating a "representation (that) may effectively exist instead of rather than in correspondence to (the) 'real'" Devi (Bahri 204).

Along with some deviations from Sen's account, Cuny and Rambali's language recalls the dialectics of Hindu mythology with frequent references to vengeful goddesses contending with demons. Recourse to such expressions to describe Devi's desire for vengeance, I argue, is a twentieth century extension of nineteenth century French imagination about India when "the savagery and religious passion of the Thugs helped fuse the tropes of divine allegiance, violent death, helpless women, and erotic devotion into one essentialising signifier – 'la violence sacree'" (Ravi 139). Consequently, as Devi progresses in her career as a bandit, her language of revenge (imposed on her by Cuny and Rambali) translates into that of divine vengeance for justice, just as her 'enemies' become 'demons' whom the Goddess-incarnate must slay. In an incident not mentioned by Sen, Cuny and Rambali describe Devi's village headman groveling before her for mercy: "Please, release me, oh goddess! You are truly a goddess! You are the incarnation of Durga!" (303). I doubt if Devi believed she was an incarnation of divine power. Total faith in powers of gods and goddesses is not uncommon in rural India; but imagining oneself as an extension of such power is more mythical than real. What Ravi identifies in Irene Frain's account of Devi is also applicable to Cuny and Rambali's version: the narrative is "testimony to (the ghost-writers') observation that one of India's charms lies in her ability to produce myths" (143). Thus, Devi, in Cuny and Rambali's account, emerges as a mythical force that rises from severe oppression only to seek justice for the similarly disadvantaged. However, this portrait of justice-seeker silences the individual courage and strength that Devi exercised in her real life. Eventually, a kind of Robin Hood figure conflates with force sacree. Devi's ghost-writers observe: "I (Phoolan) helped the poor people by giving them money and I punished the wicked with the same tortures they inflicted on others, because I knew the police never listened to the complaints of the poor" (Cuny and Rambali 396).

An important aspect of Cuny and Rambali's text is the struggle they express in convincing readers of the veracity of their account. Although they claim that this text has given Devi "the chance to tell her story herself," the fact that Devi was illiterate when she narrated her tale to the ghost-writers cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the publisher, Bernard Fixot, attests to Devi's role in this account in the following way:

During August 1995 Phoolan listened as her book was read out to her (after being transcribed from the tapes that recorded her narration). This way she was able to be sure that what she had said had been written down. She approved each page with her signature, still the only word she knows how to write. (Cuny and Rambali 500)

Whether Devi signed every sheet of the manuscript after hearing it or not is quite irrelevant because she could not have understood a single word of what was read out, either in English or in French. Moreover, neither the publisher nor the writers ever acknowledge the translators who obviously worked as communicators between the ghost writers and Devi since the writers themselves did not communicate in Hindi or Bundelkhandi in which Devi must have narrated her story. Mala Sen takes care of these details and ensures her text is accepted as a veritable account.

Besides these publishing details, there are obvious differences between Sen's account and Cuny and Rambali's. While Sen refers to the older husband who molests his eleven-year old bride, Cuny and Rambali's text depicts a sympathetic father-in-law trying to protect Devi from her husband. Kapur's film features an unsympathetic mother-in-law who shuts her door on the screams of a helpless child bride. These discrepancies with respect to Sen's account demonstrate how Cuny and Rambali, like Kapur, attempt to emphasize the helplessness of Devi, thereby projecting her as a victim. Only Cuny and Rambali portray Man Singh, a close friend of Devi during her surrender and imprisonment, in a negative light, as a coward, who boasted of being Devi's husband, while Sen depicts him as a friend and trusted partner. Devi's political plans during the time may have prompted her ghost-writers to underplay Man Singh's importance in her last days prior to her surrender. Similarly, the elaborate references to Devi's concern for the poor, the women, the low castes, derive from such political ambitions. Thus, as discussed above, Cuny and Rambali's account expertly create a Robin Hood figure of Devi, thereby distancing it from her real-life extraordinary personal fortitude that helped her survive. Moreover, Sen's account clearly indicates that bandits loot and plunder when they need money for ammunition and survival. But Cuny and

Rambali imply that Devi's gang, like Robin Hood and his Merry Men, attacked villages to fulfill their philanthropic mission. No wonder that one of the reviews of *I, Phoolan Devi* introduces Devi as a female Robin Hood, thereby erasing all reference to Devi's individual tenacity against severe repression.

### Problems in/of Representation

Deepika Bahri sums up the problematics of representation: "Representation is always fictional or partial because it must imaginatively construct its constituency (as a portrait or a "fiction") and because it can inadvertently usurp the space of those who are incapable of representing themselves" (207). Clearly, Kapur and Cuny and Rambali "construct" their own versions of Devi and successfully, not "inadvertently," displace the extraordinary woman and her agency with poor images of a victim and a mythical sacred force, respectively. In "Reading subaltern history" Priyamvada Gopal examines the challenges historians encounter in translating subaltern acts, consciousness, agencies, and beliefs because what "masquerade(s) as universal," while informing the historians' training, may actually undermine and be irrelevant to subaltern existence and experience (158). Dipesh Chakrabarty's contention that "there will always be an 'irreducible gap' between the voice of the historian (in this case journalist Mala Sen) and that of the subaltern" may hold true for Sen's narrative but her collaboration with Kapur renders her commitment questionable (Gopal 157).

### We Can Never Hear Phoolan Devi 'Speak'

Through popular media and literature the "exotic" Other is reinscribed in images familiar to the normative Self. While Kapur freezes a low caste, poor subaltern woman as a helpless victim of caste and gender oppression, a typical inhabitant of the unfamiliar territories, for his British audience, Cuny and Rambali reinforce French colonial myths about rural India in terms of mystery, sacred forces and benevolence amidst severe suffering. Both succeed in misrepresenting Phoolan Devi and her experiences and silence her voice. Either as a force sacree, or a female Robin Hood, or a much-exploited Dalit woman, Devi's "political capacity as subaltern" has been "obscured" by the "noise of transmitting Phoolan Devi as popular cultural and political icon" (Ghosh 460). Phoolan Devi's case demonstrates how an Indian subaltern identity becomes a highly profitable commodity not only for the West, like UK and France, but also for the domestic elite,

like Kapur. Both the West and the domestic privileged employ “static signifiers” to portray their Other, their subaltern, through their hegemonic vision in a post-colonial era (Ravi 148). While scholars like Benita Parry have accused Gayatri Spivak of “deliberate deafness to the native voice where it *can* be heard,” it is evident from the discussion above that since all existing accounts of Devi's experience are de facto re-presentations by elitist, urban, and First World men and women, we hear only the mediator's controlling voice (Loomba 196). Clearly, as Spivak reminds us, “...this question of representation...representing others, is a problem” (qtd. in Bahri 207). Unlike the Subalternist investment in “bending to the ground” in order to recover the traces or “fragments” of subaltern consciousness and agency, many representers trample over the fragile facts and refuse to register, let alone re-present, tales of exceptional courage and agency (Gopal 140).

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