Reading the Perplexing Figure of the "Bandit Queen": Interpellation, Resistance and Opacity

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> *In the end, the Phoolan who emerged from the shadows was nowhere near the magnificent picture that was painted of her. The legend turned out to be a wisp of a girl, dressed in khaki bell-bottoms, revolver held high over her head and a red bandana holding back unruly strands of hair. That was the day of the surrender[...]The real story of Phoolan unfolded much later, as her biographer, Mala Sen, met her in prison and strung together the bits and pieces of her past life. There couldn't have been a greater contrast between fiction and fact. The former was a romantic fantasy, the latter a horrific tale of child rape, abduction and abuse: By the time she grew up, Phoolan had been so brutalized that she felt no remorse when she killed and looted. (The Hindu para.1)*

Editorials[1] such as this are one of the many mediatized texts that seek to narrate the life story of Phoolan Devi,[2] infamously known as the "Bandit Queen" of India. Born into a family of lower caste *Mallahs* (boatmen) in a remote village in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, Phoolan Devi became an icon in her short life of thirty-eight years and a source of fascination for the mainstream media both nationally and globally. "Her story" was told through media texts - both news stories as well as opinion-based editorials and commentary, film and biographical literature - all attempts at explaining Phoolan Devi once and for all for their audiences. Cast in the mould of the "Bandit Queen", media and other popular cultural narratives focused on the horrific sexual abuse she suffered, her criminal record as a bandit who "terrorized" the Chambal ravines in northern India and often categorized her as an oppressed lower caste woman, who like the mythic Kali figure sought revenge through murder and other violent means. As an "outlaw", Phoolan eluded the police, who did not have a photograph of her, for four years, a run that ended in February 1983 with her surrender in front of an almost 8,000-strong crowd (*Outlook* magazine 53). She was a figure of fascination for the media, in part because she was a woman who had not only run with an all-male group of bandits (only a few other women had been known to have done this) but had also become their leader following the death of Vikram Mallah, the leader of the group and allegedly Phoolan's lover. Moreover, she had never been seen by the police, the army or the media. Her group was composed largely of lower caste *Mallah* males and the stories that formed the mythology of this group claimed that they attacked and looted upper caste *Thakur* homes and land holdings. Among the many charges filed against her, Phoolan stood accused of murdering twenty-two *Thakur* men in the village of Behmai, Uttar Pradesh. The stories that constructed the figure of the "Bandit Queen" claimed that the massacre of the twenty-two men was Phoolan's revenge for the brutal rape and torture that she had suffered in the village following the killing of her lover, Vikram Mallah. For the Indian English-language news

media, Phoolan Devi was a fascinating figure.

Her emergence into the mainstream proved anticlimactic for the media that had mythologized her image. The media noted that the figure that emerged from the wilderness of the Chambal ravines was "nowhere near the magnificent picture that was painted of her [...] the legend turned out to be a wisp of a girl, dressed in khaki bell-bottoms, revolver held high over her head and a red bandana holding back unruly strands of hair" (*The Hindu*, editorial). What the media failed to note was that the "legend" - that they now noted Phoolan did not match up to - had been constructed by their own myth-making machine. In other words, the media failed to note that they were - in Salman Rushdie's words - "*uncreate* (ing) their own myths of her legendary beauty" and of her ethereal goddess-like image (59). After eleven years of imprisonment - during which period she did not stand trial - Phoolan was released from prison by a political party (the Samajwadi Party) that had contested elections and won political power on the claim that it represented the interests of lower castes, Muslims and the poor. Phoolan was given a ticket by the Samajwadi Party and contested elections following her release. She was gunned down in 2001 in New Delhi, as she was returning home from the parliament. Speculation and conjecture framed her death just as they had defined the narratives that sought to describe her life. Was it *Thakur* revenge for the Behmai killings? Did her husband kill her because she was planning to divorce him? Did her political opponents do her in?

In this paper, I examine some of the 'stories' that textually produced and constructed the iconic figure of the "Bandit Queen". I focus on a range of texts including English-language publications such as the daily newspaper, *The Hindu*, and weekly news magazines like *Outlook* that are produced for the English language-consuming middle classes in India who live in the large metropolitan cities of the country. My discussion of the English language print media is based on a reading of close to fifty articles, including news reports, editorials and columns, published between 1995 after Phoolan's release from prison and her entry into electoral politics and 2001 when she was murdered. Secondly, I discuss the controversial film, *The Bandit Queen* (1994). The screenplay for this film, produced in a dialect of Hindi, was written by Mala Sen, Phoolan's biographer; it was directed by Shekhar Kapur and was commissioned and funded by Channel Four, a British television channel. The film frames its narrative as a "true story" rather than historical fiction. The third text of interest here is *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*, a book that was published in 1997, almost two years after Phoolan Devi's release from her eleven-year-long stay in prison. I focus on the text and some of the pictures that are a part of the book. By reading editorials such as the one cited above, news stories as well as the film, *Bandit Queen*, I point to the manner in which such texts function to impose a form of 'transparency' or legibility through rigid and narrow representational frames on the marginalized or the subaltern -in this case lower caste, rural, poor women like Phoolan Devi. Reading the autobiography, controversial in its own right, by keeping its tensions, fissures and ambivalences in play, I show the

discursive processes through which this text does resistive work by rendering the same representational frames imposed on Phoolan opaque.

As such, this paper is in conversation with and is indebted to Leela Fernandes' important essay - "Reading 'India's Bandit Queen': A Trans/national Feminist Perspective on the Discrepancies of Representation" - where she shows, through a reading of the film *Bandit Queen* and the autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi,* that practices of reading that focus on "the power effects of various strategies of representation" can be more productive than "a binary approach that either invokes or rejects representations of 'the real'" (148). Working through a trans/national feminist perspective, Fernandes argues that the film is a complex text. She shows that *Bandit Queen* - a collaboration between the First and the Third World - reinforces binary oppositions such as modern/traditional, difference/sameness and First World/Third World, marking the "Third World" as a "site of violence and disorder" (135). This is achieved, Fernandes argues, through the "convergence of specific strategies of representation in the film, the historical tradition of the genre of the ethnographic film, and the political economy of the production and consumption of texts" like *Bandit Queen* (136). Specifically, binary oppositions are reinforced through tropes that "interweave(s) a politics of gender with the visualization of violence" (135), which allow the First World audience of the film to read it within the long tradition of representing the Third World as a "site of violence and disorder" (135). However, Fernandes also states that within the context of a national debate in India, the film *also* served to disrupt "particular hegemonic social codes regarding sexuality and rape," even as it "recolonized Phoolan Devi through the appropriation of her life experience" (138). In other words, Fernandes suggests that the "power effects" of representation are not pre-determined by the text's material relations in the last instance. She also shows that the autobiography or testimonio is more effective than the film "in disrupting hegemonic relationships between power and resistance because of moments of subversion within the text that prevent a commodification of Phoolan Devi's life into the figure of the victimized 'Third World woman'" (147).

Contributing to this conversation, my paper, which has a different emphasis, makes modest arguments - firstly, it situates Phoolan Devi's life story in the specific historical moment within which it emerged and aims to read *this* conjuncture (this complex moment in contemporary Indian history) through the representations that framed her life. Secondly, I focus deliberately on the unease and perplexity that Phoolan's arrival into the mainstream engenders. This perplexity is evident in the questions that frame the English-language press' representations of Phoolan Devi: Who was this woman? The horrifically oppressed subaltern who also took horrific, but agentful, revenge? Or a pawn, exploited by all who met her? In an attempt to address this perplexity, the English-language news reports as well as the film *Bandit Queen* use particular representational categories that aim to resolve the unease ostensibly produced by Phoolan Devi. This form of perplexity, but specifically the representational categories used to address it, interest me because I believe it gives us a lever

with which to examine the contemporary conjuncture in India which interweaves economic liberalization and the consequent burgeoning of middle classes, conspicuous consumption *and* the growing political power of dalits, lower castes and the rural poor. The categories of representation that foreground this perplexity and seek to resolve it encompass a double movement: they define both the dominant urban classes' desire to define progress, modernity and democracy through the subaltern *and* simultaneously the need to mark her as their 'other'. Through a focus on these categories, I trace the processes through which power works through representation. There is however, a second form of perplexity that I identify in the autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi*. This perplexity does not emerge from the hegemonic media institutions' attempts to categorize Phoolan, rather it is a consequence of the subject's - in this case, Phoolan's - investment in various subject positions, even some that are contradictory with each other. Priti Ramamurthy in her feminist commodity chain analysis that links polyester production with the consumption of polyester has argued that "as an analytic with multiple subtexts, (this form of) perplexity is a way of marking the tension between overlapping, opposing, and asymmetric forces of fields of power" (525). In other words, "perplexity indexes the puzzlement of people as they experience both the joys and aches of the global everyday, often simultaneously" (525). This second form of perplexity thus marks both the workings of socio-political economic power *and* the improvisation of the subject working within these networks of power. When reading the various texts of interest here, my emphasis is on identifying the representational moves and categories that address both of these forms of perplexity.

Thus, through a reading of the film *Bandit Queen* as well as the English-language news reports that narrated her story, I point to the representational processes through which the tension created by Phoolan's emergence in the public sphere is managed by interpellating her as the 'Bandit Queen'. I will identify what Fernandes evocatively calls the "power effects" of such a representational move within these texts. Like Fernandes, I also suggest that *I, Phoolan Devi* is a more effective representation than the stories that are narrated in the news media and in the film *Bandit Queen*. While Fernandes bases her argument on revealing the complex manner in which Phoolan Devi is staged as an agent within the text, my reading of *I, Phoolan Devi* foregrounds the contradictions and tensions that the text keeps in play. I believe *I, Phoolan Devi* is an effective representation precisely because it is an ambivalent text, which foregrounds the perplexity that frames subjectivity instead of attempting to resolve it.

Ranajit Guha uses the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition of the term, 'subaltern', as "of inferior rank" (vii) to explicate the work of the "Subaltern Studies Collective" in the preface to the first volume put out by this Collective. This simple definition, which is influenced theoretically by the writings of Italian Marxist political thinker Antonio Gramsci, frames my use of the term as well. I use the term deliberately since the texts of interest here work to recuperate and reveal the 'person of inferior rank' for the consumption of its English-speaking audiences. Such texts aim to tell the 'truth' and to transparently reveal Phoolan Devi and the

savagery that surrounded her. In other words, such texts are part of a hegemonic process that seeks to reveal the woman from the most marginalized sections of Indian society, narrate her story and explain her once and for all, for the consumption of the dominant classes, who form their audience. It is precisely this process of hegemony that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak marks in her question: Can the subaltern speak? Taking up the question in her manuscript, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Spivak has argued that "when a line of communication is established between a member of subaltern groups and the circuits of citizenship or institutionality, the subaltern has been inserted into the long road to hegemony" (110). Without assuming an inevitability to the outcome of an interaction between the subaltern and the "circuits of citizenship and institutionality" that would also reify the distance between the subaltern and the dominant classes, my interest is in the *processes* through which subalterns are simultaneously included and excluded by such classes. To use Spivak's terms, I am interested in the processes through which the subaltern is "inserted into the long road to hegemony." The "road to hegemony" involves a complex negotiation with groups of diverse interests and motivations such that the dominance of certain classes is *accepted* and not enforced. I am interested in showing how the subaltern woman is often the figure through which such negotiations are worked out.

By referring to Phoolan Devi as a subaltern woman, my aim is to situate her in the socio-political-economic context in which she was condemned to live her life as a woman of an 'inferior rank' and to point to the discursive processes that consistently hailed her through categories that mythologized her body. My use of the term subaltern is also methodological, since I believe that it allows me to move through interdisciplinary spaces and bring literatures that focus on categories such as caste and gender in conversation with bodies of work that explore the construction and resistance of racialisation and gendered identity markers. It allows me to bring Black Cultural Studies in conversation with Subaltern Studies and literary theory in conversation with historical and anthropological work on contemporary India. I do this not because I am interested in building a sociological comparison between race and caste, nor am I suggesting that disparate historical and socio-political contexts can be compared, but because my aim is to 'read the Bandit Queen' with a set of sophisticated, conceptual tools. Spivak in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* states that the figure of the native informant or the subaltern is foreclosed in dominant, canonical, disciplinary texts and methodology and provocatively suggests that the pedagogical and critical task is not just to critique this foreclosure or worse to resurrect an originary subaltern in her purity, but to use the trace, the "subliminal emergence", of the subaltern *within* the text, in order to unravel the text itself (110). It is precisely with the aim of unraveling the texts of interest here and to trace the assumptions underlining their definitions of subalternity that I read the texts that translated Phoolan Devi for their audiences.

Reading these representations reveals that the 'life story' of the subaltern woman is essential for the contemporary socio-political conjuncture in India which has witnessed structural

readjustment programs or economic liberalization, combined with the burgeoning of movements that aim to define India as a Hindu nation as well as the rise of the regional political party that claims to represent the interest of dalits, the rural poor and Muslims. Life stories of women like Phoolan allow the hegemonic project of the dominant urban classes that define development and progress as a break from the planned economies of post-independence India and an opposition to identity politics based on caste and religion to legitimize themselves by simultaneously expressing sympathy for the victim of caste and gender-based oppression and by defining her as their 'other' - the figure who is not yet modern, not yet fully developed.

Postcolonial India: Mapping Political Trajectories

In the past twenty years, the Indian subcontinent has seen many political, social and cultural changes, including the legitimacy garnered by neoliberalism, the consolidation of a "new" middle class and its consumptive patterns, the exploding media industry, the burgeoning of the Hindu nationalist movement and the rise of the regional political party as a representative of lower caste, dalit and the rural poor's aspirations. The life story of Phoolan Devi interestingly marks the trajectories of this period. She emerged in mainstream Indian popular culture in the late seventies when the Indian National Congress - the political party associated in popular imaginary with the independence movement, which had held sway for nearly three decades - was on the decline. As Thomas Blom Hansen notes in his book, *The Saffron Wave,* the decade of the seventies saw the decline of the Congress party and smaller, regional political parties begin to gain political clout (17). The eighties saw a further decline of the Congress and the concomitant strengthening of regional parties. A number of these regional parties, including the Samajwadi Party, on whose ticket Phoolan contested and won two elections, were organized by and claimed to represent the interests of historically disenfranchised lower castes, dalits and the rural poor. This burgeoning political power of lower caste groups has variously been termed a "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot), and "the second democratic upsurge" (Kaviraj).

This period also witnessed the burgeoning of Hindu nationalism or the movement that seeks political power by forging a unified, Hindu identity and defining India as a Hindu nation. The Hindu nationalist movement has sought to define a "Hindu way of life" and redefine Indian history as Hindu history (Vanaik, Hansen, Basu et al.). It has sought to mobilize and represent a majority, one that is defined by its religion. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political wing of the Hindu nationalist movement, won elections in several states and in 1999 headed an alliance that captured power at the center. While the Bharatiya Janata Party now sits in the opposition in New Delhi having lost the elections to the lower house of parliament in 2004 and 2009, it continues to hold power in several Indian states.

Scholars like Blom Hansen have read the increased political legitimacy of both smaller, regional political parties and the Hindu nationalist movement together to argue that the Indian

middle classes felt increasingly threatened by what they saw as the rise of unworthy, plebian political leaders and began to grow skeptical about the viability of democracy and thus felt inclined towards more authoritative forms of governance - the type of governance that was being offered by the political parties associated with the Hindu nationalist movement. Hansen states that "the phenomenal growth and political success of Hindu nationalism in India in the last decade must be understood in the context of this larger disjuncture between democratic mobilization and democratic governance" (17).

The twenty-year period - from the early 1980s to the present - has therefore largely been framed within scholarship - particularly work emerging from the discipline of political science - that engages with South Asia along two interconnected and yet distinct trajectories: the political legitimacy secured by the smaller, regional parties (Jaffrelot, Yadav) and the Hindu nationalist movement (Hansen, Vanaik). Such frameworks have largely ignored iconic figures like Phoolan Devi and the representational practices that configured and identified her during this time. Specifically, such analyses have largely ignored the intersections between caste, ethnicity and gender within the discursive formations that have characterized India from the 1980s until the present. It is feminist scholarship focused on South Asia that has worked to address this gap in analysis (Sunder Rajan, Sarkar, Menon). An important preoccupation for this work that has focused on gender in the contemporary conjuncture is the paradoxical relationship between feminist politics and the state where, in Nivedita Menon's words, "on the one hand, the state is seen as the primary agent perpetuating oppression of women, and on the other hand, the state is treated as the agent of change and potential protector of powerless sections of society" (18). In this context, Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan analyzes Phoolan Devi's surrender to the Indian state as marking precisely such a paradox. Thus, Sunder Rajan observes that Phoolan "sought out the nation-state - its structures of state, police, judiciary, public figures, and the media to negotiate freedom and justice for herself," but immediately also notes that this observation does not undermine the "indictment of constitutional democracy in India [...] the indictment of vote politics, police criminality and terrorism, the dubious legalism of "negotiations," and the state's "production of the outlaw" (233). While my examination of Phoolan and her iconicity benefits from these analyses, it also shifts focus and uses a feminist perspective to read the representations of the subaltern woman as an analytic in order to examine politics and culture in contemporary India. Thus, while Sunder Rajan posits a relationship between women and the state in India "in the belief that it is central to our understanding of both Indian women's identity and the Indian state's role and functioning" (1), I am interested in tracing how women like Phoolan are constructed and defined *as* subaltern women through their interaction with representational processes and what this might tell us about politics and culture in contemporary India. Phoolan Devi's iconicity and the representations that constructed her life story, imposing a form of transparency on her, can reveal more about the politics and ideologies that have defined contemporary India.

"Dominative Imposition of Transparency": Managing the Perplexing Figure of Phoolan Devi

The Mythic and the Abject

A persistent thematic in the archive of English language print news stories that work collectively to narrate Phoolan's life story is the desire to trace the 'truth' about her and define her transparently for middle-class audiences consuming these media texts. The desire to hail Phoolan Devi as a particular type of subject stems from the perplexity that her emergence into the public sphere engenders. Consider this extract from an article in an English language daily that appeared after Phoolan Devi's death; it directly references a photograph that was taken at the time of Phoolan's surrender to the Indian state in 1983. At this point too, almost two decades after the surrender, Phoolan generates questions and perplexity:

> Is she a wild little girl, lost and afraid in the world to which her surrender has brought her? Or is she firming up her unsmiling mouth to take on another challenge? Or is she still immersed in the blood-revenge culture of the Chambal ravines? She fills the frame, yet does not dominate it. She is caught in a circle of eyes, fixed in other people's perceptions. And this is the space she inhabited till her death. (Chakravorty para.2)

Here, the writer implicitly references the multiple stories that had framed Phoolan's life - she was sometimes seen as a "wild," "lost girl" and at other times she was seen as a powerful agent, taking on one violent challenge after another - to mark the perplexity that Phoolan's emergence into the mainstream provoked. Feminist activist Madhu Kishwar, also writing after Phoolan's death, notes the curiosity and the questions that defined her iconicity:

> No political leader, no film star, no other celebrity has evoked the kind of curiosity and interest in the national and international media as Phoolan Devi. Who was she? A wronged and abused woman? A deadly dacoit? A shrewd manipulator? Or a Durga incarnate? (Kishwar para.2)

As Kishwar notes, Phoolan Devi was a source of fascination for the media and the stories that were told about her moved between describing her in a mythic form, reminiscent of the figures of Durga or Kali wreaking revenge, and the figure of the 'wronged and abused woman'. For Kishwar, it is precisely this double move - defining her sometimes as a violent agent and at others as an abject woman - that engenders confusion. News commentary on her life story (particularly the analyses written after her death) attempt to manage the questions her figure had produced by sifting fact from fiction, excavating the 'real' Phoolan Devi and then analyzing her for its audience. In this mode, she is typically described as a figure who failed to fill the mythic frame that had been constructed for her. Kishwar herself continues to note the following:

> While the idea of women's equality leaves most Indian men uncomfortable,

> they seem to relish and respect women who appear as Durgas. Thanks to the media's determined myth-making, Phoolan too was forced into the Durga-Chandi mould even though she does not actually fit the role. If we follow mythological lore a real Durga is one who remains unvanquished...her inviolability is what deifies her. Phoolan, unfortunately, was a much abused, battered and exploited person. Yes, she fought back. She tried retaliating with the same weapons as were used against her. And yet she moved from one exploitative situation to another. (Kishwar para.6)

In this extract, Kishwar makes three points: First, she suggests the presence of a 'real' Durga and a 'real' Phoolan Devi. While stating that the media had attempted to draw equivalences between Phoolan and Durga, she works to delineate both the 'real' Durga and the 'real' Phoolan. Second (and following from her first point), she argues that the myth of Durga (or Kali) is a male fascination but, oddly enough, she uses the male gaze to read Durga as an inviolable (and therefore perhaps also virginal) figure. For Kishwar, the 'real' Phoolan was not a 'real' Durga, precisely because she was and continued to be a 'violated' figure. Thirdly therefore, the "abused, battered and exploited" Phoolan Devi emerges in this account as a figure of abjection.

Seen as an anticlimactic figure, Phoolan Devi's life story is then explicated using a cause-and-effect formula. Brutalized by violence - these explanations note - Phoolan herself turned to violence. The editorial from *The Hindu* highlighted at the start of the paper thus notes that:

> The *real* story of Phoolan unfolded much later, as her biographer, Mala Sen, met her in prison and strung together the bits and pieces of her past life. There couldn't have been a greater contrast between fiction and fact. The former was a romantic fantasy, the latter a horrific tale of child rape, abduction and abuse: By the time she grew up, Phoolan had been so brutalized that she felt no remorse when she killed and looted. (para.1)

This editorial makes two points. First, it implies that the presence of multiple stories necessitates an explanation: Phoolan needs to be clarified for the editorial's readership. Second, it makes an explicit distinction between 'real' or 'factual' and 'fictive' or 'mythic' stories and is concerned with presenting the 'truth' about Phoolan Devi. Kishwar, in her commentary on Phoolan's death, noted that "the plethora of journalistic accounts" on her life were confusing precisely because they were "coloured" (Kishwar, para.2). In other words, Kishwar suggests that myth and bias engendered many of the journalistic accounts of Phoolan's life. *The Hindu*, which has a reputation for investigative journalism and is seen as a news organization interested in serious political, social and economic news, thus works ostensibly to strip the story of "romantic fantasy" and myth and reveal the 'real' Phoolan Devi. The editorial dismisses other narratives, accepts the biography as the 'truth' and uses it to explicate Phoolan for its readers. Using the rape-revenge formula, the editorial manages the

perplexity that is produced by Phoolan's iconicity. The editorial is one of many disparate journalistic accounts, with headlines such as "A Bullet-Riddled Biography" (Biswas, *Outlook*), "Legends of Wronged Women" (Chakraborty, *The Telegraph*), and "A Life Less Ordinary" (Khan, *The Indian Express*) that nevertheless work to define Phoolan as a "victim of caste oppression and gender exploitation who fought back first by resorting to gory revenge and later by moving on to the political plain" (*Frontline* magazine). A cover story in *Outlook* magazine stated the matter even more simply: "The real Phoolan possibly never stood up. At under 5 ft, this rebel of the ravines was essentially a sharp-tongued wronged woman" (53). In other words, the perplexity engendered by Phoolan Devi's emergence in to the mainstream - a sense of unease that was produced because the media's myth making machine had to "uncreate" its own myths - was managed by articulating a desire to turn to 'facts' and consequently by defining Phoolan as an oppressed woman who "lived by the gun and, in the end, died by it" (Khan, *Indian Express*). As such, the news media worked to impose a form of transparency on Phoolan Devi.

Daphne Brooks in her work, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*, has termed the process through which the black female body is systematically rendered as "othered" matter by "hegemonic hermeneutics" that "mythically configure" her iconography (7) as the "dominative imposition of transparency" (8). While her work focuses on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black performance - "pioneering acts" that "drew from the condition of social, political, and cultural alterity to resist, complicate, and undo narrow racial, gender, sexual, and class categories in American and British cultures" (3) - her theorization of "transparency" helps us read the "power effects" of the texts that purported to narrate Phoolan's life story as well. Brooks sees "dominative imposition of transparency" as the static, 'unfree' and rigid identity categories that were imposed on the black body (particularly the black female body) during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the U.S. and Britain. Her work points to the processes through which "spectacularly eccentric" (6) black performance at this historical conjuncture worked outside restrictive race and gender paradigms to develop "a means to move freely and to be culturally 'odd,' to turn the tables on normativity..." (6). Reading the texts that narrativized the life of Phoolan Devi in juxtaposition with Brooks' *Bodies in Dissent* proves fascinating because it provides conceptual levers with which to open up the texts that constructed Phoolan's iconography for the range of meanings that were encoded there.

Thinking of the stories, such as the ones outlined above, with the conceptual tool of "dominative imposition of transparency" (Brooks, 8). renders visible the hegemonic processes through which Phoolan is made 'transparent' by categorizing her first as a mythic figure and then as an abject body - a body that has been degraded and exploited to a point where it lacks any dignity and as such can be consumed, albeit sympathetically, by the middle classes through the mediation of the media texts. I am using the term abject here to mark the processes through which Phoolan is staged as a degraded body and therefore as the 'other' of

the audiences consuming the media texts. In Julia Kristeva's significant theorization of the term, the abject is "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (4). Abjection, Kristeva suggests, is produced by that which "disturbs identity, system and order" (4) and the abject "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes" (5). For Kristeva, the abject is the "in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4), it is that which does not respect borders, it is that which puts the rule in question. Distinct from this theorization, in my reading of Phoolan Devi's representations, abject emerges as a trope signifying absolute exploitation and degradation that, in fact, makes the body of the subaltern woman legible within a historical conjuncture where socio-political classes that are hegemonic simultaneously use the subaltern woman to define their inclusivity and disavow her to mark the limits of their spaces. Instead of highlighting the ambiguous, the trope of the abject when used within this conjuncture to define the subaltern woman erases ambiguity and distinctly categorizes her.

The discursive processes that give shape to the contemporary social formation in India do not erase subaltern women like Phoolan Devi from their narratives, rather she is made visible and legible through narrow representational frames that render her as an oppressed body and, as such, her body marks the boundary between modern, secular, cosmopolitan India that lives in bustling cities and the primitive villages and towns of the nation where caste and sexism are seen to breed. The imposition of transparency is achieved through interpellation - hailing Phoolan as "Bandit Queen" or as the Kali figure, an untamed, unsophisticated animal-woman who was brutalized and sought violent revenge. The attempt to make Phoolan Devi intelligible thus reveals more about the hegemonic social formation that was coming into being during her life time, than about Phoolan herself.

Interpellation

> The horrors, it would seem, have all retired to the sepia refuge of scrapbooks. There are no bandits anymore, trampling the wilds or tormenting the settlements teetering on its fringes [...] The ravine itself is no ravine, at least at the moment. The magnanimous monsoon has relieved it of the ochre curse [...] If imagination stood just a little above the poverty line in these parts, the ravine could have become a profitable theme park, a bandit safari as close to the original as it could ever get. (Thakur para.1)

In this extract from an *Indian Express* essay titled "In Search of Phoolan", the journalist who had written several articles on Phoolan Devi sets out to re-discover the Chambal ravines after her death in 2001. Phoolan's ravines are distinctly set apart from the world that the reader of this essay is accustomed to - the ravines were wild, badlands where bandits roamed much like wild animals "tormenting the settlements" that existed at its "margins" (Thakur).The writer takes the animal metaphor to its inevitable (but often unarticulated) conclusion, transforming the bandit simply into an object of consumption. If the middle class reader of this story were a

little imaginative, he or she could transform these ravines - with its wild and exotic beauty - into a 'theme park' that would be (and this is significant) profitable as a 'bandit safari'. The comparison between a bandit like Phoolan and a wild animal is made unambiguously clear. Phoolan Devi stands interpellated as a wild animal-woman.

Louis Althusser's key contribution to the conceptualization of ideology comes through the notion of interpellation He argues that the subject is "the constitutive category of all ideology" (170) such that "there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects" (171). Alluding to Jacques Lacan's theorization of the "mirror stage as formative of the function of I" (Eagleton, 142), Althusser uses the term interpellation or "hailing" to argue that "ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals [...] or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects" (174). He emphasizes that ideology recruits or transforms *all* individuals. The simplest example (or as Althusser puts it, the "most commonplace everyday example") of this functioning of ideology is a police officer on the street hailing: 'Hey, you there!' (Althusser, 174). In the moment when the person on the street recognizes the hailing, he has - in Althusser's conception - been transformed into a subject within a political-judicial ideology. It is through the concept of ideological interpellation then, that we can begin to theorize the processes through which human beings are transformed into blacks (therefore also whites), homosexuals (therefore also heterosexuals), Third World women (therefore also First World men) and so on. Ernesto Laclau, in fact, argues that the notion of interpellation is key to a conceptualization of ideology: He states that it is the subject interpellated and constituted by discourse that constitutes the unifying principle of an ideological discourse (101). Thus, the unity that an ideological system is perceived to possess, even though it is an articulation of various elements, "is given by the specific interpellation which forms the axis and organizing principle of all ideology" (Laclau, 101). It is also important to note here that in Laclau's reading of Althusser, different types of interpellations (he identifies political, religious, familial, etc.) coexist and are articulated "within an ideological discourse in a relative unity" (102). One can thus analyze the unity of an ideology by examining how this articulation occurs through the interpellated subject.

A focus on the processes through which Phoolan is interpellated into an abject body or an animal-woman is significant precisely because it can reveal the ways in which neoliberalism is taking shape as the suture binding the contemporary social formation in India. In the extract from the *Indian Express* article cited above, the journalist Sankarshan Thakur not only interpellates Phoolan Devi as an abject object for the consumption of his middle class readers residing in cities, he also argues that the historical and social moment had turned a corner. Thakur needs to use his "imagination" to conjure up an image of Phoolan Devi's Chambal, for the ravines had altered. "The horrors" of the ravines, that space that was so distinct from the civilization of the cities, "have all retired to the sepia refuge of scrapbooks" (Thakur, para.1). Thakur marks the change by noting that the contemporary moment had seen the "expiring" of empires and the "blossoming" of markets, "the Internet has arrived and placed progress on a

super speedway...India has become a nuclear power...and Phoolan Devi has become an icon, not demonized by the excesses she committed but deified by the excesses she faced and fought" (para.14). In fact, the change - the coming into being of neoliberal India with profitable markets, the Internet and nuclear power - is marked by Thakur through the figure of the subaltern woman: "The change lies not in the fact that the Phoolan trail does not run in the ravines any more; the change lies in the fact that it needn't" (para.15). The ravines are distinctly marked as a pre-modern space of oppression and are now seen as irrelevant even for the most oppressed of its residents, namely the subaltern woman. This is because as Thakur continues to note, "the battle can now be fought from the highways of civilization, with flags and posters and a *pichhda* (backward) constituency that rides to the fore on a new high of aspiration" (para.15). The "relative unity" of the ideology shaping the contemporary moment is thus revealed through the processes of interpellation: this ideology uses the subaltern woman to mark the contemporary conjuncture as a moment of rupture; Phoolan Devi, interpellated as an abject and mythic body, marks the spaces that lie beyond the pale of market-governed, middle class cities as oppressive, pre-modern and therefore 'other'. The emergence and penetration of new market economies symbolized by information superhighways and even the aspirational rise of the regional political party is seen as a moment of change precisely because - or so these stories would have us believe - the abject body need not fight in the ravines any more, she can and does emerge into the "spaces of civilization".

Two photographs of Phoolan Devi, similarly, illustrate iconicity and interpellation. Both of these images appear in her autobiography, which was published in 1996. I read these images, both of which have been authored by transnational circuits of power that read the so-called Third World consistently through the body of the Third World woman,[3] by juxtaposing them with the Indian political and historical context within which they emerged. Much like the journalistic accounts, the aim here is to read the images for what they reveal about the ideologies that framed the social formation in India at the time. In the picture that appears on the cover of the autobiography, a gender-ambivalent Phoolan Devi stares down at the viewer; the look in the eyes and the turn of the mouth give the figure a hard, harsh look. Phoolan is dressed in a khaki uniform and holds a gun, she could be a police officer, but the drape of the red shawl around her torso and the red bandanna wrapped around her forehead mark her not as an official of the law but as a *dakait*, a 'bandit'. This image of Phoolan was iconic of her figure at the time of her surrender. Reading the image semiotically, at the first level of signification, we can read the figure in this picture as a bandit, at the second level of signification, however, the sign 'bandit' becomes a signifier - a form - that must now be filled by signified-concepts. The text of the autobiography, as well other representations of Phoolan that focus on sexual abuse and caste oppression in rural India, construct this ideological sign for us: 'bandit', particularly the female bandit comes to signify the 'other' of postcolonial, modern India. The female bandit comes to signify the problem of the 'pre-modern' rural village, where the violence of caste and sexism are seen to lie for the urban, Indian middle

classes. This ideological sign is more clearly revealed when one juxtaposes the cover picture with a second picture of Phoolan taken after her release from prison.

In this second picture, Phoolan is dressed in a traditional *sari*, her hands do not hold a gun here, instead they are respectfully and delicately folded. Her gaze is not directed at the camera and the turn of the mouth is not hard and defiant as it is in the photograph described above. Her nails are painted a bright red and match her *sari* and blouse; she wears jewelry and a watch and is seated cross-legged on a sofa with silk drapes behind her. Pictures such as the one I have described here were iconic of Phoolan's figure after her release from prison, when she entered the spaces of the urban middle classes. At the first level of signification, Phoolan here appears as a middle-class Indian woman, lacking the sophistication of the urban elites as indicated by her posture (she sits cross-legged on a sofa), but at a distance from the bandit that appeared in the cover picture. It is this distance that allows us to read both the pictures at the ideological level. At the second level of signification, Phoolan Devi as a woman aspiring for middle class status comes to signify the inclusivity of the urban space and politics (as Thakur had noted in the *Indian Express* article discussed above); removed from the oppressions of the village - poverty, caste and sex - she can lead a more 'respectable' life, where her battles are now waged within the legal discourse of the judiciary rather than with the gun. In fact, the caption accompanying this picture which is credited to Marie-Therese Cuny, who is also listed as one of the co-authors of the autobiography, notes the following in Phoolan's voice:

> On 21 February 1994 the doors of Tihar prison in New Delhi opened before me. After eleven years of detention I was free, but my freedom is only provisional - the charges have still not been lifted and I am waiting for the judgment of the Supreme Court. A new, different battle has started. I must try to rebuild my life (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali, 235).

The "Not-yet" Figure

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in *Provincializing Europe* that historicism, or the modern European idea of history, is defined by a particular understanding of time that declares "first in the West, and then elsewhere" (6). The colonized then - according to this discourse - were confined to the "waiting room of history": in other words, "some historical time of development and civilization (colonial rule and education, to be precise) had to elapse before they could be prepared for the task" of civilization (8). Following from the semiological analysis above, we can see that it is precisely this discourse of "not-yet" that is now used by the post-colonial urban middle classes to mark lower caste, rural, poor women such as Phoolan Devi. At the historical conjuncture when political parties representing lower castes, dalits, and the rural poor were asserting themselves and winning political legitimacy, the urban middle class discourse paternalistically interpellated Phoolan as the oppressed, vengeful subaltern woman. The discourse espouses sympathy for subalterns like Phoolan but can only

do so in a mode that continually sees her only as a victim who sought revenge. As an 'effect' of this discourse, Phoolan is made transparent as a 'bandit' and while her story is read with sympathy, she and other subalterns like her are confined to the "waiting room of history". Phoolan Devi's history was ruled in for her - it was a story about horrific oppression and horrific revenge - her multiple subjectivities were ruled out and she became legible only through narrow representational frames that hailed her as the "Bandit Queen". Neoliberal discourse thus marked caste and gender-based oppression as pre-modern savagery. Working through the body of the subaltern woman, interpellating her through a paternalistic gaze, it read her as a bandit and resolved the perplexity that was produced by her emergence into the public sphere. It is only when Phoolan Devi enters the urban, middle class spaces of the city is she seen to acquire a certain dignity and yet here too, she is a "not-yet" figure: not yet middle class, not yet urbane.

One can read this subject as she emerges in the film *The Bandit Queen* (1994) as well. The film, which was based on the biography authored by writer and activist Mala Sen, may be read as a tragic-melodrama. *The Bandit Queen* interpellates Phoolan Devi as a lower caste, illiterate, unsophisticated rural woman who can only communicate through raw emotions and physical violence. She can thus only react, often without the aid of rationality or reason, against the forces that close in on her. The image of Phoolan as a child or as an innocent but trapped animal forms a motif for the film as it purports to tell its viewers the "true story" of India's Bandit Queen. In one of the early sequences in the film, a goat leads the way as the child Phoolan heads home heeding her mother's call, not knowing that she was going to become a child bride. A goat appears once more in the film as Phoolan lies trapped and beaten as her captors wait to brutally gang rape her. In both instances, like the mute and submissive goat who accompanies her, Phoolan is represented as the passive victim of oppressive and brutal men. Phoolan Devi, the human being is thus interpellated and transformed into the oppressed Third World woman for the film's First World audience and she becomes the oppressed lower caste woman trapped like an animal in the brutal, rural environs of India, where casteism and sexism frame all relations, for the urban, middle class audiences of India.

The film, like other mediated texts that emerge in the postcolonial moment, narrates Phoolan's life story with the aim of reading and re-presenting the resistance of marginalized figures and communities ignored in both the colonial and the nationalist accounts of Indian history. Such an effort is fraught with tensions though for the recovery of lost or marginalized voices can also serve to fix the meaning of such voices and essentialise them. Nita Kumar argues that a simple "enthusiasm for reconstructing the history of [...] neglected constituencies is not of much value" (5), precisely because such projects often collude with colonialist discourses and "European historicizing epistemology" (5). Even when they scrupulously attend to the lived experiences of the subordinate, there is the danger of falling into the ever-present trap of essentialism. Even though the film attempts to construct a social critique and, as Leela

Fernandes has shown, attempts to mark sexuality and rape in a public sphere that deems these issues taboo, it nevertheless transforms Phoolan Devi the human being into Phoolan Devi the abject subject. It sets the rural distinctly apart from the urban, constructs it as a 'pre-modern' space and specifically locates the oppression of caste and sex within it. Here again, much like the English language news representations of Phoolan, the film deliberately aims to show its audiences the 'true story'. This true story casts Phoolan in a rape-revenge formulaic representation in a manner that aims to resolve the ambivalences surrounding her life story. By interpellating Phoolan as a tragic female figure, helpless as a lamb-to-the-slaughter and violated by these oppressions, it reveals the paternalistic gaze through which the middle classes look upon the rural, subaltern - through the female body.

Bandit Queen reveals more about the emergent neoliberal ideology that produced the film than about the human being who is interpellated. Thus, it enables us to analyze this neoliberal ideology which works - in part through these popular representations and iconic figures - to maintain its social and cultural hegemony over the rural subaltern. This form of neoliberalism celebrates the individual's struggle against oppression and thus reads Phoolan as the vengeful Kali, defining oppression (caste and gender) outside its own margins and, even as it expresses sympathy for the subaltern, interpellates her as a figure not yet ready for modernity. The interpellated figure is not an opaque figure. Through the process of hailing, the ambivalence that is engendered by the entrance of a figure like Phoolan Devi into the mainstream is sought to be managed; an attempt is made through this process to resolve the questions by imposing transparency onto the body of Phoolan Devi.

Reading *I, Phoolan Devi* : Performance and Opacity

The autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*, proves, however, to be a more complicated text. In fact, reading Phoolan's autobiography through Stuart Hall's notion of "identification" points to what Judith Butler has called the subject's "improvisation in a scene of constraint" (1). Hall argues that "an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is 'hailed', but that the subject invests in the position" (6). In other words, he theorizes identities/subjectivities as "sutures" and "suturing" as an articulation. He argues therefore that "a theory of ideology must begin not from the subject (as one could read Laclau 'reading' Althusser as suggesting) but as an account of suturing effects, the effecting of the join of the subject in structures of meaning" (6). One can examine this "join of the subject in the structures of meaning" (6) as identification. Hall's addition to the conceptualization of interpellation, and therefore ideology in this context, is significant because it allows us to move away from unproductive distinctions between true and false consciousness and enables one to examine the structures in dominance but also the negotiations of the subject within discourse. The journalistic accounts, the two images that appear in the autobiography and discussed above, as well as the film, all point to the ideological interpellation of Phoolan Devi as 'bandit' and the "not-yet" ready subject of modernity, reading *I, Phoolan Devi* through the frame of identification can reveal

the negotiations of the interpellated subject within the text.

I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen is described in the publisher's note as an "extraordinary publishing adventure - probably the first of its kind", for this was an autobiography of an illiterate person published in a language that she did not even speak. The publishers had to explain to Phoolan what a book meant; they also had to explain to her what narrating her own story would mean: "We explained what it would mean for her to tell her story" (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali, 499). The note also states that Phoolan's oral narration of her story was recorded and that when the tapes were transcribed, her narrative filled 2000 pages. The publishers do not provide any detail about how this long account was edited to about 500 pages, nor do they explain the processes through which the story was translated to English. The note also states that the story was read back to Phoolan once it was completed and that she approved each page with her signature.[4] Such a process would have required that the English text be translated back into the dialect of Hindi that Phoolan spoke. The publishers provide no detail about this process either. They simply frame this "publishing adventure" as a chance given to Phoolan Devi "to tell her story herself" (500). Through its title (*I, Phoolan Devi: The Autobiography of India's Bandit Queen*), the text makes a reference to an (in)famous work about Rigoberta Menchu, a Quiche Indian woman from Guatemala who was illiterate and had spoken Spanish for only three years when she narrated her life story in the form of a testimonial to ethnographer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray in that language (*I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*). [5] Burgos-Debray notes in the introduction to the text that "in telling the story of her life, Rigoberta Menchu is also issuing a manifesto on behalf of an ethnic group" (xiii) and thus positions this text within the genre of the testimonial. Through her autobiography, Phoolan Devi is placed within a transnational context, where the publishers call upon the reader to put her iconic figure in conversation with other subaltern figures like Rigoberta Menchu and to read *I, Phoolan Devi* as embodying Phoolan's voice, which narrates the life story not just of a single woman but of an entire community. Considering the large role played by the publishers in the writing of this text (a role that in this case remains largely undefined and therefore insidious), can the autobiography be critiqued as encompassing only fragments of Phoolan Devi's voice, her agency and her resistance?

It is easy to critique *I, Phoolan Devi* as a transnational text where Phoolan is defined in ways that allow her figure to fit neatly into the category of 'Third World subaltern female subject' (her life defined by caste- and gender-based oppression). Fixed within this category by her publishers, one could argue that Phoolan Devi as Third World woman can be easily consumed by the First World reader, familiar with the genre of autobiography. One could also interact with the text within a mode that allows one to read the "I" in *I, Phoolan Devi* as uncritically embodying Phoolan's performative self. I believe that though these modes of reading are not necessarily incorrect in themselves, they are nevertheless incomplete. Emphasizing a mode of reading that keeps the tensions that emerge from the text consistently and deliberately in play,

I posit that *I, Phoolan Devi* must be read as a transnational text that enables the First World to consume a representation of the Third World*and* as a textual space (stage) that allows Phoolan to perform her selfhood. Thus, the autobiography - a text that by definition claims to reveal the 'truth' about the subject - does not provide uncomplicated answers for its reader; rather it presents the reader with paradoxes. Was Phoolan Devi a rational, conscious agent extracting revenge through the only means available to her? Or was she a mere pawn used, exploited and violently abused by the men who surrounded her? Such questions remain in play within the autobiography. The ambivalence can be productive because it resists the imposition of transparency on the subaltern and reveals the intersection of the multiple ideologies that constitute the subject. *I, Phoolan Devi* thus emerges as an opaque text - what Brooks has called a "dark point of possibility" (8) - within such a modality, one that engenders ambivalence, compelling the reader of the text to question fixed notions of identity and the essential self.

For Brooks, such opaque performances "of marginalized cultural figures call attention to the skill of the performer who, through gestures and speech [...] is able to confound and disrupt conventional constructions of the racialised and gendered body" (8). Using this notion of "opacity" as a conceptual lever, I read *I, Phoolan Devi* as an opaque text that confounds the reader attempting to find the 'truth' about Phoolan Devi through her autobiography. *I, Phoolan Devi* confuses its reader because it is a text composed of various contradictions: Phoolan Devi emerges both as a resistive agent conscious of the axes of power which oppress her *and* as an irrational woman lacking the sophistication to understand the structures of power that constrained her. This perplexity is a "dark point of possibility" since it resists the static and rigid identity markers of caste and gender that defined Phoolan's life; it reveals the inadequacy of the representational categories that she was interpellated into. Moreover, it reveals Phoolan's subjective investment or identification in various - even contradictory - subject positions.

South Asian feminist scholar Kumkum Sangari cautions against the unqualified celebration of occlusion and ambivalence by revealing, for instance, that the us-and-them discourse of certain anti-colonial nationalisms served to *occlude* the complicity and "co-authoring" of certain colonizing processes by both the colonialists and the land-owning middle classes of the colony (xxx, xxxi). In this case, occlusion cannot be deemed to have a radical potential and Sangari therefore argues that the historical context and specificity within which meaning emerges must be central to any examination of ambivalences. Following Sangari, I do not claim that all occlusion and ambivalence of meaning has a radical potential and have therefore situated my arguments within the specific context of postcolonial India. Using Brooks' theorization of the term "opacity' as a guide, I contend that one must read and represent the subject through the contradictions and the paradoxes that she appears to embody. Ramamurthy has argued, in fact, that the contradictions or perplexity embodied by the subject is theoretically important for feminism as it compels feminist researchers to

recognize "personal experiences as socially constructed, linguistically contained, and never just individual in scale" (525). By marking the perplexity as it emerges in *I, Phoolan Devi* as opacity, one can define it as resistive. The aim therefore is not to resolve the paradoxes and ambivalences - as most of the representations of Phoolan Devi attempt to do - or even to describe it and step aside from it, but to use it as a productive frame that will animate our analysis of contemporary India - its culture and its politics. The autobiographical text - *I, Phoolan Devi* - offers us this opportunity. It reveals the ambivalences that accompany subalternity as a political subjectivity in postcolonial India.

Abject Body or Conscious Subject?

> [...] then he unbuttoned my blouse and touched my chest. He had squeezed my ribs and giggled. The look in his eyes had scared me, but it wasn't my fault that he had stared at my chest and touched me. I had tried to get away from him [...] after my big sister's wedding it had been a while before she went to her husband's village. He never threatened to beat her, he protected her [...] my husband smelled of sweat and he made a funny noise with his mouth whenever he saw me [...] (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 2)

The autobiography begins with a graphic description of rape, as evidenced in the extract cited above. The prologue contains a description of Phoolan as a child bride being raped by her husband (a much older man). Beginning the autobiography with the horrors of child marriage and rape allows the reader to easily and familiarly read the categorization of the Third World (for the First World consumer of the text), but particularly the rural Third World (for the metropolitan Third World consumer of the text) as a savage, uncivilized, irrational space where such practices persist as pre-modern traditions when privileging the voice of the publisher. Such a categorization can be critiqued as a uni-dimensional, Orientalist construction of the Third World as the 'other' of the First World and the rural as the 'other' of the urban Third World. As such, the autobiography, much like the journalistic accounts of Phoolan, the photographs and the biographic film, claims to provide its reader with a 'true' insight into the horrors of subalternity. It purports to define the subaltern woman as an abject body. However, the autobiography, unlike the other representations of Phoolan Devi, does more than define her as abject: one also reads Phoolan testifying to her oppression and performing a conscious self that was always already formed even when she was a child, when the reading privileges her voice. For instance, consider the following lines from the prologue that follow the description of rape:

> I decided that when they came back, I would stay near the old man from then on. I would go with him to the well, so that his son wouldn't be able to touch me again. I would wear my skirt and my petticoat as well as my blouse and wrap my sari over that, and then tie it so tightly he wouldn't be able to undo it. I didn't even know him, he wasn't even one of my family, and he was trying to

> frighten me! (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 3)

Through her performative recollections, Phoolan constructs self-awareness; a consciousness. Just after the text had presented Phoolan as an abject body, the narrative also discusses her resistance and her strategy to counteract the oppression that she faced (she decided, the text notes, to spend time with her father-in-law who appeared to be a sympathetic figure and began to wear her clothes in a manner that would make it difficult for her husband to force himself on her). Moreover, the child Phoolan is presented as angry; she could not understand how a man she did not know and someone who was not a family member could attempt to frighten her! This Phoolan Devi is not an abject figure. In fact, at the conclusion of the first chapter, the reader encounters this defiant voice:

> [...] The poor must bow down and touch the feet of the rich. The poor eat a few grains of millet while the rich feast on mangoes. The pain of hunger in the belly of the poor produces fear and submission. I tried to submit, as my father said I should, but I was unable. I was like my mother. There was too much anger in me. (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 21)

The reader of the autobiography thus encounters Phoolan Devi as the abject victim but also as the angry subaltern woman who strategically plans her resistive moves against the everydayness of the oppression she faces. The conjunction of both readings ruptures an uncomplicated reading of the autobiography as a reflection of an essential self. Thus, the text is not transparent, it does not *reflect* the life history such that the reader can capture the 'truth' about Phoolan's life, rather it produces ambivalence.

I, Phoolan Devi thus generates more questions than answers. Was Phoolan a *baghi* - a rebel - who resisted the oppression that was meted out to her? Or was she merely a pawn, worked on by her oppressors and circumstances that she could never hope to understand? One reading of *I, Phoolan Devi* emphasizes a form of resistance that was both conscious and deliberate, as these lines from the text suggest:

> 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 backbone and sweat. I warned those who refused to pay what we asked that they would see nothing growing on

their land the next season. (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 144)

Here, one can read Phoolan performing an understanding of the precise nature of the oppression that she had faced all her life: "the power of men, the power of privileged castes, the power of might." These lines stage her actions when she was fourteen or fifteen years old as "rebellion" (a political rebellion), while simultaneously pointing to the framing of childhood actions by the performative mode of the autobiographical narration in adulthood: "I didn't think of what I was doing as rebellion [...] but it was then that my rebellion began." She emerges as a thinking actor through these lines - using "any trick in the book," she was also able to mobilize other girls like her to resist the tyranny of the landlord. Here, Phoolan Devi's anger takes a political turn as she warns the landlord that if he did not pay the people who had actually ploughed, sowed and harvested the land, he would see his fields turn barren.

In other instances within the text, however, Phoolan's actions are staged as irrational, her thought lacking the sophisticated understanding of socio-economic structures of oppression displayed in the lines above. The textual device that deliberately stages Phoolan in this manner is the metaphor, specifically animal metaphors. Phoolan is described as a "little pigeon" (1, 3), a "wild animal, sick nervous and aggressive" (473), a "frightened cat" (460), she can "sniff out" (457) danger instinctively and she will retreat into the "jungle" if she senses trouble. As an animal, Phoolan is a savage, distinct and cut off in her "jungle world" from civilization. More importantly, Phoolan Devi staged as an animal can react to the circumstances she finds herself in, she can even chaff and protest the oppressive structures that torment her, but she cannot completely comprehend the networks of power that enmesh her. This is also the description that emerges - as I have argued earlier - within the film, *Bandit Queen*.

Moreover, *I, Phoolan Devi* deliberately refers to Phoolan as "just a poor simple little peasant, naïve and uneducated" (271) when describing her interactions with Vikram Mallah, defined as her protector and lover in the text. The autobiography makes clear in certain instances that it is Vikram Mallah who is "in control of [...] [Phoolan's] destiny" (271). The text goes on to note that while *he* knew how to read and write and survive in the jungle, for Phoolan the "world was still full of menace," she made her way in it the best way she could, but each step was on taken in terror (271). In the presence of a sympathetic male protector, Phoolan is presented as docile and helpless against a world "full of menace".

The autobiography - unlike the film - presents its reader with two sets of descriptions: Phoolan Devi as a political actor, reading the oppressive structures around her and staging her resistance *and* Phoolan Devi as animal-like unsophisticated female pawn. Rather than asking which of these descriptions is more accurate, if we were to hold the tension created by the simultaneous appearance of both descriptions in a single text in play, the autobiographical genre can no longer be seen to reveal or reflect the truth about Phoolan it becomes instead a performance of contradictions, a staging of perplexity. Thus, Phoolan herself is rendered

opaque, such that within the text, she slips away and escapes the narrow representational frames that only read her as a politically unsophisticated, oppressed poor, lower caste woman. While the reader is unable to 'see' Phoolan Devi completely, what she can read is the "suture" - Phoolan's performative investment in particular subject positions. The "sutures" or investments in subject positions (that are contradictory even) that emerge within the autobiographical text point to the absence of an essential self but the opacity that blurs the reader's vision of Phoolan Devi simultaneously points to an essence that has escaped the performative re-presentation.

Gender and Performance: From Phoolan Devi to Phool Singh

I, Phoolan Devi specifically points to this absence and presence of an essence through descriptions of gender and gender roles. The text describes a transformation that occurred within Phoolan Devi - a transformation that changed her externally and internally - when she started running with a group of bandits (the text describes her being kidnapped by this group and later becoming a part of them). She cut her hair, shed her *sari* for a khaki uniform that all the other bandits wore and became Phool Singh:

> Sometimes we didn't sleep for days and nights. I was the only woman and there was nobody I could talk to about my problems. Often we camped far from the river, without a drop of water for washing. I walked for days cursing the God who had made me a woman. Somebody heard my curses at least: our men started to nickname me Phool Singh, the masculine version of my name. (Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 295)

Here the text points to the malleable quality of gender: when she lives like the men, dresses like them and eats like them (271), Phoolan Devi becomes Phool Singh. In one sense then, she was able to shed and change her gender when she shed her *sari* for trousers. Gender here is defined through performance and interestingly enough through interpellations: it is when the men hail Phoolan Devi as Phool Singh that she is transformed from the accursed feminine position to the masculine. Simultaneously though, the text emphasizes a bodily essence of gender:

> Our men started to nickname me Phool Singh, the masculine version of my name. It was a tribute to my fortitude, but when Phool Singh had an ache in her tummy, she would have given tens of thousands of rupees just to be able to bathe in the Yamuna in the cool of the evening(Phoolan Devi with Cuny and Rambali 271).

This tension between gender seen as performative and gender seen as bodily essence produces a moment of opacity which, as I have been arguing, is resistive because it ruptures notions of the "dominative imposition of transparency" (Brooks, 8). Gyan Pandey notes that it is important to "maintain our sense of the always ambiguous and contextual character of the

category of the subordinated and disprivileged" (287). Pandey argues moreover that subaltern accounts are:

> truncated, fragmentary and often self-contradictory[...]what these are, are fitfully told stories, or stories that cannot be told: of coping with minimal resources in impossible conditions, of wishing to die but wanting to live, of surviving - and trying to put together a new life - through *multiple subject-positions* and multiple narratives, many of which are scarcely scripted by themselves (287).

I, Phoolan Devi is just such an account: It stages Phoolan Devi's multiple subject-positions; it marks the paradoxes and the perplexity of her subjectivity and thus resists the "dominative imposition of transparency" that defined her life story.

Conclusions

Phoolan Devi's surrender to the state thrust her into the mainstream. As I have described, she became an instant fascination for the media, whose stories were largely replete with questions. This is also the moment when the regional political party in India espousing the interests of the rural poor, dalits, lower castes and Muslims gained legitimacy through political struggle and mobilization. The urban, middle classes were compelled to engage with perplexing figures like Phoolan Devi who had emerged in the public sphere. The iconic figure of Phoolan always produced more questions than answers and the mainstream media constantly searched for an explication. I have emphasized this perplexity in representation and pointed to the manner in which it was negotiated. I have argued here that a number of the texts that constructed Phoolan as an icon interpellated her as a particular subject: the "Bandit Queen". This interpellation served to resolve the tensions produced by her emergence and as such it reveals more about the neoliberal ideology that has acquired some legitimacy in postcolonial India than it does about Phoolan Devi, the human being. It reveals that neoliberalism as an ideology in India requires the gendered subaltern to haunt its margins as the "not-yet" figure, so that it can define itself as triumphant progress. It also suggests that neoliberal ideology in India is attempting to manage the burgeoning political power of lower caste and dalit groups through the body of the gendered subaltern - by reading her through a sympathetic yet paternalistic gaze that defines her as "not yet ready" for the project of modernity.

The autobiographical text is often seen as a simple reflection of an essential self; it is seen as a space that allows a conscious actor to narrate his life story. *I, Phoolan Devi* though is full of ambivalences; it produces more questions about Phoolan than answers and resists a clear categorization. Through this paper, I have attempted to argue that this opacity engendered by this particular text can be productive precisely because it does not allow Phoolan to be pinned down; it resists the imposition of transparency and marks the multiple and often contradictory subject positions that the subject invests in. Read as performance that holds the tensions

produced by the text in play, *I, Phoolan Devi* complicates notions of resistance, gender and identity as essence. It opens up spaces where Phoolan Devi's iconic figure can become "unfixed," it allows her to escape at least in part the categories that framed her all her life.

Notes

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[1] All of the news articles cited in this essay have been sourced from the Center for Education and Documentation located in Mumbai, India during the course of archival research.

[2] "Devi" is the gendered suffix that categorizes Phoolan as female. In the discussion of the autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi*, later in the paper, I will point to the play associated with the gendered name and also therefore with gender that is present in the autobiography. "Devi" therefore should not be read as Phoolan's surname or last name; she was always referred to as either "Phoolan" or "Phoolan Devi." In this paper, I do the same. By referring to her as "Phoolan," I therefore mean no disrespect.

[3] Marie-Therese Cuny who is credited as a collaborative author of Phoolan's autobiography has most recently also collaborated in the publication of Mukhtar Mai's memoirs. See, Mukhtar Mai with Marie-Therese Cuny, *In the Name of Honor: A Memoir* (Washington Square Press, 2007).

[4] The note states that this was the only word (her own name) that she knew how to write.

[5] *I, Rigoberta Menchu* was published in Spanish in 1983 and an English translation of the text was first published by Verso in 1984, more than a decade before *I, Phoolan Devi* was published by Little, Brown and Company.

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