

# A Sociological Exploration of the portrayal of victimhood and/or agency in the popular Bollywood Film *Bandit Queen*

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## **Abstract:**

**Background:** Popular Hindi films, especially Bollywood mainstream films almost always promote both overt and covert gendered stereotypes. Being a mere victim becomes the master status for many women characters to audience's appreciation. In films, audiences watch ideal 'female' characters only to shuffle from one aspiration to the next and Bollywood films cater to this mass need rather very well. The present paper is a modest endeavour to explore victimhood of women in the context of the film *Bandit Queen*.

**Methods:** Content analysis and the use of semiotics is used to analyze and examine the representations in the film *Bandit Queen*.

**Results:** In representations of Bollywood films in general, women are victimized in a way which is not only all pervasive and threatening but more often than not legitimized by the wider society as well. On the other hand in recent times there are more bold films coming up often tagged as feminist films where women are shown as an agency for change both in the private and the public sphere and not relegated to a passive receptacle. *Bandit Queen* is one such film which has scratched beneath the surface to fathom more about such representations where women are depicted as an agency and/or victim and the dichotomy between the two at the very root of it.

**Conclusion:** Despite of all the cumulative criticisms against the film, it has successfully been able to portray an otherwise marginalized character in the backdrop of a certain Indian socio-historical context. The journey of Phoolan from a helpless victim to a liberated woman loved by the people (as a *Bandit Queen* to some and as a social revolutionary to others), is well captured only if selectively so.

**Key words:** Feminism, Victimhood, Agency, Mainstream Bollywood films.

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## I. Introduction

"No art passes our conscience in the way film does, and goes directly to our feelings, deep down into the dark rooms of our souls."<sup>1</sup> Ingmar Bergman

Film is relatively a new art form with a history of only just over a century but it is evident to all of us, the power this medium possesses in terms of what it can achieve. Films widen one's perspective and might open up vistas hitherto unknown or penetrate deep down inside as in the words of Bergman "into our souls." Films have many functions: entertaining, creating awareness, educating and in doing so it profoundly influences all of us. In turn films are influenced by the wider culture of which it is a part of. Here in lies the risk, about the nature of dialectic interaction that films and a given culture share with each other: How real is the simulation or representation of the real world that we see on the silver screen? Does certain representation intend to create awareness causes further hindrance in the process? Does representation of women is only that of victims? Or are they portrayed as an agent for change too? This paper makes an endeavor to answer such questions in the light of the New Indian Cinema as opposed to mainstream male-stream Bollywood masala films. In the words of the master Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray-

*There is a belief currency in film circles that a 'New Wave' of sorts is lapping on the shores of Indian cinema. One reads about new directors, about low cost and non-star movies.*<sup>2</sup>

The film selected for the purpose of essay is one such New Wave Bollywood film '*Bandit Queen*'.

## II. Methods

The methodology to be used is qualitative research. Let me clarify in the very beginning that 'qualitative research is inherently multi method in focus.'<sup>3</sup> Therefore, multi method research will be the methodological departure point where theoretical perspectives such as feminist theory, feminist film theory & methodological use of semiotics & content analysis will also be used.

Semiotics is the methodological tool which is a very potent mean in dissecting films. In short, it is the science of signs. A sign can be a word, a sound, or a visual image. Saussure divides a sign into two parts--the *signifier* (the sound, image, or word) and the *signified*- the concept the signifier represents, or the meaning. Content analysis on the other hand is a methodology in the social sciences for studying the content of communication. The content can be books, films, magazines and so on.

Claire Johnston was among the first feminist critics to offer a sustained critique of stereotypes from a semiotic point of view. She put forward how classical cinema constructs the ideological image of woman. Drawing on Roland Barthes' notion of 'myth', Johnston investigated the myth of 'Woman' in classical cinema.<sup>4</sup> As a sign, the cinematic image has two tiers of meaning, the denotative and the connotative. Denotation refers to the most literal meaning of an image and connotation the subtle meanings which is often filled with ideological dimensions .

Feminist film theory is the theory primarily used in this paper. Feminist theory encompasses the equal right for men and women on social, cultural, political and sexual grounds. The application of feminist theory in studying films is what is known as feminist film theory. The body of work called feminist film theory and criticism has played a crucial- and often controversial- role in the emergence of film studies as an academic discipline; in turn, film studies shaped feminist concerns as well as granted feminist research a space to flourish. In recent years, feminist film research extended its cultural interests and influence. Interrogating representations of race, ethnic identity and class in relation to gender allowed scholars to broaden the film feminist remit.<sup>5</sup>

'Feminist thinkers regard feminism as somehow different from the mainstream- as innovative, inventive and rebellious.'<sup>6</sup> Mainstream male stream cinema on the other hand reinforces that fact that women should behave only in a socially appropriate definite way, and not cross the brink of socially acceptable norms. What constitutes such appropriate and acceptable ways and whether or not the protagonist of the chosen film could transcend such barrier remains the principal focus of the paper, objectively analyzed with semiotic content analysis and feminist film theory.

## III. Analysis and findings

### **Bandit Queen: One woman dared to fight back**

*"No more tears now; I will think about revenge."*<sup>7</sup> - Mary, Queen of Scots

The captions of the film 'Bandit Queen', directed by Shekhar Kapur reads- "*One woman dared to fight back*" and "*Revenge was her reply*". The tone of the film is set right from these captions. The film is based upon the life of Phoolan Devi with Seema Biswas playing the lead. The film opens when Phoolan is just a child married to an elderly man. Then the film explores the circumstances in which an anonymous village girl from Uttar Pradesh went on to become one of the most notorious bandits ever. The film apparently depicts Phoolan as a victim first and an agent later, though not without criticism.

Which of the words best describe Phoolan- outcast, outlaw and victim, anti-social? May be all the words are apt for her. In a brutal world dog eat dog world where women are relegated to nothing more than pounds of flesh in feudal rural India, the film Bandit Queen tries to capture what rising above the circumstance truly means. 'The vigilante film, a staple of post-independence Hindi popular cinema, has spawned a remarkable sub-genre in the last decade or so. The appropriation of a traditionally masculine grammar of violence (ranging from castration to cannibalism) by the female protagonist has been criticized as an index of a society increasingly receptive to violence as also celebrated for depicting subaltern agency.'<sup>8</sup> It is in this context that Sekhar Kapur's film *Bandit Queen* surfaces as it claims to be different from the commercial films. It is true that some representations are not without criticism but one watching the film will also accept that there's an honest endeavour to celebrate a certain kind of realism; a realism which is not sugarcoated and a rare component of the mainstream cinema. Loosely based on Mala Sen's biography of Phoolan Devi's career as a woman "dacoit" or bandit in the Chambal valley of Central India, the film with its explicit portrayal of rape and sexual humiliation ignited powerful controversy since its release in September 1994 (its Indian screening was halted for a while under a court stay order ) because Phoolan herself did not agree with various events described in the filmic account.

### **Visual representation of victimization: another source of victimization?**

*“One thing I want to say: I don't like victim stories and I don't write them.”<sup>9</sup>*  
- Todd Solondz

‘Depictions of female oppression can perpetuate the condition of exploitation for it encapsulates familiar contradictions to feminists who analyze representation of female sexuality in terms of both oppression and agency. Do depictions of victimization/oppression with the putative goal of raising political awareness or do further harm by showing women as victims rather than agents? And conversely do representations of female sexual pleasure and sexual agency repeat the exploitative mood in contexts where it is hard to separate pornography from “positive” sexuality? Phoolan Devi has asserted that her body is literally being exploited in a text which purports to condemn that very exploitation and to celebrate her resistant self.’<sup>10</sup> Though the representations of Phoolan is not beyond doubts or criticism, it is true that the director has to have a creative license when making a film based on true events. One must also remember that when women are shown as victim in mainstream male-stream commercial films, women are either shown as passive receptacles in need of welfare from others or worse, as a character that is psychologically convinced of her role in society as a marginalized entity thus perpetuating ideological domination. Portrayal of Phoolan Devi in the film is neither of the two. As for pornographic depictions are concerned, the chief focus of the film has never been scopophilia to say the least as it constitutes only as a few passing scenes.

One of the charges against the film is that –the film depicts caste and gender violence simply to pander to “the western palate” and he stereotypes that the West has of India. Arundhati Roy writes that the film is really no more than the usual 'Rape' and 'Retribution' drama churned out by Bollywood and criticises the alleged “rapability” of Phoolan’s body which can then reify the understanding of women as always already victims. The question is, then, whether the repeated brutalization of Phoolan’s body is (a) symbolic of the vulnerability of all female bodies and (b) if the representation of her victimization is harmful to feminist efforts to recuperate female agency,<sup>11</sup> but one has to keep in mind that whatever is shown for entertainment or awareness, can hardly be categorized as having gendered stereotypes: the kind we encounter in mainstream masala films. The crude gestures of gender oppression on the other hand comes into play in the film and Phoolan eventually becomes the voice of the sub-altern though that is not how history prefers to remember her. The credential of the director is that, he successfully creates an alternative history for her where Phoolan is shown in a more humane manner.

The film has been criticized by Phoolan and others for showing her in situations of apparently pleasurable sexual activity not actually mentioned in her biography. But director Shekhar Kapur claims that he has used poetic license for polemical reasons. Sex had always been imposed on her. It was associated with violence and rape. This allowed her to flower. Feminists who value representations of “active” female sexuality would only conceivably agree with director Kapur that such a representation provides an inspirational model of the survival of pleasure and agency in the context of great adversity.<sup>12</sup> Such portrayal of victimization however doesn't necessarily perpetuate victimhood as it soon seeks the path for agency for Phoolan as she strikes back to such oppression to be better understood in terms of intersectionality. It depends purely on the context of the film whether or not such rape scenes would be scopophilic, a make belief reality or a societal statement.

Let us consider a study on a popular ‘rape and retribution’ film of Bollywood called *Zakme Aurat* which thrives on make belief reality or entertain the masses as opposed to the sensibilities of films like *Bandit Queen* which aims to sensitize the spectator and an eye opener in terms of intersectionality. ‘In Indian villages rape is used as a weapon, as a manifestation of the process of feudalism in an attempt to maintain the power position. But hardly the voice of such sub-altern women’s are heard in popular Bollywood films. Therefore, the rape-victim is almost always middle class, elite women. Still, in a film like ‘*Zakhmi Aurat*’, Dimple unites some rape-victims to form an organization whose work is to castrate all the sex-greedy men. Unfortunately, the image of a modern woman that was very carefully built in the first half of the film had to be discarded for a more unrealistic platter meant to feed the populist taste of audience. The audience is glued to seats to watch how one castration operation after the other is successfully done by Dimple. The dream of establishing women’s liberation has long vanished in the film by then.’<sup>13</sup> We can clearly observe that the transition from victimhood to agency is more of a myth than a reality as represented in these kind of films meant for a more popular, unaware, mainstream palate. The above example illustrates how the same actions are context dependent and it is the premise of the protagonist, the intersectionality which truly unmasks the connotations of such films.

### **The politics of the body (representation of rape): the politics of filmmaking?**

“No woman can call herself free who does not control her own body.”<sup>14</sup>— Margaret Sanger

As eminent feminist Laura Mulvey says, ‘women’s rights to gain rights over their bodies could not be divorced from questions of (the) image.’<sup>15</sup> ‘Image is not merely a set of moving pictures. The main thing is context and the subsequent meaning of the images.’<sup>16</sup> If this be kept in mind and we delve deep down inside, some important aspects concerning Phoolan’s body in the film will surface which otherwise are very subtle for any audience to understand.

If we are to understand the politics behind the way a female’s body is portrayed in films, we have to understand a few of the film’s scenes. Let us analyze the scene when Phoolan

Devi is again and again raped by the bandit leader, Babu Gujjar, who is shot during one such episode by his lieutenant, the low class Vikram Mallah. This scene is especially powerful because the rape is not shown through symbols as it has been so far. We see Gujjar on top of Phoolan’s prone but resisting body (she is struggling and screaming) and the thrusting movements of his bared buttocks. The might of this scene is that it is the man’s skin that we see, not an exposed female body. “Rape” scenes in pornographic and semi-pornographic cinema are often an excuse to expose female flesh to the viewer’s sensational gaze. What Laura Mulvey calls “to-be-looked-at-ness” is successfully deconstructed here as opposed the mainstream imagination.

Finally, in the scene when Phoolan is beaten and gang-raped by Thakurs, we do not encounter the rape scene directly. As this brutal act happens, we understand how disgusted the director is through the camera work that is projected. The camera shows us the ‘Act’ in flash of a second, blink and you miss imagery and then moves here and there, panning on a bicycle instead, as if the director is trying to look away from the rape scene and then can’t help but go back there. The scene where Phoolan is made to walk naked in front of the villagers is a crude example of how power positions are deeply embedded in the feudal structure of the village. ‘The panoramic camera high shot covering the whole square, a naked and small Phoolan, and the passive gaze of bystanders all work to represent the suffering female body as, indeed, vulnerable to both gaze and touch.’<sup>17</sup> Therefore, we can say in the end that the film did not politicize Phoolan’s body for some cheap entertainment of the audience unlike many other popular Bollywood films which are subjected to male gaze.

Marital rape, statutory rape, custodial rape, gang-rape, caste violence expressed through rape: the film’s account of Phoolan’s body is sexualized pain could well function as an illustrated primer for section 375 of the Indian Penal Code, which treats the issue of rape. Arundhati Roy points out that the film focuses on Phoolan’s rape as primary motivation for turning to vigilante dacoity, whereas Mala Sen’s (Phoolan Devi’s biographer) account suggests that Phoolan was outraged primarily by other kinds of injustices even as a child: “*She didn’t need to be raped to protest. Some of us don’t*”. We know, biographically and from the film’s own representation of politicians’ concern, that she is a figure with great standing among the lower castes, the subject of popular heroic balladry. Yet there is little representation of her as a social revolutionary: the revenge ends up seemingly solely personal and takes over what in reality was a much longer and richer narrative.<sup>18</sup> Some critics say that ‘the rape scenes are fundamentally voyeuristic: the fixation with rape allows a voyeuristic entry into an area otherwise considered taboo and too horrible to enter by anyone but its practitioners...which is why graphic representation of rape are so popular even when they don’t indulge in obvious pornography.’<sup>19</sup> But this is not the case, at least not in totality with *Bandit Queen*. The rape scenes are shown (not shown or selectively portrayed) with utmost sensitivity so that it does not become a voyeuristic journey for the male audience. On the other hand it is also true that certain liberties are taken while making a film from a book. It might offend a few but one also has to be more considerate towards the adaptation done by the director. Whether or not the film passes the test of time and various truth claims it offers are however matter of great debate and the auteur of the film was successful in igniting such debates and discourses.

### **Victim breaking the silence- New Wave Bollywood?**

*"Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim. Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself."*<sup>20</sup>— Harvey Fierstein

Phoolan’s transformation into enraged avenger is also not sudden as some critics have claimed in dismissing *Bandit Queen* as indistinguishable from popular vigilante films. Throughout *Bandit Queen*, there is emphasis on Phoolan’s resistance to being violable, but in all the sequences where rape occur successful verbal and physical resistance cannot be offered in a credible fashion.<sup>21</sup> The financial, sexual and caste -based oppression/

victimization of Phoolan was enough to smash any other girl of that space and time. But Phoolan was Phoolan. She fought back with a bang and what sociologists would call as an agent for change not only for herself but also for women around her.

It is undeniable that New Wave Bollywood are much bolder than its counterpart, The movement that according to many started with Mani Kaul's *Uski Roti*(1969) gave way to more realistic films by Mrinal Sen, Shyam Benegal and others. These are alternative films which offer alternative worldviews. *Bandit Queen* is most definitely a bright example of this genre. It is rather a good step for the New Wave Bollywood cinema, where bold characterization, bold subject matters, new directors give rise to a 'twentieth-century mind' giving voice to hitherto marginalized groups or individuals and their transcendence manifesting their full capacity as an individual.

Take for example the single instance where she can fight the Thakur lad, she does so. The question of women being an agency for social change is rather a new concept in films, more so after the second wave feminist movement in India which started sometime in the late sixties to early seventies. But some potent questions can be raised in this context. Does one have to be a rebel to protest? Is being a dacoit an answer to stop victimhood? The answer is both yes and no. Yes, because Phoolan was left with very little choices in her life and seeing the world from her 'perspective' makes enough sense why she took to gun . No, because not everybody's condition is same as a rural girl in Chambal. The intersectionality of race , caste, class alongside gender also determines the stratification structure.

The armed Phoolan is also the Phoolan -a sexual persona that she obviously takes pleasure in. We see her and Vikram Mallah engaged in sexual play, making love in two scenes where she obviously has or takes control. During the first such encounter, she pushes him violently away when he attempts gently to embrace her, hits him, pins his arm against the rock face, and then initiates the sexual play herself. In the second sequence we see her straddling him as they make love, and answer with a touch of acidity when he asks her how he had performed: "*You did nothing. I did all the work.*" Within the film, there is a space for sexual pleasure and non-coercive sex even if this does manifest itself through the indices of popular romance and "good" heterosexual relationships.<sup>22</sup> This is sharply in contrast to the gender based binary- often a hallmark for mainstream films. Take for example some oppositional associations based on gender.-

Man / Woman	Independence / Dependence
Subject / Object	Selfhood / Otherness
Human / Animal	Active / Passive
Reason / Emotion	Public / Private

The film *Bandit queen* tries to do away without such binaries as much as possible but in its execution is sometimes very crude because the reality depicted in it is also very crude. Unless and until such binaries are given way to a complete and thorough degendering manifestation of hitherto gendered roles, films will fall short of being a vehicle of social change. *Bandit Queen* is one such film which can be called a revolutionizing Indian film in this regard.

In our pre-modern polity, the victim had a vital say in matters connected with restitution or retribution. With the government taking on the responsibility for meeting out justice, the offender has become the prima donna and the victim is completely forgotten. Penologists, jurists, psychologists, sociologists, socio-psychologists, psychiatrists, criminologists social workers and the government vie with one another in finding explanations, reasons, excuses why a crime is committed, why the criminal should not be dealt with punitively but in a reformatory manner and why society is to blame for the anti-social acts of a few.<sup>23</sup> It is against this backdrop, of the relationship between the victims and their perpetrators in most cases that the victims are not aware of their victim status or the social construction of the concept denies their claim for victimhood. This is often the case with women victims as well. Phoolan devi as portrayed in the film is surely an exception in this regard. She embraces her victim status only to rise from the ashes like the proverbial phoenix thus creating somewhat empowerment only if in a manner debatable. She refused to be a mere victim and showed the world that everybody has a choice, however gruesome it may be.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Many critics have pointed out that in highlighting the victim status of the women in films, victim hood is reinforced further, more so in case of a controversial film like *Bandit Queen*. As many points out- 'in the film *Bandit queen*, Phoolan Devi's sex appeal is glamourized and after her boyfriend Vikram Mallah is killed, she is

merely planted as a “he-woman” for action sequences that follows. ‘<sup>24</sup> But the film surely tries to break the stereotypes as much as possible and it is in this capacity that it celebrates not the passive victim hood of women but their active participation, their agency in shaping their own reality and as well as other’s around them. In the end we can say that the film despite of all the cumulative criticisms against the film, has successfully been able to portray an otherwise marginalized character in the backdrop of a certain Indian socio-historical context of intersectionality. The journey of Phoolan from a helpless victim to a liberated woman loved by the people (as a Bandit Queen to some and as a social revolutionary to others) is well captured in this cinematic imagination, only if selectively so.

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