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**Reading Shekhar Kapoor's "Bandit Queen" and Deepa Mehta's "Water"
through the perspectives of Gender and Caste position with
the cancellation of men
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Abstract

A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband has died goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal.

-The Laws of Manu, Chapter 5, Verse 156-161, Dharmashastras

“Animals, drums, illiterates, low castes and women are worthy of being beaten”

Manusmriti

Patriarchy is structured into male power, prejudice and subjugation and is employed throughout sexual violence. In this paper we will explore how the seeds of violence against Subaltern subjects inherent within the structures of the modern Republic, leads to the brutalization of humans. Both the films 'Water'(2005) and 'Bandit Queen'(1994) show how women were epitomized as the feared eroticized women and were continually denounced by the authorities, thus in a way questioning the clichés of persecuting women for their attack and holding them responsible.

'Water' traverses how religion is used as a tool to exploit and subjugate an entire class of women and the way patriarchy authoritatively informs religious optimisms. 'Bandit Queen' portrays how violence against a child bride is a method of mastering male supremacy by asserting that a woman's sexuality is her husband's possession and her inferior position is

natural and irreparable. The aim of my paper is to explore how the dignity of a woman gets erased after she becomes a widow and her caste position becomes the cause of her humiliation and her humanitarian rights get blocked by the whole world. This study further highlights how the texts of 'Water' and 'Bandit Queen' question the atypical portrayal of women and remediates social beliefs on societal gender relations.

And as a student of Comparative Literature, I would try to push the scope of Cultural studies by reading different intersectionalities of caste, class, race and religion to consider these similar experiences of violence and trauma. The main purpose of this paper is to show how a Film re-amend history, conventions and reinitiate differently ignored stories, and the functions of language in shaping patriarchy and class hierarchy across time and space from a marginalized position.

Keyword: Brahmanical patriarchy, widowhood, gendered violence, intersectional consciousness, collective victimhood, existentialism

"...movies are considered to be the most popular medium of mass communication (Gargan 11-12). The interaction between genders is targeted to and relates to the subjugation of women in the patriarchal structure. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze and describe the ways in which literature portrays patriarchal discourse by ranging over social and psychological forces implanted within literature in the digital media of film 'Water' by Deepa Mehta and 'Bandit Queen' by Sanjay Kapoor. As women's bodies are being posited in this imaginary construction of national and cultural identity these nationalist constructions of home and space have been inherently gendered which is being challenged by applying feminist politics. Cultural identity is portrayed through the examination of multiple axes of differentiation in relation to gender, "race", class, nation, and sexuality.

Challenging Literary Conventions

As both the movies 'Water' and 'Bandit Queen' are female centric they derogate patriarchal structures therefore intimidated to face controversies. The surviving Indian patriarchal society is represented by sexually obsessed men in the movies. Men are privileged to physically, verbally, sexually and mentally abuse women. This kind of representation of men has a significant impact on the mass due to unintentional imitation.

Defying institutionalized oppression

The movie starts with three renowned male characters: Seth, Sadananda, and Narayan who represent the different standpoints of masculinity in a conventional society, where men are in influential positions and women are consistently neglected. Seth personifies negative aspects of male power due to oppressive and violent nature, while Sadananda, a religious scholar, validates this oppression through the agency of religious texts. Narayan, the hero is acclaimed as a rescuer, defies the conventions. He ultimately solidifies this existing hierarchy by legitimizing violence to continue. Thus the multifarious roles of men in society both as perpetrators and potential catalysts of change are highlighted in this discourse. Narayan explains the practice of sending widows to ashrams, "One less mouth to feed, four less saris, and a free corner in the house. Disguised as religion, it's just about money." (Singh 2021)

And how in a patriarchal framework, scriptures are expounded in favor of men and the fortunate section of society. Patriarchy is a carrier of gender-inequality, authority, subjugation and vehemence. It pollutes the society through socially initiated customs like family and socialization processes. And men consequently fail to take moral charge of women and children by exercising power over their body by force.

According to Foucault's philosophy, discourse is a system of language and knowledge that shapes our understanding of reality. It establishes truth within a specific socio-historical context, influencing our perception and interaction with the world. This perspective emphasizes the power dynamics inherent in language and the ways in which certain expressions are legitimized while others are marginalized. (Chiacchieri 2019)

Rape is mainly seen as a crime against the honour of the family, community in order to stigmatise the community in the public domain. The purpose of rape is to assert the power and superiority of the perpetrators, destroy the dignity of women publicly. The shame and disgrace of rape endures long after the execution of crime, and is transmitted from generation to generation dramatically impacting the victimised community. (Astashkevich 2018)

The phrase "women as a category of analysis" refers to the crucial assumption that all females, regardless of class or culture, have some kind of social confluence indicated prior to the analysis process as a homogeneous group. Women are considered to be a single category of people based on shared oppression in any given feminist analysis. The sociological notion of the "sameness" of their oppression binds them together. (Mason 2014) This is evident in Water where Madhumati tells Chuiya, "Dukh mein hum sab behene hai, aur yeh hamara aur Mittho ka ghar hai."

The word 'Patriarchy' means: hierarchical relationships between men and women, manifested in family and social structures, in descending order from an authoritarian, male head, to male dominance in personal, political, cultural and social life, and to patriarchal families. It often updates itself to inflict violence on women and finds newer reasons to justify them. Under Feminist Theory, Men in Patriarchal societies are conditioned to distrust, despise, and dominate women.

Plights and Tragedies of the wronged woman

Usually in child marriages children are ignorant of their own bodies and are subjected to tremendous tortures as a method of sheer objectification. Phoolan being a eleven year old girl was being forced into physical intercourse under the guise of a game. She mistook his penis as a "serpent" and considered it a punishment for her misdeeds. Despite her unbearable pain, he decided to rip open her genitals and she managed to flee from her in-laws. This whole incident reflects on the fact that 'the right to protect gives you the right to injure'. A husband is entitled to rape his wife as it's a part of her marital conjugality irrespective of her choice and reproductive health. This trauma created a huge impact on her life. Her complaint to her father was ignored as was considered common for a woman to satisfy her husband after marriage. When Phoolan returns to take revenge, her anger is aimed at Puttilal's penis, "It was the serpent in him that I want to destroy". She squashed his "serpent". The note left on his body stated: "Warning: this is what happens to old men who marry young girls!" She takes revenge on all other molesters; Sarpanch's son, Pradhan's sons, Babu Gujjar, Shri Ram and Thakurs from Behmai village in the same way. (Roy 1994)

She could not gain the support of women of her community as they pitied her but couldn't gather the courage to stand with her, fearing social customs. Female experiences and perspectives are never valued and their submission to the husband is regarded as the law of the land.

Phoolan witnessed lust, greed and pride of Thakurs in extortion and she was made to suffer more because of her gender. Her body was used as a medium to establish caste pride, ego and lust and made sexually available to everyone. Even men supporting him, here Vikram was killed by Shri Ram who considered the best way to curb her power was to kill her kinsmen. Throughout the movie we could see Phoolan being disrobed, assaulted and misjudged on the basis of her boldness and audacity. Being a feminist by birth she refused to subscribe to the conventional gender roles assigned to women by society. She revolted throughout the film by answering back to the patriarchal society.

In the beginning of the film, Chuiya is shown as a free and defiant little girl accompanying her dying husband on his last journey. Being completely unaware of his death she didn't

express any grief at her widowhood but violently protests her separation from her family. She is left in the widow ashram with most of the elderly widows. Further, adding to her misfortunes, she is being forced into prostitution and is drugged by the pimp Gulabi but is later rescued and delivered to Gandhiji by Narayan and Shakuntala.

Set in 1938 pre-Independent India in the backdrop of Gandhi's influence, *Water* revolves around the politics of religion and is based on the ancient concept of Sati. Colors are used to manipulate a particular atmosphere or mood. In the movie only blue and white is used extensively. Widows are forced to wear white coloured saris to make them look oppressive. Blue color is abundantly displayed especially when in a scene, Kalyani wishes to wear blue saree on being asked about her choice of colour on her wedding day with Narayan.

Women defined by Men in the Colonial Space

The prevalent cultural force of Indian Cinema casts social imaging of gender relations and propagates patriarchal social norms and values. Women in Indian cinema are generally represented in two ways, first as self-sacrificing mythological ideals like Sita and Savitri; second, women are portrayed in a lascivious manner to feed male creativity and erotic desires. Modern female-centric movies intend to separate themselves from the stereotypical social construct of women and to cross-question gender politics commemorated by the governing patriarchy.

Bollywood movies are heavily influenced by the Hindu religious practices and beliefs that forecast women as Sati, the mythical benevolent woman who bears pain and suffering to protect their father and husband's honor. This paper fills the gap by exploring two women-centric films that cultivate strong feminist responsiveness to situate women's desire and sexual power and challenge inhumane social practice that perpetuates violence against women.

When the old widow dies, Chuiya considers her guilty as she gave her sweets which she considers the cause of her death and tells Shakuntala, "Auntiji I committed a sin by giving her the sweets". She is pacified by her reply, "Don't worry, she will transcend to heaven after eating the ladoos". (Singh 2021)

Both gender and caste hierarchy in Hindu society intensifies the helplessness of women especially dalits and widows. This fortification arises from social beliefs that regard the widows as ethically undesirable and a threat to the pleasure of other's lives.

Deconstructing the hierarchy of gender and caste

The movie begins with three verses from the Manu, the sacred Hindu religious text that dictates a rigorous life for widows. In traditional Hindu society, widows are marginalized and depended on the mercy of the patriarchal system where their activities are strictly supervised by the religious authorities and any kind of violation of the laws leads to penalization. It is evident in the movie, when Chuiya boldly asks Shakuntala, "Auntyji where do the male widows live?" and is tremendously criticized for showing such an audacity to question the established power dynamics of the society. This deprivation is not meant for men who lost their wives as they have the right to marry, exploit and despise women validated by Patriarchy. This continuous dialogue formation between Chuiya with the widows, priest and Narayan further depicts their life of hardship and dehumanization. Similarly, Phoolan also engages in a dialogic conversation between Lala Ram, Vikrant, her father and police officer thus revealing her exploitation by upper caste men at large and further portrays her deprivation. Shakuntala is being warned by the priest while drawing water from the river, "Watch it. Do not let your shadow touch the bride", as he was performing rituals for the marriage and her shadow would pollute the whole ceremony. (Singh 2021) This scene further validates the ostracization of widows from all kinds of social gatherings and religious ceremonies and their presence is a curse in mainstream culture.

Lacking feminine grace, they were forced to lead an unattractive and dull life living under the mercy of God. Their denial of wearing any jewelry, colorful clothes made their life sublime and transparent as water which also symbolizes feelings, imagination and instincts and is also related to femininity according to Hinduism. They embraced a simple and austere lifestyle, prioritizing self-discipline and detachment from material comforts. Kalyani transgresses the margins of social domination and falls for Narayan but her dreams of starting a new life gets shattered after discovering his true identity as Seth's son and commits suicide to escape shame and dishonour.

Representation of women in a masculine space

Both the movies *Water* and *Bandit Queen* reveals how patriarchy, religion and caste collaborate to limit women's bodies by inflicting strict penalty for widows, thus reflecting harsh social oppression turning them helpless. Her romantic relationship with Narayan questions the horizon of expectations of the conventional Hindu society that considers widows half dead and restricts women's desires.

Bandit Queen is basically a dalit feminist discourse highlighting oppression on the basis of caste and Gender and the film reveals that she was an ordinary woman who was denied her rights by the upper caste people who disrobed her thus forcing her to turn into a dacoit. The rapist reconstitutes himself as a powerful sexual subject and constructs the woman as the oppressor who must be silenced and resisted—a version of the "blaming the victim narrative". (153)

Their caste positions gives them the license to freely exploit them and play with her body parts. The female gaze subverts the sensationalization of a woman's anger by unpacking the seething horrors of gender discrimination and collective moral sanctions on the female body. Being a victim of the rape culture and subjected to continuous assault by men of her community and caste hindus lost trust in men and started hating all of them. She started attacking the thakurs both verbally and physically venting her anger for mutilating her, and shot eleven men who gangraped her and boldly stated that she won't stop until her perpetrators are punished. She was raped by the police officers in custody who asked her, "Kitne mardon ke saath rahein itne din? thus addressing her as a prostitute. Even worse than that, she was paraded naked by being pulled by her hair in front of the men and accused by Lala Ram, "Dekho logo, yeh hai peeran ki Rani, jangal ki Rani. Phoolan Devi nam Hai isska! Kya nam Hai? Phoolan Devi! Dekh lo shakl iss ki. Yeh hai Phoolan Devi! Mere ko Gali di thi iss ne. Kaha tha madarchod, Yeh hai Phoolan Devi! dekho loko dekho...." Yeh hai Phoolan Devi! (Kapoor 1994)

Patriarchy from all sides

She was even considered a threat to the men of her society who accused her of seducing men and humiliated in the Panchayat, through the statement "she was saying that, she's itching for it". She was harassed on the basis of her caste and her failed marriage made it easier for them to label her as "a fallen woman". Being subjected to harassment, humiliation and ostracization, she openly declared a dispute against the thakurs, whom she promised to eliminate. This text is basically an eye opener to the audience who for the first time reads the prison narrative of a subaltern woman, in the first person narrative, her story is a fierce reminder to every underprivileged people who has experienced the same treatment through ages and has never gathered the courage to address them.

Mehta also exposes the pitiable condition of the widows despised by society as they are considered 'witches' who have devoured their husbands which is not at all their fault. Similarly, Phoolan also was labelled as a witch for bewitching men of her village and trap them in her net of seduction.

Women as the category of Oppressed

In this academic task, I am referring to Paulo Freire's pioneering book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed," Paulo Freire highlights dialogue as a crucial aspect of human interaction, stressing its core in spoken language. Considering dialogue as a literary element, it becomes integral to human emotions, sharing the ability to evoke feelings in readers or audiences. The dichotomy of the oppressor and oppressed is highlighted repeatedly as stated by Paulo, the oppressed might get themselves in the role of the oppressor. Madhumati's matriarchal domination in the ashram is an imitation of the patriarchal supremacy which is clear from the following example, "Have you gone mad? Nobody marries a widow. Shameless, you'll sink yourself and us. We'll be cursed. We must live in purity, to die in purity" (Mehta).

Madhumati's statement reflects a traditional and orthodox perspective on widows, emphasizing the societal expectation for them to uphold loyalty, chastity, and devotion to their deceased husbands as part of religious rituals in a male-dominated context. The religious scriptures are further influencing colonization of the psyches of widows stated

through her character, who is immensely impacted by religious scriptures. She being a victim of

patriarchy and subjected to abuse is now performing the same injustice on these widows. The relationship dynamic of the oppressor and the oppressed has been delved into by both Water and Bandit Queen. Phoolan spares Puttilal's life and leaves him injured as his death would remind her of her domestic abuse. Madhumati is beaten up and cursed by Chuiya whenever she tries to morally police her for her audacity as she also protests against the stone-age traditions and customs of fasting and penance unlike other submissive widows who silently accept her supremacy. Therefore violence is pedagogic and symbolic is best explained when Madhumati cuts off Kalyani's hair forcefully despite her pleas to curb her mobility and beauty so that she won't look attractive and locks her in her room to prevent her from meeting Narayan and warned all the widows that this will be the outcome if they ever try to follow her path. Phoolan was also pulled by her hair and paraded naked to show all the men that women who dare disobey the male authority should meet with the same fate. Hair which symbolizes mobility and freedom is also a concept of beauty which is being destroyed to curb women's Independence.

Religion is used both as a medium for oppression and agency by these widows, who celebrate "Janmashtami" to take back the joys of their lives shackled by religious restrictions. They are allowed to participate and apply colors and play and Chuiya is dressed as lord Krishna, here Nand Gopal.

Both Phoolan and Chuiya are equally vocal and continuously protest against the Brahminical hegemony which reduces their existence to mere bodies of flesh, they are swearing and cursing, to their oppressors even engaging in a fight. Phoolan Devi faces repeated assaults, not only for defying societal norms but due to a caste-based notion of sexual accessibility, wherein upper-caste men assert control over lower-caste women. The film's counterhegemonic impact is further evident in a scene where Phoolan Devi takes the sexual initiative with her lover, Vikram, presenting a positive depiction of her sexuality beyond themes of rape, violence, and victimhood. Thus she tries to transgress her position from a submissive partner to a dominant partaker in sexual intercourse.

Gendering and race-ing the wounded body

At the same time, both the films highlight the social and cultural roots of imagining India as principally upper-caste Hindu and male-dominated nation by focusing on the ideological power of the Hindu religious scriptures as scriptures influence patriarchal domination of landlords and gentry (Lall 236). The female characters in Kapoor and Mehta's films rebel against their oppression through the exploration of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies. By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies. Their bodies being the marginal spaces that they occupy, these protagonists don't always begin as women with agency, but grow and develop to that point. Their marginal spaces are first defined and highlighted in order to show how they later redefine and transcend its boundaries. (Moodley 2003)

Conclusion

Chuiya and Phoolan, both being victims of child marriage boldly decides to deviate from conventional wifedom by making their own individual choice by rejecting the patriarchal system which considered them invisible. In this new era of representation in Indian cinema, women's experiences are placed at the center of their compelling narratives and serve as catalysts for change, by encouraging examination of the status quo and questioning prevailing gender dynamics. Women are being emancipated both by guaranteeing that their narratives are heard, acknowledged and acclaimed. Intersectionality highlights the multifarious layers of identity and valuing their unique perspectives. For example, a Dalit woman's experiences of gender inequality are further compounded by caste discrimination, therefore, her struggle gets escalated. Similarly, a widow's battle for equality encircles the intersections of gender and sexuality. Indian movies act as a reflection of the diverse narratives of the women in society and promote inclusivity through its depiction of complex characters and their genuine struggles. Films foster an authentic understanding of gender roles and bias by unveiling both the advances and challenges faced by women (Prasad 2023)

The movie strives to bring universal attention, intending to raise awareness about the existing issues of neglect of women. Both *Water* and *Bandit Queen* transform the unmentioned struggles of women encouraging the audience to engage with and manifest upon these social challenges. These movies challenge traditional beliefs and prejudices by daringly resisting these social ills and giving voice to the marginalised.

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