

Socio-cultural Impact on the Psychology of Women with Reference to the Film Text 'Bandit Queen'

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Abstract

Crimes or violence against women make headlines almost every day and an innumerable number of such cases go unreported. Violence can be in several forms such as rape, domestic violence, abuse, discrimination and neglect. Instances of violence happen not only at work place but also at home. Violence against women is a major public health problem and a violation of women's human rights. This study is an effort to describe the type of abuse and mental trauma a woman undergoes through in an Indian society. Such stressful activities also sometimes make women take drastic steps as evident in this analysis.

The text taken for analysis is 'Bandit Queen' by Shekhar Kapur, a real-life story of Phoolan Devi, who belongs to a lower caste and faces sexual abuse and discrimination. A turn of events leads her to become the revered leader of a gang. She then comes back to take revenge against her oppressors. Bandit Queen describes the life of north Indian women who experience exploitation in the name of caste and sex. The film talks about violence and its impact on women's psychology. It also depicts to what extent a woman can go when she undergoes extreme abuse. Although the people see her as a dacoit, she is actually fighting for her freedom and to achieve that, she is even willing to take the wrong path if necessary. Several women fight violence and abuse in silence and only a handful of cases are reported owing to the shame and guilt a woman has to undergo that is established in a patriarchal society.

Key words: abuse, Bandit Queen, discrimination, Phoolan Devi, violence

INTRODUCTION

According to the United Nations, violence against women is defined as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." In general terms, an intimate partner is supposed to give support and protection to the other, which is however not the case in women. Globally about 38% of the murders of women have been committed by a male intimate partner.

In the Indian context, violence against women have existed ever since. The National Crime Records Bureau, a government of India agency recorded a total of 4,05,861 cases of crime against women during 2019, which is an increase of 7.3% compared to 2018 (3,78,236 cases). A majority of crime against women were registered under 'Cruelty by Husband or His Relatives' (30.9%) followed by 'Assault on Women with Intent to Outrage her Modesty' (21.8%), 'Kidnapping and Abduction of Women' (17.9%) and 'Rape' (7.9%). A recent incident that shook the nation was the rape of a 19-year-old Dalit girl in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, who was gang raped and murdered by 4 upper caste men. Several similar cases have also been reported from other states where the victim is a lower caste girl.

Several laws and law enforcement agencies have been formed since then to curb the issues of violence against women. The National Commission for women was set up to make sure women are treated equal and that she gets her rights. The commission also provides solutions to problems arising from discrimination or violence against women. A separate ministry has been set up by the Central government called the Ministry of Women and Child Development, with a vision to protect these vulnerable sections from abuse and violence. According to the Indian Penal Code, the following are considered as punishable offences.

1. Rape (Sec. 376 IPC)
2. Attempt to commit rape (Sec 376/511 IPC)
3. Kidnapping & abduction of women (Section 363,364,364A, 366 IPC)
 - 3.1 K&A under section 363 IPC
 - 3.2 K&A in order to murder
 - 3.3 K&A for ransom
 - 3.4 K&A of women to compel her for marriage
 - 3.5 K&A for other purposes
4. Dowry deaths (Section 304B IPC)
5. Assault on woman with intent to outrage her modesty (Sec. 354 IPC)
 - 5.1 Sexual harassment (Sec.354A IPC)
 - 5.2 Assault on woman with intent to outrage her modesty (Sec. 354C IPC)

5.3 Voyeurism (Sec. 354D IPC)

5.4 Others

6. Insult to the modesty of women (Sec. 509 IPC)

6.1 at office premises

6.2 at places related to work

6.3 in public transport

6.4 in other places

7. Cruelty by husband or his relatives, (Sec. 498A IPC)

8. Importation of girl from foreign country (up to 21 years of age) (Sec. 366 B IPC)

9. Abetment of suicide of women (Sec. 306 IPC)

In addition to these, several Acts have been passed to check violence against women.

(i) The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961

(ii) The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986

(iii) The Commission of Sati Prevention Act, 1987

(iv) The Protection of women from domestic Violence Act, 2005

(v) The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

In spite of these laws and Acts, the country has seen an increase in crimes against women. Instances of abuse are more when the individuals are uneducated. This does not mean that an educated environment is free of such evils. These acts of violence are prevalent in any society or environment where the woman is always blamed. Such acts of violence can negatively impact a woman's physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health which may also increase the risk of acquiring HIV in some cases. The Indian National Bar Association also stated that if such cases of abuse and violence are not checked now, then there a day is not far when there will be no women in India.

This study describes the abuse and discrimination a girl belonging to a lower caste has to undergo in a male dominated society in a North-India setting. The film is based on a real-life story of a Dalit girl turned bandit who takes revenge against her abusers.

BANDIT QUEEN

Bandit Queen is a biopic film based on the novel 'India's Bandit Queen' a true-life story of Phoolan Devi, written by Mala Sen, and directed into a film by Shaker Kapur in 1994. It is a story of a girl who is a victim of child marriage, sexual abuse and exploitation. She gradually starts to rebel against the societal norms because she couldn't take them anymore. After several years, this makes her to lead a gang. She leads the gang with courage, generosity, humility and shrewdness for women and protects them. The movie begins with a quote from the "Manu

Smriti” an ancient Sanskrit legal text which says, “The low caste, the drums and women should be beaten.” A statement like this kind would be total unacceptable in the 21st century but is it shocking that such a thing still exists in India. Such atrocities do not get noticed and is lost among the headlines of corruption scandals and honor killings.

ANALYSIS

In this film, conflicts between the upper and lower caste and men’s violence against women is observed. Also, an abused woman deconstructs the ideology of an Indian society and becomes a gang (dacoit) leader who according to the society is actually supposed to be within the social norms. A transformation of a helpless village girl into a much-feared bandit takes place which isn’t a normal phenomenon seen in Indian women. It was because of her past life experience where she was subjected to oppression and mistreatment by her own family (father, husband), as well as the so-called upper caste Thakurs of the region. It is ironic that such discriminatory caste system where one human is superior to the other still exists in the 21st century.

Phoolan Devi was born in an untouchable lower caste family in Madhya Pradesh. Phoolan witnessed her family and herself being subjected to systematic abuse, deprivation and torment by the higher caste landlords and youths in her village. When she was a small child, her uncle, Mayadin arranges a child marriage with Putilal, who was a widower and older to her. Since it was a mismatched marriage, her married life became miserable. The Thakurs accuse her of being a prostitute, which leads to her being expelled from the village and is treated as an outcast. She is even abandoned by her own family who fail to believe her but believe the selfish and biased allegations of the upper caste men. When she later returns to her village, who abuses her and asks her to leave. When she refuses to leave, her husband files a fake complaint of theft. This leads to the arrest of Phoolan Devi who then shockingly gets raped by the policemen who are thought to help the helpless and give justice to the downtrodden. She is again broken for the second time. In fact, the very people whom she thought could help abused her sexually repeatedly. Repeated sex had become a daily routine for her and as a result, she becomes numb and senseless to the events.

Then comes the part that made Phoolan Devi famous. Phoolan gets abducted by a gang of dacoits. The gang leader Gujjar who is an upper caste man tries to rape her. One of the bandits, Vikram Mallah, tries to protect Phoolan and kills the gang leader to ultimately becomes the gang leader himself. She becomes his second wife and she learns to use a rifle from Vikram. As a bandit, she takes her place beside men in a society that refuses to believe that a woman is capable of such a thing. The gang is then led by a former leader who gets released from jail named Shri Ram who belongs to the upper caste. Shri Ram also tried to rape Phoolan who is protected by Vikram again. This leads to differences among the gang and ultimately a division takes place. Vikram later gets killed by the upper caste bandits (Thakurs) and she is captured again. She is kept in a village called Behmai where she is again repeatedly raped by the men folk of the village. She is also paraded naked through the village. Phoolan then meets a friend of Vikram called Mann Singh, plans her escape and they plot to take revenge against the Thakurs. After Vikram’s death, her existence becomes increasingly desperate. Although she is a strong lady, Phoolan Devi becomes powerless after losing the only male of her gang. We relate power, authority and strength to men. This shows that she was under the control of a male and followed his orders.

After her escape with Mann Singh, she returns to the same village with her gang disguised as policemen where she was kept in abduction and raped. A wedding preparation is underway, but she manages to get the attention of

the villagers. She asks for her abductors but they fail to present themselves. As a result, she orders her gang to kill all the men folk of the village, a total of 22 innocent men were killed that day.

This incident led both to her popularity as well as to her massive manhunt. She also gets the media's attention and is glorified by both media and the public. Being a dacoit, she looted mostly upper caste villages and shared the loot among the poor lower caste people and also involved in protecting women. Towards the end, she surrenders with a few conditions. She then joins politics with the vision which she stated.

“My main goal is that things that only the rich and privileged have enjoyed until now should also be given to the poor: for example, drinking water, electricity, schools and hospitals... I'd like there to be seats reserved for women in government posts. Women should be educated in schools. And people should not be forcing them to get married at a very young age...the most important thing is equality. So that people can get employment, they can get proper food and drink, and also to be educated. And especially women – now they are really treated very lowly, like shoes! They should be treated on an equal basis. And like other countries that have progressed and have comforts, I also want my country and people to progress that way.”

During her political career, she is shot by men of the upper caste who were seeking to take revenge against her for killing the 22 innocent men.

CONCLUSION

A woman who is vulnerable and prone to violation, on the other is indomitable and cannot be destroyed because the violence makes a woman fierce and indestructible. It is the occurrence of violence that engenders woman. In the studied text, Phoolan never expected to a dacoit, it is the society who brought the beast out of her.

In Bandit Queen we see the direct violence, where she is vulnerable to physical and mental violence. Violence is within the society and this makes Phoolan go against the system. Society and family played a negative role in her life which turned her into a Bandit leader (dacoit). She is exposed to threats and she rebels and fights for the freedom that she desires by going beyond the society's set rules. Women in the Indian context don't choose to be aggressive individuals, it's the society that makes them one.

Women play a very important role in a society and family. She is considered as the pillar that the development or upliftment of an entire nation rests on. She not only brings up the children but systematically takes care of the household chores as well. In spite of knowing this, women in India continue to suffer at the hands of family, society and even law protectors where they are very prone to sexual abuse and different forms of discrimination and violence. Despite formation of several laws and bodies to oversee or protect women, cases of abuse and violence continue to rise. It is also known that such forms of abuse can also have a negative impact on children. A most probable solution would be education and awareness on the abilities and role of women in the society.

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