

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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PHOOLAN: The Life of a Bandit Queen

Introduction

On February 14, 1981, 18-year-old Phoolan had only one thing on her mind: revenge. Waiting outside a remote village on the Yamuna River in northern India, a band of about 20 bandits waited for her instructions. The bandits were from different gangs, but their common goal was to hunt down the man who had murdered Phoolan's lover, while she slept beside him.

Married at ten, to a man twenty years older, Phoolan experienced a life of brutality. She was raped several times, including by the police, and put in jail. Eventually she became the leader of her own gang of low-caste men who attacked upper-caste villages and held captives for ransom. When her gang murdered 22 men, she became the target of a manhunt by the Indian government for two years. She surrendered on her own terms and agreed to go to prison. Emerging 11 years later, she was twice elected to the Indian Parliament and then shot dead in 2001.

Her story, as printed, is based on 2,000 pages of oral interviews in Hindi that were transcribed in Hindi and then translated into English. Finally, two western writers wrote the published book. On the printed page, it is almost as sensational as the accounts of her life in newspapers, biographies and films, and some have doubted its authenticity.

Phoolan was illiterate and she only 'approved each page [of the book as it was read out to her] with her signature' (p. 468). No further information is given about the process of transforming her oral interviews in Hindi into a printed book in English. We do not know who carried out the interviews, who transcribed them or who translated them. Nor do we know if Phoolan had any role in the selection of events included in the book. One of the writers is a French TV presenter, while the other is a British writer on rock music, both of whom have written best-selling books, including biographies, about people in the Third World.

This book thus raises issues of agency and voice, so fundamental to the production of an autobiography. Indeed, one could say that the western writers 'ghost' wrote Phoolan's story. Still, there is no doubt that her life became (and to an extent still is) a powerful symbol of female resistance, and not only in India.

Themes

fiction and autobiography; oral autobiography;

Essay Questions

- 1 What is Phoolan's goal in writing/speaking her story?
- 2 Some critics claim that parts of her story are fabricated. Explain why you think this is or is not important.
- 3 Using this text as an example, discuss the problems and/or advantages of writing a spoken autobiography

Reading

Phoolan Devi, *I, Phoolan Devi*

Supplementary Reading

Weaver, 'India's Bandit Queen'
Sen, *India's Bandit Queen*

Pinch, review of film
Fernandes, 'Reading "India's Bandit Queen"'