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Reading "India's Bandit Queen": A Trans/national Feminist Perspective on the Discrepancies of Representation

In recent years the question of difference has posed a critical dilemma for research that has engaged in cross-cultural or transnational modes of analysis. On the one hand, feminist research has interrogated the naturalized reproduction of a hegemonic unitary Western subject of feminism (Alarcón 1990; Butler 1990) and has provided an impetus for the inclusion of differences of race, class, and nation in arenas such as university curricula, academic anthologies, and research agendas. On the other hand, recent research has begun to question the deployment of difference as the "other" once again becomes the site for the production and consumption of a modernist authenticity and purity within a decentered, fragmented age of postmodernity (Trinh 1989, 1991; hooks 1990; Chow 1993a). This dilemma, which rests on the link between the desire for and the commodification of difference, has been particularly marked in relation to the question of the representation of the "Third World subaltern woman." Feminist scholars within postcolonial studies have analyzed the processes of re/colonization, which unfold through the production of a homogenized "Third World woman" who is depicted either as a silent victim of (Mohanty 1991) or as a speaking subaltern responding to (Spivak 1988) various structures of oppression.¹

The problematic of the power/representation relationship (Foucault 1980) raises the task of confronting the (un)translatability of difference,² particularly when the boundaries of difference are marked by the figure of the "Third World woman." Gayatri Spivak's now classic essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" presented feminist scholars with an incisive argument

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¹ For a critical discussion of an overemphasis on the possibilities of resistance, see Abu-Lughod 1991.

² I am referring here to current debates over the problems of representing "other" groups—marked, for instance, by class, cultural, or national difference.

that the speaking subaltern subject coheres “with the work of imperialist subject-constitution, mingling epistemic violence with the advancement of learning and civilization. And the subaltern woman will be as mute as ever” (1988, 294). Meanwhile, feminist scholars have attempted to devise particular types of textual strategies that can subvert the power dynamics inherent in textual representations of subalternity (Behar 1993; Visweswaran 1994; Fernandes 1997a). Spivak herself, in a more recent essay (1992), has suggested possible methodological strategies that can begin to confront the politics of translation. Her call for modes of linguistic translation that do not just focus on grammatical rules but “surrender to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text” begin to point to a conception of cross-cultural translation that does not simply focus either on a rejection of “the real” or on “getting the reality right” through increasingly sophisticated methods of empiricism (1992, 187). Rather, such an approach shifts the task toward both the sense of rhetoricity and the strategies of representation of the cultural context in question.

The significance of a shift from grammar to rhetoricity or from empiricist methods to strategies of representation is particularly evident in relation to the ways in which the effects of texts are contingent on the questions of audience and the location of the consumption of texts. The shift entails a confrontation not just of multiple audiences but, as Lata Mani has argued, of “discrepant audiences,” which are constituted through dissonant discursive regimes of power and possibilities for their subversion (1990, 27).³ This dissonance is the product of two intertwined and at times countervailing historical and political forces. At one level, texts, theories, and cultural commodities circulate and “travel” (John 1996; Clifford 1997) across national boundaries. At another level, the consumption, meanings, and power effects of such forms are contingent on the local and national historical and political boundaries of the “audience” in question. I return to Spivak’s formulation in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” to foreground this “discrepant” nature of audience, context, and consumption. Spivak’s formulation provides a critical interruption of a long history of a European sociology of knowledge that has laid claim to a simultaneous discovery, understanding, and production of “other” peoples and worlds (Said 1978). Within the context of Western academic audiences, Spivak’s formulation disrupts trans/national relations of power by locating the desire for an autonomous speaking subaltern within a theory of interests

³ See also John 1996 for a discussion of the ways in which theory “travels” across discrepant contexts.

shaped by colonialism and the international division of labor. At another level, however, the transformation of the subaltern into a figure of untranslatability or, as Mary John has put it, into “another name for the economy of undecidability” (1996, 46) may have different political implications within the context of Indian audiences. For instance, in India, gender- and class-based representations of the Indian nation have often transformed subaltern women into figures who must be represented by elite nationalist politicians or middle-class representatives of organized social movements (Basu 1992). In this case, the implications of representing the subaltern cannot be contained within the boundaries of a theory of imperial interests and may, in fact, hold important counterhegemonic potentialities. The *discrepancy* of such differential power effects lies not just in the potential difference between audiences but in the temporal simultaneity of such effects where consumption practices travel across, even as they are located within, the borders of nations. That is, in this hypothetical exemplar, the representation of the subaltern may simultaneously subvert hegemonic nationalist narratives even as it is implicated within the theory of imperial interests that Spivak delineates.⁴

My aim in this article is to demonstrate the ways textual forms produce such contradictory effects in order to develop an approach that can address Caren Kaplan’s call for “feminist analyses of transnational economies of texts and theories” (1994, 146). I specifically attempt to interrogate the notion of the (un)translatability of the “Third World woman” by exploring the discrepant threads of power and resistance that unravel within particular forms of translation and representation. I discuss representations of Phoolan Devi, a legendary lower-caste woman dacoit in India who was known for raiding villages with her gang and redistributing wealth from upper-class, upper-caste landlords to poor landless villagers.⁵ The article

⁴ I am making two points here. First, in the context of a globalized economy, texts that may be produced for a particular national audience are in fact simultaneously consumed within the context of other national audiences. Second, such consumption occurs at the same temporal moment and is not a teleological process in which Third World countries will eventually consume First World texts. Note also that this is not limited to texts that are produced in the postcolonial era or about postcolonial subjects. Shakespeare, for instance, is taught within the Indian academy.

⁵ Her national notoriety in India grew, in particular, due to one incident commonly known as the “Behmai incident.” In the north Indian village of Behmai, Phoolan Devi had been gang-raped by a group of upper-caste landlords after being captured with the help of an upper-caste dacoit who also served as a police informant. In retaliation, she later returned to the village with her gang and killed seventeen upper-caste landowners who had allegedly raped her. The incident caused a particular national outcry because of the political and social

juxtaposes readings of two forms of representation of her life history, the film *Bandit Queen* and her autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi*.⁶ I use an interpretive methodology of reading in order to analyze the textual strategies of representation in each case and the ways in which these strategies reproduce and interrupt relationships of power within international and national realms (Said 1978; Foucault 1980).⁷ In this endeavor, I want to argue for a trans/national feminist theoretical approach that moves away from a binary choice of either invoking or rejecting the “real” and focuses instead on multiple narratives of hegemony and resistance that are produced in varying and often contradictory ways in the textual strategies of the film and the autobiography.⁸ The transformation of Phoolan Devi into “India’s bandit queen” provides a striking case of the ways in which the power effects of the production and consumption of cultural forms spill over the territorial boundaries of nation-states and cannot be cast into a singular model of meaning.

A trans/national feminist approach recognizes a dialectical relationship between the intratextual realm (modes of representation within the textual form) and the intertextual realm (social and political contexts that include both national discourses and trans/national relationships of power within which texts circulate). The relationship between the internal and external layers of cultural forms in the contemporary global context disrupts easy oppositions between Third World production and First World consumption because texts are manufactured through modes of “collaborative” multinational production. Consider the case of *Bandit Queen*. While the film was directed by Shekhar Kapur, an Indian filmmaker, it was commissioned and funded by a British public television channel. Meanwhile, Phoolan Devi’s autobiography was written based on oral interviews

implications of a lower-caste “outlaw” woman attacking landed *thakurs*. Following the incident the state government of Uttar Pradesh launched a full-scale attempt to capture her and ultimately forced her to surrender to the government.

⁶ Note that prior to the production of the film and the autobiography, Mala Sen’s biography, *India’s Bandit Queen* (1991), was the key text that claimed to represent Phoolan Devi’s life. The film was based on this text.

⁷ I am drawing here on a Foucauldian analysis of the linkages between power and representation. By using the term “strategies of representation,” my aim is to call attention to the performative and constructed nature of textual forms that claim to embody, represent, or speak for “real” experiences of particular individuals or social groups. See Foucault 1980.

⁸ Note that my point is not to advocate a singular universal “global” feminist approach. Rather, by a trans/national feminist approach, I am referring to the need for a feminist analysis of the ways in which the power effects of texts are both contained within and transgress national borders. In this article, my use of a slash in the term *trans/national* attempts to signal the simultaneity of power effects within and across nations.

(Phoolan Devi is nonliterate), produced and published in English by a British publishing company.⁹ At one level, both the film and autobiography signify “strategies of invested representation” that fit into wider patterns of the Western consumption of the heroic Third World woman (Carr 1994, 154). As Robert Carr puts it, “The emergence of testimonial literature in the First World marketplace (geographically defined) is . . . involved in an ongoing history of mappings of Otherized communities and their worlds (dehistoricized and deterritorialized) for the accumulation of knowledge and power by bourgeois/ruling-class Anglo-Americans and their descendants” (1994, 155). However, neither the film nor the autobiography can be read purely in terms of its effects for a self-contained “Western” audience. While the title *I, Phoolan Devi* clearly echoes the title of the highly successful testimonial *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, it cannot be read solely in terms of Western processes of canonization (Beverly 1993) but must also be located within existing genres of literature in India. Such genres include writings in both vernacular regional languages as well as English. In the case of English language productions, autobiographies and biographies have had a long and varied historical tradition in India. This tradition includes writings in diaries and travel accounts by elite figures in the early colonial period and by elite nationalist leaders such as Nehru and Gandhi. Women’s biographical and autobiographical literature in India has encompassed elite Indian Christian women’s writings in the late nineteenth century (see Flemming 1994), the autobiographies of princesses (such as Sunity Devee, the maharani of Cooch Behar, and Vijaya Raje Scindia of Gwalior), and prominent political leaders such as Indira Gandhi.¹⁰ Alternative forms of women’s testimonial literature have involved collaborative oral testimonial projects between feminist intellectuals in India and women from subaltern social groups.¹¹ The first representation of Phoolan Devi’s life published in a biography written by Mala Sen (1991) was

⁹ Both the film and autobiography claim to represent the true life story of Phoolan Devi. While the film begins with the caption, “This is a true story,” a short note of a page and a half at the end of Phoolan Devi’s 463-page autobiography indicates that the book (based on 2,000 pages of transcribed interviews) was read out to her and that “she approved each page with her signature, still the only word she knows how to write” (1996, 468). The note ends with the words, “After everything she lived through, she deserved to be given the chance to tell her story herself” (468).

¹⁰ For a more general and comprehensive collection of women’s writings in India, see Tharu and Lalitha 1993.

¹¹ See, e.g., the volume of testimonials by the feminist collective Stree Shakti Sangathana (1989) documenting the experiences of women’s participation in an armed struggle in 1948–51 against landed interests in the princely state of Hyderabad, a movement that later brought its participants in direct confrontation with the Indian army.

successful with India's English reading public sphere and has been reprinted in two successive editions.

In the national public sphere in India, the film *Bandit Queen* sparked a contentious and distinctive debate on the politics of authenticity, agency, authority, and responsibility in the representation of the "real" life experiences and struggles of an individual. The controversy centered on the politics of gender and sexuality since director Kapur presents several rape scenes, one of which is a gang rape of Phoolan Devi. This depiction touched a raw nerve of public (middle-class) morality within the Indian public sphere.¹² The controversy surrounding the representation of rape was further complicated by Phoolan Devi's own attempt to stop the film from being distributed and screened in India. Although Phoolan Devi had consented to the making of the film, she had not anticipated the visually graphic representation of rape in the film—a portrayal that would violate her sense of honor in the context of hegemonic social norms in India that depict rape victims as figures of shame and dishonor. Moreover, Phoolan Devi's petition accused Kapur of factual misrepresentation and the endangerment of her life since he had depicted her participation in a massacre of upper-caste landlords (*thakurs*) in the village of Behmai.¹³ In response to public criticism, Kapur argued that resistance to his film was a manifestation of a middle-class morality that sanctioned public silence about rape. Kapur's position was further complicated by a battle with the Indian state, which attempted to censor nudity in the film's rape scenes.

The film and autobiography raise a number of questions regarding the modalities of power and resistance that are set in motion in each case. For instance, how do they attempt to subvert hegemonic forms of morality, state power, and the policing of women's sexuality in public discourses of women? In what ways do the film and autobiography disrupt or reproduce conventional Western stereotypes of "traditional" Indian society? Does Kapur's representation inadvertently recolonize Phoolan Devi by packaging her as a rape victim? Both representations of Phoolan Devi's life raise complex issues regarding translation, authenticity, and depictions of the "real." My central theoretical endeavor is to contribute to a form of feminist "critical realism."¹⁴ Such a project rests on a recognition of trans/national material, historical, and political relations of inequality and entails a mode of

¹² Although rape scenes are common in commercial Hindi films, such films do not depict any form of nudity.

¹³ Since Phoolan Devi was charged with these crimes, the film's representation could potentially have served as "evidence" of her acknowledgment that she committed the crime.

¹⁴ This approach distinguishes between empiricism and notions of the real. See Bhaskar 1989 and Barad 1996.

interpretation that includes an analysis of the international political economy of the production and consumption of cultural texts. The first section of my article presents an interpretive reading that locates the film in terms of form and substantive strategies of representation within trans/national relationships of inequality. However, the interpretive dimension of a feminist critical realist approach also demonstrates that such material structures do not predetermine or produce a singular regime of the power effects of these texts in question. The second section examines how the film contains counterhegemonic possibilities within the context of the Indian national public sphere. The third section demonstrates that, while the autobiography and film operate within similar materially based trans/national circuits of power, the autobiography's form and rhetorical strategies are able to disrupt both trans/national and national hegemonic discursive frames of reference.¹⁵

My intention in juxtaposing the film and autobiography is not to make the argument that Phoolan Devi's self-presentation in textual form is more accurate or authentic than Kapur's cinematic presentation of her life. My argument — that the contrast between the film and autobiography does not rest on the measurement of the degrees of “truth in representation” but on the contrasting power effects of the texts in question — attempts to move feminist debates on “realism” away from a binary opposition between the politics of representation and methodologies of discourse analysis on the one hand and the politics of authenticity and methodologies of empiricism on the other. My methodological approach aims not to “measure” audience responses in different national contexts but to engage in a transdisciplinary analysis that bridges dichotomies such as structure/representation, political economy/discourse, real/fictional. My conceptualization of “audience” refers to the national and international cartographies of power within which texts circulate rather than empirically defined audiences at the local level.¹⁶ I use a reading of the two forms of representation of Phoolan Devi as India's bandit queen to suggest ways to move toward a trans/national feminist mode of cultural interpretation that recasts the dilemmas of difference, representation, and “the real” from a static problem of untranslatability into a question of the performance of the real through strategies

¹⁵ In other words, the relationship between structural location (where the text is produced) and representation (the power effects of the text) is not predetermined.

¹⁶ A project that analyzes fractured audience responses to the film within India and Britain is an important endeavor but is not relevant to the theoretical or methodological project of this article. Such a project is currently being carried out by Shohini Ghosh. Ghosh 1996 has also discussed the international acclaim *Bandit Queen* received at international film festivals and in reviews in Europe.

of representation—strategies that are always contingent on the form of representation, the context of reading, and the tactics of rhetoricity deployed in the texts.

Consuming “India’s Bandit Queen”: Transforming modernist authenticity into cultural capital in a postmodern age

In her essay “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” (1993b), Rey Chow analyzes a series of discursive and textual forms that attempt to recuperate an originary authentic subject who can escape the structure of imperialist discourse but instead result in the re/production of the objectified figure of the “native” other. Chow examines Malek Alloula’s book *The Colonial Harem*, which attempts to produce an anti-imperialist narrative through the presentation of a series of postcards of Algerian women that the French had sent home during the colonial period. While Chow acknowledges that Alloula’s point is to mark the French colonial construction of the Oriental woman, she argues that “because Alloula is intent on capturing the essence of the colonizer’s discourse as a way to retaliate against his enemy, his own discourse coincides much more closely with the enemy’s than with the woman’s” (40). Her discussion raises critical questions regarding the political implications of witnessing and redepicting forms of power and domination that apply to the production, commodification, and distribution of Phoolan Devi’s life history through film and autobiography. Such questions are further complicated by the complexities involved in an analysis of the politics of representing the subaltern woman in a global context of multinational cultural production.

These questions do not signal a call to return to a romanticized notion that presumes that the subaltern woman must speak her own voice and represent herself but ask instead to contextualize depictions of the “real” stories of subaltern oppression within international relations of power that unfold through complex circuits of the production and consumption of the “Third World subaltern woman.” Recent research has begun to analyze the power effects of the recent rise in consumer demand for the “real” stories of Third World women in the forms of testimonials, autobiographies, and documentary film (Trinh 1991; Grewal and Kaplan 1994). The production of the figure of India’s bandit queen provides a significant site for an interrogation of the production and consumption of the modernist authenticity of the “Third World subaltern woman” within the shifting, fragmented, and destabilized moment of postmodernity in late-capitalist nation-states in the “West.” I am deliberately deploying the categories “West” and “Third World” in order to foreground the trans/national rela-

tionships of power that have governed these constructions. My point is to demonstrate the contradictory power effects of representations *without* blurring the material historical processes of colonization that have governed relations between First and Third Worlds (Said 1978; Spivak 1988; Mohanty 1991). My analysis suggests that these processes are marked by three critical characteristics: (1) a process of collaboration that simultaneously marks and seeks to erase relations of power between First and Third Worlds, (2) a production of a binary opposition between the modern and the traditional, one that temporally places the Third World outside of the historical moment of postmodernity in the West, and (3) moments of subversion within such textual forms that may disrupt or complicate these oppositions.

The film *Bandit Queen* and the autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi* represent in different ways a collaborative project between First and Third Worlds.¹⁷ While *Bandit Queen* was funded and produced by a British television company, the film cannot easily be classified as a “British film” since it was directed, produced, and shot in India with an all-Indian cast.¹⁸ The autobiography *I, Phoolan Devi* was written on the basis of Phoolan Devi’s oral narration of her life story. The text was translated and written by two collaborators since Phoolan Devi is nonliterate and does not speak English. The translation and writing of Phoolan Devi’s life story occur through a form of collaboration that defies a clear-cut classification of the book as either “Western” or “Indian.” I want to suggest, following the work of Trinh T. Minh-ha, that this very mark of collaboration, which appears initially to interrupt the First World/Third World binary, is a central means for the production and consumption of a modernist Third World authenticity. As Trinh argues, “Factual authenticity relies heavily on the Other’s words and testimony. To authenticate a work, it becomes therefore most

¹⁷ I am specifically foregrounding the multinational nature of this production for two reasons—first, to point to the material basis of the production of such texts; second, to interrogate the implications of this multinational character. One possible interpretation could cast this as another manifestation of an international (neo)colonial relationship. A second interpretation could cast this as an intrinsic sign of authenticity or subversive hybridity. Recent anthropological debates, for instance, have discussed the possibility of including the “native’s” authorship as an experimental subversive strategy. During the course of this article, my discussion of the film and autobiography will complicate this binary opposition while recognizing the material basis of such collaborative process. See Behar 1993 for a complex discussion of such issues. Note also that in the case of the film *Bandit Queen*, the British production company Channel IV retained joint control with Shekhar Kapur over the film’s content. In this case the material collaboration directly shaped the representation. In other cases such shaping is often indirect or implicit.

¹⁸ Furthermore, the script was co-written by Mala Sen, Phoolan Devi’s biographer.

important to prove or make evident how this Other has participated in the making of his/her own image” (1991, 67). The publisher’s note at the end of Phoolan Devi’s autobiography states that she signed each page of the book manuscript in order to verify and authenticate its truth. This process conforms to the kind of testimonial literature that, Carr argues, “tracks the international flow of capital, First World/Third World relations and the locus of the borderland of the testimonial” (1994, 157).¹⁹ However, the production and extraction of value through the commodification of Phoolan Devi’s life story in the postcolonial period departs from the ways in which colonial discourses constructed the Other. While in the colonial period the French postcards that Alloula compiles presented an objectified view of a silent native woman,²⁰ in the postcolonial period the native subaltern woman must not only speak her own voice but also be seen speaking in her voice (Trinh 1991). Oral testimony and visual spectacle function together in the production of an authentic, realist representation of the “Third World subaltern woman.” Furthermore, the establishment of a collaborative relationship of material production legitimizes this voice in two ways. First, a clear collaboration that can be traced back to India consolidates the local and particular authenticity of the text. Second, an acknowledgment of the boundaries of the Indian nation-state subtly conceals the possibility of a neocolonial relationship that might lurk beneath the collaboration. Phoolan Devi cannot be transformed simply into the bandit queen, she must be represented as India’s bandit queen.²¹

Although the collaboration between First and Third Worlds in making *Bandit Queen* signifies the production of and desire for a Third World authenticity, the relationships of power inherent in this collaboration are not limited to the material relations of production. They are also simultaneously recoded by strategies of representation. Such representational strategies require the measure of Third World authenticity to signify a form of difference as otherness. However, this difference can only be produced through an implicit sameness between First and Third Worlds, one that rests on a set of shared humanistic, universal values. This sameness in difference unfolds in the film *Bandit Queen* through the deployment of images of the modern and the traditional. My aim here is not merely to

¹⁹ Note that Phoolan Devi’s location in many ways corresponds to Anzaldúa’s 1987 conception of the borderland since the intersections among caste, class, and gender place her at the margins and in-between spaces of Indian society.

²⁰ See also Spivak 1988 and Visweswaran 1994 for discussions of the ways in which silence becomes the marker of the colonial subaltern woman.

²¹ See Jameson 1986 and Ahmad 1987 for an exchange regarding the ways in which Western scholarship recasts Third World literature within allegories of the nation.

rehearse a deconstruction of the modernity/tradition binary but to demonstrate how the deployment of “difference” in the film serves to recode trans/national relationships of power. The film casts cultural tradition as the force that explains the caste and gender oppression Phoolan Devi endures and marks this oppression as peculiarly Indian and “different” from the West. Meanwhile, the film continually juxtaposes this tradition with more familiar images that link Indian society with a failed attempt to reproduce universalistic narratives of democracy and modernity. While the sameness of Indian society is marked by such narratives of progress, this sameness is always constructed through difference as otherness (culture) and difference as inferiority (failed modernity).²²

Bandit Queen casts Phoolan’s life story in terms of the problem of “Indian culture” through a series of images that portray the intersection between caste and patriarchy in the everyday life of rural north India. The film attempts to present an incisive indictment of the reproduction of caste and gender hierarchies in a series of social institutions including marriage and family, community life, state (in the form of the local village government and police), and even the political structure of the dacoit gangs in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. However, Kapur’s depiction inadvertently draws its explanatory power of such social hierarchies from an essentialized conception of Indian tradition. The film highlights particular forms of traditional culture such as Phoolan Devi’s child marriage, caste-based segregation,²³ and passive villagers, which conform well with the Western imagination of oppressive Indian traditions (Mani 1989). The film juxtaposes such hierarchies with an individualized view of Phoolan Devi’s rebelliousness. While the film casts Phoolan Devi as a heroic woman striving against her culture, the audience is not provided with any context in which to place Phoolan Devi’s actions; her rebelliousness is depicted as an aberration within a society that otherwise consists of active oppressors and passive victims.

The difference of gender and caste that marks the boundaries between First and Third Worlds in *Bandit Queen* is also carefully constructed through a framework of sameness that can be used to measure Indian society against the West. This sameness rests on a familiar narrative of modernity that is juxtaposed with the representation of “tradition” in the film. Images of idyllic rural scenery and the rough savage scenes of the ravines

²² See Trinh 1989 for discussion of how difference is deployed in ways that re/produce hierarchies of power.

²³ See Appadurai 1988 for a discussion of the ways in which caste has been constructed as an essentialized marker of social organization and hierarchy in India.

and desert where Phoolan Devi and other members of the dacoits are in hiding are juxtaposed with stereotypical urban images of crowds and chaos. Shots of Phoolan Devi bringing her lover and gang leader Vikram to a doctor in Kanpur, one of the major cities in Uttar Pradesh, present a chaotic city in the middle of a public festival with burgeoning crowds and blaring music being played by a marching band. Moreover, the film also presents images that do not merely serve as signifiers of the modern encroaching on a traditional India but as markers of a failed modernity. For instance, all characters representing the modern Indian nation-state, ranging from policemen to doctors to state government officials, are depicted as violent or corrupt. Phoolan Devi is raped by policemen, the doctor who treats Vikram asks for a bribe in order to pay for his daughter's dowry, and the politicians and government officials link their plans to allow Phoolan Devi to surrender alive to the fact that the lower castes vote. These images serve two related functions in the film. First, they serve as signifiers of modernity and democracy that are familiar to Western audiences and therefore facilitate the process of translation of Phoolan Devi's "Indian" experience into a language comprehensible to Western audiences. Second, the association of such images with corruption and violence clearly projects an Indian modernity marked by failure; that is, a failure to achieve Western standards of progress and democracy. This mark of failure brings us back to the circulation of cultural capital encoded within relationships of power between First and Third Worlds, which I have argued shapes the international production and consumption of India's bandit queen. The film does not merely produce an Indian otherness (the traditional) that is dissociated from the West but implicitly reproduces a relationship between India and the West by presenting Indian modernity as a measure of inferiority and failure.

The failure of Indian modernity and democracy has specific political implications within the context of the British production and consumption of the film given the historical relationship of colonialism. In the world of *Bandit Queen*, Phoolan Devi is trapped by a nation that has neither been able to discard the remnants of its oppressive cultural traditions nor been able to live up to the modern democratic institutions and traditions that India inherited through the legacies of colonialism. This double bind is depicted in the film by a visual strategy that denotes critical stages of devastation in Phoolan Devi's life by images of travel. The pull of tradition is marked by Phoolan Devi being forcibly taken away on a boat shot against idyllic images of village India. For example, a journey by boat signifies the first tragic event in the film as Phoolan Devi is taken away from her home by her husband. Later in the film when Phoolan Devi is kidnapped by an

upper-caste dacoit, she is beaten and taken by boat to the village of Behmai where she is gang-raped and paraded naked in front of the entire village in a public demonstration of the brutal, violent reprisal for Phoolan Devi's transgression of caste and gender hierarchies. Meanwhile, such rurally based images of travel are juxtaposed with shots of a speeding train, a classic symbol of modernity, that signify the force of the modern nation-state weighing against Phoolan Devi. A shot of the train prefigures a scene in which Phoolan Devi is arrested and raped by the police in her village after she is falsely accused by the village district head of burglary. Later in the film, when Phoolan Devi's own gang is being hunted down with the full scale of the state government, the shot preceding her surrender to the government is marked by her lying in a crumpled state by the tracks as a train passes by. Such images of movement, whether "regressive" as Phoolan Devi is captured and taken by boat back to the confines of oppressive caste and gender traditions or "progressive" as the train marks the coercive recuperation of Phoolan Devi by the Indian nation-state, frame Phoolan Devi as a nonconsenting victim of the modern and the traditional. These movements, backward in time into the world of repressive tradition or forward into the chronological narrative of a violent, corrupt nation-state, are cast into a singular timeless model of violence and failure.

My analysis suggests that the transformation of difference into otherness and inferiority is linked not merely through the content of the images that Kapur deploys but also through the form of these depictions. The binary oppositions such as the modern/traditional, difference/sameness, and First World/Third World are specifically constructed and managed through a trope that interweaves a politics of gender with the visualization of violence. Mainstream Western representations in film, television, and newspapers have a long history of representing the "Third World" as a site of violence and disorder—whether in relation to ancient primordial religious, tribal, and ethnic conflicts or revolution or state repression.²⁴ Such images link the production and consumption of a "Third World" authenticity to the spectacle of violence. The violent, disordered, and repressive "Third World" is thus juxtaposed against the civilized, orderly, democratic "West." As Chow has argued in her discussion of U.S. representations of the Tiananmen Square massacre, this is the "cross-cultural syndrome in which the 'Third World,' as the site of the 'raw' material, that is, 'monstrosity,' is produced for the surplus-value of spectacle, entertainment and spiritual enrichment for the 'First World'" (1991, 84). Chow's suggestion in this analysis that we confront "the complicity of our technology,

²⁴ See Chow 1991.

which does much more than enable us to ‘see’” (83), points to the ways in which the realist form in cinematic representations can be located historically within the wider genre of the ethnographic film that reproduced relations of race and colonialism through representations of the “primitive,” “savage,” and “native” (Rony 1996).²⁵ *Bandit Queen*, of course, to some extent, reworks this genre since the depiction of violent rape also foregrounds personalized injury that may invoke empathy. Nevertheless, there is an interesting parallel between the empathy presumed between anthropologist and “native” on the one hand and audience and victimized subaltern on the other; more significant, in both cases empathy is not inconsistent with the power-laden questions of the context I am foregrounding. 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 impel *Bandit Queen* to recodify power-laden boundaries between the First and Third Worlds.²⁶

Such processes are of particular significance for feminist analysis when the spectacle consists of the image of violence against the “subaltern Third World woman.” I am suggesting that a feminist project of representing violence against women contains within it the potential for reinvoking orientalist narratives, in particular, by marking the “Third World” as the naturalized site of an unrestrained violence.²⁷ In *Bandit Queen*, the representation of rape results in a gendered transformation of the Third World into a spectacle of violence. Recent feminist research has demonstrated the ways in which the construction of the paradigm of Third World woman as victim serves as the means for the production of a colonial relationship between First and Third Worlds (Mohanty 1991). Building on this research, I argue that such power effects of textual representations are produced not just through representations of Third World women but also through particular constructions of Third World men and masculinities. The construction of sexual difference through the deployment of particular meanings of masculinity provides a central mechanism for the articulation of oth-

²⁵ Such questions regarding cinematic form have also been addressed in relation to the category of gender. See Kaplan 1983. This raises important questions for future research regarding the parallels and intersections among the spectacle of race, the spectacle of woman, and “woman of color.”

²⁶ Such categories thus continue to have salience in cultural analysis (even while we deconstruct them) not merely as analytical tools but because they are reproduced through practices of cultural production.

²⁷ Such processes are not of course only linked to the Third World. For instance, consider the racialized, gendered politics of images of black men and the politics of lynching in the United States. See Hall 1983.

erness and inferiority of the Third World. In *Bandit Queen*, the oppression of tradition and the failure of modernity in contemporary India are translated through the representation of the intrinsic violence and abnormality of Indian masculinity. Consider the parameters of “good” and “bad” masculinity portrayed in the film. The “bad” men in the film are either violent rapists (upper-caste men, dacoits, police) or weak, passive characters such as the rural villagers who consent to such violence. Meanwhile, the “good” masculine figures are depicted through two characters in the film. The first, Phoolan Devi’s lover Vikram, is a dacoit who has transgressed the boundaries of the normal in Indian society. The second, Phoolan Devi’s cousin, who helps her at points of crisis in her life, is presented as a bumbling, comic character. More significant, he embodies a deficient masculinity because he can neither fulfill his traditional role as patriarchal figure (he is bullied by both his wife and Phoolan Devi) nor save Phoolan Devi.²⁸ My reading of *Bandit Queen* shows how a critique of an oppressive culture based on gender and caste hierarchy recodes colonial constructions of otherness and inferiority. The interpretation I have presented presumes an audience located within the West. The effects of textual power of the film shift in important ways when contextualized within hegemonic national discourses in the contemporary Indian bourgeois public sphere.

Disrupting the national bourgeois public sphere: Sexuality, representation, and middle-class morality in India

The distribution and release of *Bandit Queen* resulted in a sharp public debate centered on the representation of rape in the film. The film presents five incidences of rape in increasing degrees of graphic depiction of violence, beginning with the rape of the eleven-year-old Phoolan Devi and culminating with an extended scene of the gang rape of Phoolan Devi in Behmai village. Kapur’s use of nudity in representing the rapes is particularly unusual in the context of existing genres of popular Hindi and regional cinema.²⁹ The controversy surrounding this representation was exacerbated by Phoolan Devi’s attempt to stop the film from being screened in India. Her motives were interpreted and represented through widely varying media reports and speculations, ranging from whether Phoolan Devi had been paid enough for the film to whether she had been sufficiently consulted during the production of the film. A leading Indian feminist writer, Arundhati

²⁸ For a historical discussion of such colonial ideologies of masculinity, see Stoler 1991.

²⁹ Popular films do not generally depict nudity and until recently did not depict explicit sexual intimacy, including kissing.

Roy, charged Kapur with not consulting Phoolan Devi about the film's representation of her life (1994). A central trope of these discussions was Phoolan Devi's reported opposition to the graphic portrayal of the rapes as well as her opposition to ways the film distorted facts of her life (for instance, by portraying her as the dacoit Vikram's lover). These contestations were further complicated by the Indian state's attempt to censor the film because it contained nudity. Following the film's release, the controversy continued, as reports of male audiences cheering during the rape scenes circulated in television and newspaper reports.³⁰ Yet, at the same time, the film was screened with special showings for women-only audiences, opening up spaces for the production of a women's public sphere.³¹

Within the context of the national debate over *Bandit Queen* in India, I argue that the film produced a set of contradictory effects that both disrupted particular hegemonic social codes regarding sexuality and rape within the Indian bourgeois public sphere and reproduced relationships of power that re/colonized Phoolan Devi through the appropriation of her life experiences. In response to the controversy over his representations of rape, Kapur argued that his intention had been to represent rape as a non-sexual act without any hint of sensuality.³² For instance, in the graphic depiction of Phoolan Devi being raped by the upper-caste dacoit Babu Gujjar, the rape is presented in daylight and the only nudity shown involves the male actor. Kapur argued that although the actual rape had taken place at night he depicted the scene in daylight to avoid any sensual connotations associated with darkness or nighttime. Furthermore, none of the rape scenes depicts any female nudity; the only nude shot of the actress playing Phoolan Devi is the scene of the incident when Phoolan Devi is paraded naked in Behmai village after she is gang-raped. Kapur's representation departs significantly from images of rape usually presented in popular Hindi films. Although rape scenes frequently occur in popular film, they are generally highly sexualized representations even though they do not include nudity. Typically, the film's hero rescues the heroine from assault. The successive rapes in *Bandit Queen* form a narrative of spiraling violence. The last incident of the gang rape depicts Phoolan Devi beaten until she is barely recognizable and unable to speak. The representation of rape as a

³⁰ Such reports were often tinged with particular class narratives and the deployment of stereotypes of "uncivilized" working-class men who cheered at such violence.

³¹ Such special screenings are not new or unique to *Bandit Queen* and can be traced back historically to the early twentieth century. See Vasudevan 1995.

³² All references to Kapur's perspective are based on a televised interview, which was aired on the interview program "In Focus," Home TV channel, India, June 10, 1996.

brutal act of violence disrupts public silence on rape and violence against women in India. This disruption is particularly significant given the ways in which public outcries over rape are usually constructed in terms of the loss of honor of the victim and her community (Kumar 1993). The film, in contrast, presents a disturbing vision of the violence the woman herself experiences. Although for Western audiences *Bandit Queen* reproduces the trans/national power effects in conforming to realist strategies of representation, within the national context of India, the film breaks from the conventional strategies of popular films.³³ The strategies of representation deployed in *Bandit Queen* contain counterhegemonic moments when viewed in the context of the Indian national public sphere.

The counterhegemonic effects of *Bandit Queen* in the Indian public sphere are reinforced by the film's representation of rape within a discursive framework that interprets violence against women in terms of the intersections of caste and gender. The film presents a series of images in which upper-caste men in Phoolan Devi's village make remarks that interpret her act of leaving her husband as a sign of her sexual availability and promiscuity. Indeed, these scenes set the stage for the events leading to the first rape of Phoolan Devi after she has run away from her husband, setting in motion the subsequent events in her life. The film's narrative interprets Phoolan Devi's final transgression of the law as the bandit queen as stemming from the violent reprisals she faced because of her transgressions of gender and caste boundaries. In doing so, the film interrupts the naturalization of caste and gender boundaries within contemporary India. For instance, the film calls attention to the ways in which single women are constructed as a sexual and social threat to the moral and social order within India (Fernandes 1997b). Kapur's representation also demonstrates that the construction of the boundaries of gender is always contingent on the politics of caste. Phoolan Devi is repeatedly assaulted not just because she has defied hegemonic social norms by leaving her husband but because of a caste-based construction of sexual accessibility where upper-caste men often assert violent sexual access to lower-caste women. Such counterhegemonic effects of the film are also produced by a different subversion of sexual codes in a scene in which Phoolan Devi takes the sexual initiative with her lover, Vikram. The image portrays Phoolan Devi positioned on top of Vikram, making love to him in a sexually assertive manner. As several

³³ Note that the film also presents a gendered reworking of a significant genre of popular commercial Hindi films that depict the "male outlaw figure," for instance, through representations of male dacoits or the male working-class hero who transgresses the law.

Indian feminists have argued, the scene represents a positive portrayal of Phoolan Devi's sexuality, one that moves beyond rape, violence, and victimhood.³⁴

These counterhegemonic possibilities subvert a common narrative linking the middle classes, their consumption practices of cultural forms such as films, and the Indian nation-state. Recent scholars and media critics in India have begun to call attention to the way in which cinema as "an institution of modernity" plays a central role in the nationalist imagination (Vasudevan 1995, 2809). Tejaswini Niranjana, for instance, has argued that recent popular films have begun to cultivate "an audience primarily composed of the newly articulate, assertive and self-confident middle class that is also claiming for itself the spaces of nation and secularism premised on *Hindutva*" (1994, 79). Niranjana links the production of this new middle-class audience to several interwoven political processes. On one level, the middle classes are presented in a celebratory fashion invoking images of new lifestyles and consumption practices associated with recent policies of economic liberalization in India (Niranjana 1994; Fernandes, in press). On another level, the "'ordinary' middle class person is suddenly inserted into a national conflict" and is then projected as the means for restoring or recuperating the modern, secular Indian nation-state (Niranjana 1994, 79). In this process, the future of "India" is reimagined through a lens that rests on the interwoven paradigms of modernity, nationalism, state power, and consumer capitalism.

Kapur's *Bandit Queen* contests such narratives in a number of complex ways. The film disrupts the production of new hegemonic public cultural images of India's successful transformation into a consumer capitalist nation competing in a global economy (Fernandes, in press). By foregrounding economic and caste inequalities in rural areas in Uttar Pradesh, the film in effect disrupts the narrative that assumes the Indian nation has in fact modernized and is now synonymous with the urban middle classes. *Bandit Queen* marks the social fragments that have historically been excluded from the Indian nation as materially and temporally present within the "new" liberalizing Indian nation.

The film produces another narrative that is counterhegemonic in the Indian national context: the means for social justice in the film lie beyond the boundaries of the legal democratic institutions (such as the courts and police) of the Indian state. With this narrative, the film departs from the conventional genre of popular crime films that, as Ravi Vasudevan argues,

³⁴ For strong critical reviews, see Kishwar 1994 and Roy 1994.

invoke middle-class anxieties regarding crime yet contain these anxieties in an “acceptable narrative of nationalist inspiration, familial re-location and class reproduction” (1995, 2813). Phoolan Devi is unable to receive justice through such instruments of India’s democracy. The intersections of caste, class, and gender hierarchy produce a situation in which social justice is contingent on Phoolan Devi’s transformation into an “outlaw” (Ghosh 1996). In effect, justice and democracy ironically become two poles of a binary opposition.

While *Bandit Queen* subverts hegemonic social codes in contemporary India in many ways, the film’s oppositional endeavor nevertheless raises unsettling questions regarding Phoolan Devi’s own location in relation to the representation. The fact that Phoolan Devi attempted to prevent the screening of the film in India raises the question of whether Kapur’s counter-hegemonic strategies of representation inadvertently re/colonize Phoolan Devi and position her within new hierarchies of power. Such questions require a focus on Phoolan Devi’s location and agency within the politics of representation. I consider these issues below by juxtaposing the film with the depiction of Phoolan Devi’s life in the testimonial *I, Phoolan Devi*.

Agency, authenticity, and intersectionality

Phoolan Devi’s effort to block the film’s screening cannot be understood simply as a form of consent to the existing silence on rape in the hegemonic public sphere in India. On the contrary, her opposition to the film signals significant paradoxes in the representation of violence against women and the dangers of reproducing a paradigm of victimhood through this representation. The film’s emphasis on rape shifts Phoolan Devi from a legendary figure within the Indian context—a woman dacoit, both heroic and notorious, who stole from the rich and distributed wealth to the poor—to the status of a rape victim. The film’s presentation of rape as an explanation for Phoolan Devi’s transformation into an outlaw transforms rape into the sole motivation for her subsequent actions. This presents a sharp contrast to the autobiography, which deals at length with a complex conception of social justice that motivated Phoolan Devi’s numerous raids on various villages. In her vision of justice, resistance was not merely a retaliation against her own personal experiences of violence but also against the exploitation of lower-caste villagers by upper-caste landlords. Consider, for instance, the following passage, which begins with Phoolan Devi describing her method of castrating men who were rumored to have raped lower-caste women.

I heard it often enough.

That's why, whenever I heard it, I crushed the serpent they used to torture women. I dismembered them. It was my vengeance, and the vengeance of all women.

In the villages of my region there was no justice other than the *lathi* (stick), where *mallahs* (boatmen caste) were the slaves of the *thakurs* (landowning caste), I dealt out justice. "Who stole from you? Who beat you? Who took your food? Who said you couldn't use the well? Who stole your cattle? Who raped your daughter or your sister or your wife?" The guilty one was brought before my court. He was forced to suffer what he had made others suffer. (370)

In contrast, in the film the only depiction of social justice that does not involve Phoolan Devi's own personal revenge against men who raped her is a scene in which Phoolan Devi gives a small girl a necklace for her dowry during a raid on a village. The film individualizes Phoolan Devi's conception of social justice by casting it within a singular personalized narrative of rape and revenge. Ironically, *Bandit Queen* in its attempt to call for social justice by revealing the brutal gender- and caste-based violence of rape does so by silencing Phoolan Devi's own vision of social justice.

My intention in juxtaposing the film and autobiography is not to argue that the autobiography presents us with an unmediated access to the truth of Phoolan Devi's life. Autobiography is a situated and negotiated text that is constructed through particular strategies of representation. Certainly, as recent research has demonstrated, the decentering of a universalistic Western male subject through autobiography does not serve as a self-evident or transparent means of decolonization but may produce contradictory effects. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue, "On the one hand, the very taking-up-of-the-autobiographical transports the colonial subject into the territory of the 'universal' subject and thus promises a culturally empowered subjectivity. Participation in, through representation of, privileged narratives can secure cultural recognition for the subject. On the other hand, entry into the territory of traditional autobiography implicates the speaker in a potentially recuperative performance, one that might reproduce and re/present the colonizer's figure in negation" (1992, xix). Such contradictions are particularly acute when the autobiography in question is characterized by the hierarchies of power inherent in trans/national relations of the translation, production, and consumption of Third World texts.

I, Phoolan Devi lies in an intermediary space between the genres of autobiography and testimonio. While the book is marketed as an autobiogra-

phy, it is in practice created through methods closer to the testimonial form. During the remainder of the article, I refer to the book as a testimonio in order to emphasize the contestatory nature of the representation contained within the autobiography. The book was based on taped oral narratives that were translated and transcribed by the book's editors. The book provides no detailed information on the methodological practices used. Readers do not know, for instance, how the editors selected events or made decisions on the order of the narrative, whether all of the tapes were transcribed, what the nature of Phoolan Devi's input was in the editorial process, or what the interaction between Phoolan Devi and the editors was during the interviews. Unlike *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, Phoolan Devi's testimonio does not contain a formal introduction by the transcribers/editors nor does the reader have any information on the background of these "witnesses" of Phoolan Devi's experiences.³⁵ The book merely notes that each page was read out to Phoolan Devi and signed by her. This designation of Phoolan Devi's consent, nevertheless, only emphasizes the constructed nature of the autobiography. This textual representation of Phoolan Devi's life history, positioned between the genres of testimonio, autobiography, and ethnographic interview, highlights the performative nature of all representations of the "real." Meanwhile, this liminality of form also demonstrates the contradictory processes of the commodification of Third World women's testimonials (Carr 1994), on the one hand, and the transgressive potential of testimonio, on the other (Beverly 1993). The classification of Phoolan Devi's testimonio attempts to contain the representation of her life experiences within the more conventional, individualized form of the autobiography. However, Phoolan Devi's presentation of her experiences in relation to wider structural forms of oppression and to the experiences of marginalization of lower-caste and lower-class men and women from her community disrupts this containment. John Beverly argues that "testimonio is an affirmation of the authority of a single speaking subject, even of personal awareness and growth, but it cannot affirm a self-identity that is separate from a group or class situation marked by marginalization, oppression and struggle. If it does this, it ceases to be testimonio and becomes in effect autobiography" (1993, 83). *I, Phoolan Devi* transgresses the autobiographical and in the process demonstrates that trans/national materially based structures of the production and consumption of texts do not predetermine the power effects of such textual forms. Thus, while the

³⁵ Contrast this to the careful strategies of representation in Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman*, particularly in relation to the ways in which Behar makes explicit her role as a (privileged) witness.

“autobiography” circulates in the same trans/national circuit of power as the film, the power effects of the representation are not identical.

Particular narratives in the testimonio *I, Phoolan Devi* disrupt binaries such as modern versus traditional or oppressor versus victim that the film reinforces. For example, scenes in the testimonio contextualize Phoolan Devi’s resistance in relation to her mother’s actions and in relation to Phoolan Devi’s own vision of social justice. This contextualization interrupts the process of commodification and consumption of Phoolan Devi’s life as an individualized resistance set against a singularly oppressive culture. Phoolan Devi’s words in the book, “I was born with my mother’s anger” (1996, 11), for instance, move the reader away from an individualized vision of Phoolan Devi’s rebellion and compel the reader to view the rebellion in relation to her mother’s struggles with and critical consciousness of the socioeconomic hierarchies in her everyday rural life. Such forms of rebellion provide a contrast to the film’s presentation of social oppression as a static feature of Indian culture.

Consider another contrast between the film and testimonio. The film begins its narration of Phoolan Devi’s story with her parents’ negotiations of her marriage at the age of eleven to a man three times her age. The negotiations and arrangement present a bleak picture of a hopelessly patriarchal family structure. Phoolan Devi’s father takes the role of negotiating the arrangements while her mother for the most part stands on the sidelines, watching sadly and silently. Phoolan Devi’s father protests weakly that she is too young to be taken by her future husband, Putti Lal, but her father gives in since he has already paid a bride price for her marriage. Phoolan Devi is then taken to her husband’s house where she is raped while her mother-in-law stands outside listening passively to her screams. The childhood rape scene is presented before the opening credits of the film and serves as the foundation for the events that unfold in the film’s chronology of Phoolan Devi’s adult life. As with the film, the testimonio also opens with a short description of the rape of eleven-year-old Phoolan Devi. However, the early chapters of the testimonio contextualize the events leading to the rape in ways that disrupt essentialized notions of a static Indian tradition. The testimonio clearly suggests that Putti Lal’s insistence on taking Phoolan Devi away at the age of eleven was a violation of customary practice and, therefore, of Indian tradition. Phoolan Devi states, for instance, that she was told at her wedding that she would leave with her husband in three or four years (65), and she indicates that her older sister did not leave for her husband’s village until the age of sixteen (73).

The representation of Phoolan Devi’s childhood years and family life presents a striking contrast to the film’s depiction of her parental family

structure. In contrast to the film's images of Phoolan Devi's silent mother, the testimonio weaves a narrative that presents her mother as a dominant force within the family while her father appears as a passive, weak-willed man who consents to his subjugated social status. Phoolan Devi describes an incident where she is beaten by the village *Pradhan* (village district head) because she asked him for a mango. Phoolan Devi's mother drags her to the *Pradhan's* house where she screams at him in rage, "You think we bring children into the world just to be your slaves? Instead of hitting her like that you should have just killed her! Go on kill her! Then she won't ask you for any more mangoes. Kill her if you want!" When he came home and heard what happened, my father was ashamed. He said it was our duty to serve them. That was the way the world was" (11). While the testimonio implicates Phoolan Devi's mother in the reproduction of gender hierarchy in certain ways (her mother laments the fact that she was born a girl and warns her of the danger of female sexuality and the threat of rape), this is complicated by her mother's resistance. At one point, for instance, Phoolan Devi describes her mother's rejection of God and religion: "She never prayed like my father. She preferred to wail about the misfortunes God had sent her. 'If he would even just give me enough food for all these girls. . . ?' Once she took a little statue of one of the gods from our house and threw it down the village well" (12). These anecdotes illustrate contradictory moments in the creation of her mother's social identity. On the one hand, Phoolan Devi's mother articulates a form of gendered ideology as she copes with the economic consequences of bearing female children in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, her rejection of God simultaneously reflects a form of critical consciousness as she rejects a religious order that reproduces her caste location and provides no relief from her class-based poverty. In the process, the reader moves away from an assumption that rural Indian society is characterized by a naturalized form of consent to tradition.

The testimonio disrupts particular hegemonic narratives not merely because of a claim to authenticity through the voice of Phoolan Devi but because of specific types of strategies of representation. It is not simply the empirical fact of the first person narrative that is at issue here but the way in which the "I" is presented. The effectiveness of such representation centers around the ways in which the translated narrative of Phoolan Devi's life presents her identity in terms of a complex, multilayered form, one that is emblematic of wider structural forms of social oppression.

Throughout the book, Phoolan Devi's narrative of oppression and resistance links social hierarchies within her village to the social relations between landlords and landless peasants. She identifies the origins of her own

and her family's problems as her uncle cheating her father out of his share of land because her uncle "wanted to be like the rich, like a *thakur*" (51). In her description of her early childhood, her initial rebellions are targeted at her uncle and later her uncle's son as she continually witnesses their ability to use money and upward mobility to cheat her family. It is at this point that Phoolan Devi begins to transgress gender boundaries by openly expressing her defiance against her uncle and cousin. In one such confrontation with her cousin, she notes, "Mayadin [her cousin] was learning how to use the power he had inherited from his thieving father. And all the cowering dogs in the village had obeyed him. But he had been red with fury, he was sweating in his fresh clothes and I had seen his eyes blink with disbelief that I had dared to attack him in the absence of my father. I began to calm down as I thought about his embarrassment. It must have infuriated him. He must have thought that I took myself for the head of our household!" (58). This depiction of the unfolding relationship between class, caste, and gender differs from the film's presentation of caste and gender hierarchy in important ways. By depicting her relatives' attempts to improve their social location through land and money and illustrating the ways in which the lure of upward mobility produces class and status hierarchies within Phoolan Devi's extended family, the testimonio counters the notion of caste as a monolithic, unchanging hierarchy.

Phoolan Devi's narrative is also distinctive in terms of her continual references to the complex articulation of the relationship between caste and class in the social relations of everyday life in her village. Her focus on the politics of class is significant not only because it adds another social category to her discussion of oppression but because the category of class disrupts any presumed naturalized boundary between the modern and the traditional. This narrative contests urban middle-class representations of rural India as traces of the premodern lingering within the modern consumer capitalist nation. Phoolan Devi's discussion of the links between land ownership and caste highlight the economic bases of power, contradicting the notion that caste is a form of social distinction intrinsic to Indian (Hindu) society. This complex articulation between class, caste, and gender resurfaces later in the testimonio in Phoolan Devi's description of her vision of social justice, which, she argues, guided the raids she carried out on villages once she had formed her own band of dacoits.

Phoolan Devi's testimonio constructs her identity and experience through a narrative of oppression, agency, and resistance that reveals the complex relationship between caste, class, and gender in contemporary Indian society. In contrast, Shohini Ghosh has presented an incisive analysis

of the ways in which Phoolan Devi's agency is foreclosed in the film. Ghosh notes that Phoolan Devi's empowerment is always dependent on male outlaws in the film so that "she is empowered only when she is 'allowed' empowerment by the men around her" (1996, 159). More significantly, pointing to a "recurring pattern in the film where oppositional speech is punished repeatedly by assaults on the body," Ghosh argues that "only speech remains her truly autonomous domain of agency and resistance."³⁶ In the film, Phoolan Devi's speech is defiant yet her actions are individualized and are dependent on a masculine world; the material and "discursive displacements" (Pathak and Rajan 1992, 268) that produce her intersectional identity, in effect, also locate her in a position of disidentification (Alarcón 1990) either from the elites or from the masculine counterhegemonic dacoits. In contrast, in the testimonio, Phoolan Devi is able to represent the interests of other marginalized members of her social world—her agency is thus contextualized within, and subversive of, material structures of oppression; her interwoven identity of caste, class, and gender in this context serves as a potential source for wider social transformation. The testimonio reflects the "critical practice of outlaw genres" that attempt to "shift the subject of autobiography from the individual to a more unstable collective entity" (Kaplan 1992, 134).

I, *Phoolan Devi* is more effective than *Bandit Queen* 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 a victimized "Third World woman." Such moments allow the testimonio to interrupt the trans/national power relations that shape the translation, marketing, and consumption of the book. A striking example of this type of disruption is evident in Phoolan Devi's response to the public's desire to see her and capture her through visual representations. After her surrender to the police and state government, she vividly describes the pressure from the press as journalists continually attempted to photograph her and her resistance. She says, "I would charge at them and tear their cameras away from them. I hated being photographed. Every time I heard the click of a camera, I turned into a tigress" (450). The most significant insight into the relationship between power and representation is perhaps captured in the short epilogue to the book, "I had seen all kinds of bandits. Assassins had tried to take my life, journalists had tried to get my story, movie directors had tried to capture me on

³⁶ For an interesting interrogation of the notion "to speak is to become a subject," see Pathak and Rajan 1992, 26.

film. They all thought they could speak about me as though I didn't exist, as though I still didn't have any right to respect. The bandits had tried to torture my body, but the others tried to torture my spirit" (464).

Conclusion

I have argued for a practice of reading that focuses on the power effects of various strategies of representation rather than on a binary approach that either invokes or rejects representations of "the real." My analysis suggests that, although both the film and testimonio are products of collaborative processes between First and Third Worlds, which must be located within material relations of production, distribution, and consumption of Third World texts, the power effects of textual representation are not predetermined by such material relations. On the contrary, a trans/national perspective necessitates a mode of interpretation that pays attention to the contingencies of context and audience.

I have argued that while the film *Bandit Queen* reproduces hegemonic Western constructs of Indian society, its depiction of rape subverts particular moral and social codes that govern the politics of sexuality in the Indian bourgeois public sphere. The depiction of the "reality" of Phoolan Devi's experiences invokes different modalities of power and resistance that are contingent on tactics of rhetoricity, form, and context. I suggest that a trans/national feminist perspective on the representation of the Third World woman does not need to rest on a binary opposition between an authentic speaking subaltern or an unrecoverable subject lost in webs of power and domination. I have presented readings of representations of Phoolan Devi's life experiences that both illustrate the trans/national material relationships of power that govern the circulation of texts and cultural meanings and also demonstrate that such material relations are not necessarily determinate in the last instance. Multinational productions of cultural texts are not intrinsically authentic or resistant because of their presumed hybridity. However, they are also not unitary in the meanings and power effects they produce. As the film *Bandit Queen* demonstrates, such multinational cultural products do not just represent commodities for First World consumption but also circulate and intervene in complex and contradictory ways within the Third World context in question.

A hypothetical situation in which both the film and autobiography had represented their translations of Phoolan Devi's life as a partial or fictionalized version may have moved us away from the commodification of authenticity but would not necessarily have shifted the threads of power and resistance in the representation and consumption of Phoolan Devi's story.

My reading of India's bandit queen suggests that in a consideration of binary oppositions between reality and fiction or truth and partiality, choosing one pole of the dichotomy will not in itself circumvent the problem of power and representation. A rejection of the real in favor of fictionalizing our accounts in film, ethnography, or biography will not, for instance, address questions of who is invoking the real, how it is invoked, and where it is invoked. Rather, as I have argued in this essay, a feminist analysis of the trans/national implications of the production, representation, and consumption of the Third World text necessitates a shift from the "fact" of the (un)translatability of the "subaltern Third World woman" (that is, the question of whether she can speak) to questions of how she is being made to speak and in what context her speech is being heard.

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