

Senanayake, C.
PAPER

Phoolan Devi and Kuveni – “Bandit Queen” and “Queen of the Yaksha” – “Queens” or Gendered Subalterns?

C.Senanayake, Department of English, University of Peradeniya

Phoolan Devi, as depicted in Mala Sen’s biographical *India’s Bandit Queen* and in Shekhar Kapur’s cinematic representation *The Bandit Queen*, as well as Kuveni, as depicted in SugathSamarakoon’s film *Vijaya Kuveni* and in Henry Jayasena’s theatrical production *Kuveni*, are ideal examples of the “gendered subaltern” figure that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses in her seminal article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. However, these female figures do not passively accept the oppression they are subjected to. They resort to alternative means of resistance that may go against accepted social norms. Phoolan Devi joins a gang of dacoits and commits various illegal acts. Kuveni challenges the patriarchal system that kept her in a subjugated position by allying herself with a group of foreign invaders headed by Prince Vijaya.

On the other hand, one can question this supposed resistance and challenging of patriarchy. Can the gendered subaltern ever “speak” anything but the language of patriarchy? Is there space for a truly “female” voice? Such questions finally bring us to the problem of “representation” and “re-presentation”, forcing us to ask *who* has the authority to represent *whom*? In this research, the focus is to look at these issues in relation to the figures of Phoolan Devi and Kuveni as represented in the abovementioned texts.

As Spivak states in the concluding lines of her essay, “The subaltern cannot speak”. This can be seen in relation to the figures of Phoolan Devi and Kuveni as represented by Mala Sen and Shekhar Kapur, and Henry Jayasena and SugathSamarakoon respectively. The reason behind this inability to “speak” lies in problems of representation. Even on occasions when the gendered subaltern “speaks”, it is tainted by the voice of patriarchy. Therefore, one must attempt to locate a space in which the gendered subaltern can speak her own voice, unencumbered by her male counterparts.