Re-Imaging Indian Womanhood: The Multiple Mythologies of Phoolan Devi

BY

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This dissertation examines the work of three artists, Rekha Rodwittiya, Chitra Ganesh and Sangeeta Sandrasegar, and their images of Phoolan Devi, India’s Bandit Queen. By contextualizing each object within the artists’ oeuvres as well as the time period in which they were made and through careful analysis of individual images, this dissertation reveals how Phoolan Devi becomes a new model of Indian womanhood in late twentieth-century India.

The works of art reveal Phoolan Devi as a new model of Indian womanhood through mythologization. Drawing on Roland Barthes and Eric Csapo’s interpretation of mythology, this dissertation reconsiders mythologization by examining how the meaning of the term has shifted in the context of late twentieth-century India, by becoming a brand symbol. The brand symbol projects a seamless image in which India can be simultaneously modern and traditional. The works examined in this project, by addressing power relationships and the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, reveal how each work disrupts the illusion of a stable brand for the nation, thus constructing a new, more complex model of Indian womanhood that challenges the fixed meaning of a brand symbol.

By placing Rekha Rodwittiya’s print, Untitled (Phoolan Devi), 2001, within the artist’s oeuvre, Chapter Two reveals how the print continues the themes explored in the artist’s body of work: violence against women, domesticity, a sisterhood of all women and woman-as-goddess. Yet, this particular work focuses on one specific woman, suggesting that this imaging of Phoolan Devi’s life comments on the tension between modernity and tradition. The print gives viewers a chance to see how late twentieth-
century Indian womanhood is a tense and precarious balance between tradition and modernity, not the easy melding witnessed in brand symbols.

Chapter Three analyzes Chitra Ganesh’s paintings, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life*, 1998, alongside the masking theories of Joan Riviere, Homi K. Bhabha and Frantz Fanon. By reading the series through these different lenses, I reveal how the images use masking to disrupt societal status quo and shifts power relations from the dominant group into the hands of the oppressed group. By wearing these different masks, Chitra Ganesh’s Phoolan Devi presents late-twentieth century Indian womanhood to be an unstable sign that can be read in multiple manners simultaneously.

Chapter Four considers Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s series, *Goddess of Flowers*, 2003. This multi-media installation, made of over thirty cut-out paper sculptures decorated with sequins and glitter, addresses the tension between opposites. The works, when installed project slightly from the wall, creating a shadow. But the viewer is not supposed to read only the shadow or the sculpture; she is also asked to read the space between the two. By taking into consideration the seemingly domestic craft materials as well as the violent and unstable subject of Phoolan Devi the works reveal the complex and shifting sign of Indian womanhood in late twentieth/early twenty-first-century India.

This project contributes to the discourse on late twentieth and early twenty-first century South Asian women artists as they are situated within the debate on modernity in postcolonial contexts. The tension created by the meeting of tradition and modernity allows for a critical reading of the representation of Indian womanhood, revealing it to be an unstable, constantly shifting sign that acts as an appropriate symbol for this time period.
Chapter One: Introduction

This project examines works created by artists Rekha Rodwittiya, Chitra Ganesh and Sangeeta Sandrasegar. Rodwittiya’s work, *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)*, 2001, is an inkjet print. Ganesh painted a series called *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life*, 1998, and Sandrasegar used paper, glitter and sequins to create *Goddess of Flowers*, 2003. Each image discussed in my project shows how Indian womanhood, when focused on a late twentieth-century figure such as Phoolan Devi (1963-2001), reveals the notion that during this period Indian womanhood has multiple identities and that these identities can be approached in different ways. Through the use of Phoolan Devi as a challenge to neoliberal India, these works unpack and challenge previous ideas on Indian womanhood, creating a new mythology for late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India that results in a questioning of concepts such as nation, tradition and womanhood.

**Woman as Nation: A Brief History**

Indian womanhood is a constructed notion that acts as a symbol of the nation. This constructed concept was first articulated by James Mill in his 1817 work, *The History of British India*. The consistent idea throughout this work was the superiority of the West in relation to South Asia. The author specifically noted that South Asian men treated their women very poorly. Mill believed that the treatment of women was an indicator as to how civilized a society was. He stated “Among rude people [women] are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted.”

nature of South Asian society. He was not alone, as his contemporaries in both Britain and South Asia believed this as well.\(^2\) The British were highly critical of South Asian practices such as *sati*, polygamy, female infanticide, *purdah* and child marriage. Due to the British criticism, Indians started to strive for a construction of a “‘new woman’” who represented the nation.\(^3\) As noted by Shobna Nijhawan, “Throughout the 19\(^{th}\) century and beyond, the colonial discourse on women featured as a central reference point in the writings of Indian social reformers and nationalists.”\(^4\) These notions began the debate on Indian womanhood and its link to nationhood. Once South Asians realized that the colonists would see them as a civilized and advanced society when their women were treated better, various South Asian reformers and nationalists began to define Indian womanhood by searching the past for evidence of the veneration of women.

Nijhawan’s article focuses on late nineteenth through early twentieth-century publications, which allowed South Asian women to voice their opinions on critiques concerning Indian womanhood. One of the contributors, Ramachandra (Nijhawan suspects this was a woman writing under the pen name of a man), noted that Indian civilization was one of the most refined and this could be proven by “looking at the venerated state Indian women enjoyed in those ancient days.”\(^5\) She then continued by comparing the status of ancient Indian women to that of contemporary western women. Ramachandra appropriated Orientalist scholarship and colonial discourse to make her

\(^2\) Shobna Nijhawan, “‘The Touchstone of a Nation’s Greatness is the Status of its Women’ – Reponses to Colonial Discourses on Indian Womanhood,” *South Asia Research*, 28:(73), 2008, 75.


\(^4\) Nijhawan, 76.

\(^5\) Ibid., 77.
Orientalist discourse noted that South Asia had had a past glorious, golden age in which the nation had been civilized. Making the assumption that if the nation was civilized the women of the nation were being treated well, Ramachandra appropriated Orientalist ideas to suit her own arguments and agenda concerning the civilized nature of India.

Nijhawan notes that women became even more engaged in early twentieth-century discussions concerning India and women. The scholar states that contributors began to focus the discourse on the idea that “women were responsible not only for their own fate, but also for the well-being of their family, the society and even the nation.”

Women were seen as the protectors of culture and tradition. Rejecting obvious comparisons to western women, writers “referred to pre-colonial indigenous traditions and emphasized women’s biological and spiritual power of motherhood.” The writers insisted that Indian women look to their own heritage and sex to gain an understanding of Indian womanhood.

Eventually the question of how women could serve the nation arose. Some writers pointed towards modeling women after various heroic and mythological female figures. The association of mortal, everyday women with goddesses had begun. The notion that

6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 79.
8 Ibid., 80.
9 Ibid., 80-81. Initially it was goddesses such as Sita and Savitri who were considered to be divine role models. The mythical figures would show women how to be the helpmate of her husband and his complementary half. Even though women were associated with the divine, the particular choice of divinity made them non-threatening to a traditional male hierarchy, yet allowed the patriarchy to seem as if it was giving women some agency. For more information see Suruchi Tapar, “Women as Activists; Women as
South Asian women were associated with goddesses further strengthened the idea that nationalist movements need to protect the spiritual realm. The West lay claim to science, technology and good governance, thus the spiritual was seen as distinctly Indian. “The woman was supposed to be the guardian of the ‘spiritual’ domain” further tying together the notion of woman and nation.\(^\text{10}\) However, nationalist leaders realized the spiritual domain needed to reflect contemporary notions of equality and liberalism. With this in mind, Indian womanhood took on another aspect: she was to be educated, because it assisted her in her familial duties.\(^\text{11}\)

Two other qualities of the new woman during the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century were motherhood and femininity. South Asian tradition has always deified the mother figure. As mothers, women would produce healthy children, care for them and love and educate them. The mother’s education would ensure that her offspring would become future enlightened citizens of the nation. Nationalist leaders capitalized on this by reinforcing to the British that because women were seen as deified mothers, South Asia did treat its women with respect and thus could be considered a civilized nation. Out of the deified mother arose the notion of \textit{Bharat Mata} (Mother India). \textit{Bharat Mata} has been depicted in various ways: she has been shown as chained and in need of rescuing from the British. She has been portrayed as the woman who suffers for her children, thus her nation. And she has upheld ideas such as nationalism.\(^\text{12}\)

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\(^{10}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 83.

\(^{12}\) For more information on the various depictions of \textit{Bharat Mata}, see Geeti Sen, “\textit{Bharat Mata: Woman or Goddess?}” \textit{Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema}. Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2002, 15-60, Sumathi
With the rise of Mahatma Gandhi, Indian womanhood took yet another turn. Beginning in the 1920s, Gandhi saw women as a valuable resource to the nationalist movement and believed they needed to participate through domestic tasks. Gandhi’s reasoning was that because the idea of the self-sacrificing and silent sufferer was so closely associated with women, this made them perfect candidates to participate in the swadeshi movement. Gandhi encouraged women to take action through domestic activities such as spinning.\textsuperscript{13} This allowed him to emphasize qualities that were also valuable in the domestic sphere. Rebecca M. Brown has stated “Spinning enabled the participation of those who cannot sacrifice their jobs and those who cannot radically alter their daily activities to participate in marches, picket non-swadeshi businesses or move away from their home to play a part in the movement.”\textsuperscript{14} This statement reveals how spinning was created as a form of participation for those who were rooted to one spot. This could most obviously refer to women who were homemakers and hence could not leave off their daily tasks. The way Gandhi encouraged women to participate in anti-colonial protest made it seem as if women were given more agency. In reality women were still a non-threatening force to patriarchy because they were being confined to domestic spaces and tasks.\textsuperscript{15}

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Ramaswamy, “Body Politic(s): Maps and Mother, Goddesses in Modern India,” Picturing the Nation: Iconographies of Modern India, Richard H. Davis, ed., New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007, 32-50, and Sumathi Ramaswamy, The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.\textsuperscript{13} See Rebecca M. Brown, “Gender and the Modern Charka,” Gandhi’s Spinning Wheel and the Making of India, New York: Routledge, 2010, 86-105.\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 94.\textsuperscript{15} In her chapter “Gender and the Modern Charka,” Brown also uncovers how men did not truly join in spinning until the box charka was invented because it was a new spinning wheel that allowed a distancing from the traditional charka which was mainly associated with women.
The history of Indian womanhood as outlined by Thapar and Nijawan reveals how women were used as symbols of a united India. This symbol was propagated through mass communications, such as cinema, literature and nationalist rhetoric. Women as *Bharat Matas* became deeply embedded into the Indian consciousness and remained so through much of the twentieth century. The late nineteenth and early twentieth-century images attempted to make women seem empowered. Yet, Thapar notes, “the nationalist leaders benefited the most from the manipulations of representations of women. The benefits to women of participation in the nationalist movement, by contrast, were always limited by their responsibilities for ‘women’s work’ in the home.” Women seem to have been empowered during these periods, but in reality they were still under patriarchal constrictions.

By the 1980s, another type of Indian womanhood was beginning to gain traction. Specifically, in cinema, Indian womanhood took on qualities of the fierce goddess. As noted by Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay, “the…Bombay cinema, and its wide popularity have a particular significance for cultural politics in India….The Bombay films consist virtually of a single genre which is especially conducive to the construction and reinforcement of an abiding myth, setting guidelines for social conduct.” Tremblay notes how a mass media form of communication, such as cinema, can act as a model for how one is supposed to be. Seeing repeated representations of womanhood in such a ubiquitous media had an enormous impact on how Indians understood Indian womanhood.

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16 Thapar., 88.
Tremblay begins her article with an overview of the values and ideals stressed in films of the 1960s and 1970s. One aspect of these films was that they try to incorporate the ambiguities and contradictions occurring in Indian society. The notion of the 1940s and 1950s in which there is a dichotomy of modern versus traditional was no longer present. The author attributes this complication of the social understanding to an attempt to grasp a “global, all-encompassing world-view” and “a pervasive concern for nation-building…and an emerging philosophy asserting economic and political autonomy from the western hegemonic societies.”

Tremblay reveals that economic and political pressures were affecting the state of Indian womanhood.

Tremblay explores these concerns by examining some female vigilante films from the 1980s. She sees them as an extension of the more complicated relationship between tradition and modernity. Trembaly analyzes films such as Sitapur ki Geeta, 1987, Mera Shikar, 1988, and Zakhmi Aurat, 1988. The overall premise for these films is that the heroine of the film, or her family, has been wronged in some way. The main female characters are left as the only options to avenge the wrongs. They become vigilante figures that invoke or are compared to fierce goddesses such as Durga and Kali. The women then confront and defeat the wrong-doers. The films always end in the female figures returning to the core principles of Indian womanhood at the time (“honour, justice and love”) and leaving behind any vestiges of the avenging goddess. Tremblay concludes her analysis by noting that even though these women are allowed to act independently, it is only temporary. The films’ endings valorize the traditional position of Indian womanhood as being in the domestic sphere.

18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.,
Some of these ideas on Indian womanhood change by the 1990s. In 1994 Shekhar Kapur directed a film called *Bandit Queen*. The film is a dramatized interpretation of Phoolan Devi’s life from her time as a child-bride, to her surrender to the police in 1983. This film was not typical of Bollywood films. The filmmaker chose to tackle a gritty and horrifying subject matter. To further reinforce the seriousness of the subject, the film lacks the traditional Bollywood song and dance numbers and fantasy sequences. The film was initially censored in India, but it was disseminated to a foreign, western, market and became a great success. The name Phoolan Devi became much more widely known in the west and western audiences took the film for a representation of Indian womanhood. The film, because it covers Devi’s story at its most gripping, gave the impression that Indian womanhood was about a female who would try to follow tradition, but would end up gaining some form of happiness and stability by moving outside the bounds of tradition. In the case of Devi, the film revealed a woman who rose to personal autonomy despite the hardships of caste and gender. This notion of Indian women striving for personal autonomy became one way in which Indian womanhood of the 1990s was understood. The woman in this film also claims her autonomy through the invocation of a fierce Hindu goddess. But unlike the women in the films analyzed by Tremblay, Devi does not achieve her revenge and then return to the domestic sphere. She continued to exist outside the boundaries of tradition after revenge had been satisfied.\(^{20}\) Because Phoolan Devi becomes known for breaking the boundaries of tradition and domesticity, I argue that she becomes a new model of Indian womanhood for the 1990s. Tremblay discusses

\(^{20}\) Tremblay noted in her article that returning the female vigilante figure to the domestic sphere is one way in which tradition is upheld. The other way in which tradition is being upheld is the control of the women’s sexualities. I argue in Chapter Three that Devi’s sexuality was metaphorically contained once she was taken into prison.
how changing political and economic forces begin to shape new world-views that allowed for the female vigilante figures to emerge in 1980s cinema. I further argue that because Devi’s story became globally known in late twentieth-century India, she is allowed to move completely outside tradition, yet still become symbolic of Indian womanhood. The entrance of foreign businesses and money into India reveals the rest of the world gaining more of an interest in the social aspects of India, while at the same time allowing neoliberal ideas to seep even more deeply into Indian culture. Devi, even though her extraordinary story began in the 1970s, as symbol for Indian womanhood could only have happened with the further re-examination of the dichotomy between tradition and modernity as seen in late twentieth-century India.

**Phoolan Devi**

Phoolan Devi was born on 10 August 1963, into the Mallah caste. Her family was poor and what little resources they possessed were stolen from them by another family member. Devi had four sisters and one brother. Her extraordinary life began at the age of eleven, when Devi’s parents married her to a thirty-year old man named Putti Lal. Devi was not intended to leave her father’s home until she reached puberty, but her husband demanded her presence in his home. Putti Lal was known to be a cruel man who treated Devi worse than a slave. In addition to beatings and household work, Putti Lal raped her. Eventually, Devi was thrown out of his house and she returned to her family. Her return to her family was a bitter one: her failed “marriage” was a disgrace. Devi remembers being fourteen or fifteen years old at this time.\(^{21}\)

\(^{21}\) For a more detailed account of this incident, see Mala Sen. *India’s Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi.* London: Harvill, 1991, 42-46, 52-55.
While this incident in itself was not uncommon in India during the 1960s and 1970s, the next major life-changing event in Devi’s life was very atypical of what happened to young, low-caste village girls. In early July of 1979, a gang of bandits kidnapped Phoolan Devi. At the age of fifteen she became the property of Babu Singh Gujar. He terrorized her through beatings and rape, until Vikram Singh Mallah, the second-in-command of the gang, killed Babu Singh Gujar and then claimed Devi for his own. He did not beat or rape her. Vikram Singh had killed his leader because he did not approve of the way he treated Phoolan Devi specifically and women, especially lower caste ones, in general. When Devi realized that Vikram Singh was not going to harm her, they formed a friendship and eventually became lovers. He encouraged Devi to be assertive and to stand up for herself. Additionally, he changed the mission of the gang to one of stealing from the rich and giving to the poor and to protecting the lower castes.

One of the first acts the reborn Devi committed was to visit Putti Lal. She beat him nearly to death and, according to some accounts, castrated him.\(^{22}\) It was at this point that she decided that she would take revenge for the poor and lower castes, especially women of this demographic, and she became an equal partner with Singh.

Devi’s life continued like this for about a year, until, Vikram Singh was murdered by gang members loyal to Babu Singh Gujar. Devi was again taken prisoner and gang raped. She eventually escaped and formed a gang of her own. She was driven by her desire to avenge Vikram Singh’s murder. In the process of doing so, Devi continued to steal from the rich and give to the poor and to take vengeance for the lower castes.

While Phoolan Devi was successful for many of the years in which she led her own gang, her life as a bandit was becoming more and more precarious. On 12 February 1983, Devi surrendered to the police. As part of the terms of surrender, she demanded that her family be relocated and protected and that her brother receive a government position once he was old enough to take one. Additionally, she demanded that she be allowed to surrender in front of an image of Durga and an image of Mahatma Gandhi. Devi wanted the on-looking villagers to see her as the warrior goddess and someone who was in the service of the poor and lower castes. Devi was imprisoned until 19 February 1994. In May of 1996, Devi was elected to the Indian Parliament as a representative for the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party. On 25 July 2001, she was gunned down in front of her home. Sher Singh Rana was arrested in connection to the crime. Because he is considered to be a Hindu activist, Devi’s murder was most likely a political act.

Phoolan Devi’s life story is gripping, dramatic and fascinating. Because of these qualities, Devi has become part of a group of mortal figures who have stepped into the role of mythologized person. In India, the mythologized mortal is more than a figure to be venerated; she becomes a metonymy of the Indian nation. By the time of Devi’s mythologization, the meaning of the word took on new connotations when understood within the context of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India.

Mythology

In twentieth-century India there has been a historical trend of mythologizing public figures such as Mahatma Gandhi, Indira Gandhi, Bhimrao Ambedkar and even Bollywood and television actors and actresses. Each figure’s life inspired tales to be told, regardless of whether of not they were true. The stories constructed around these figures
tend to show how they sacrificed themselves for the nation, whether that was fighting off
colonizers or trying to unite the nation, despite issues surrounding caste and religion.
Phoolan Devi is yet another figure that has been mythologized. However, when I use the
terms mythology or mythologization, I am not referring to a story. In the context of India
and the specific figures I have noted, mythologization suggests that these figures are
constructing a national identity that is relevant to their particular moments in history. The
reason these figures can do so is because they are extremely recognizable in India and
overseas.23 Mythologization, when linked to India’s political and cinema/television
figures, begins to move beyond a story and becomes about the construction of
nationhood.

Mythologization began as the notion of a story told to explain phenomena or
teach a lesson. Usually these stories were creation tales that explained the origin of a
nation or people. While Phoolan Devi’s biography could be understood as a creation
story that tells of the birth of the Bandit Queen, creation is not the end of her narrative.
The origin of the Bandit Queen is the beginning of a mode of mythologization that
changes within the context of late twentieth-century Indian politics and society.

Roland Barthes conceived of a nuanced and semiotic approach to mythology in
his book, *Mythologies*, 1957. Barthes is particularly interested in how everyday signs can
be read in images and text. These signs tend to be subconsciously understood by a
particular culture because of the myths tying them together. Barthes concludes that
“…*myth is a type of speech*….myth is a system of communications, that[...] is a

23 In my experience, people who know next to nothing about India can cite at least one
fact concerning Indira Gandhi or Mahatma Gandhi. These types of figures are well-
known the world-over. I argue that Phoolan Devi is one of these figures.
message….It is a mode of signification, a form.” He notes that mythologies communicate various aspects of cultures. In the case of India and my project, womanhood communicates Indian nationhood. Furthermore, Barthes notes that myth can “consist of modes of writing or of representations…” The communication can be textual or visual.

Barthes’ work acts as a valuable starting point from which I understand the meaning of myth. Mythology shapes a culture’s understanding. What do certain stories represented in images mean to particular people in a particular society at a particular moment? How do these ideas communicate the larger messages being sent by the particular images on which I am writing? While my project could be read through Barthes’ theory, I want to push beyond his work and show how mythologization is contextualized within present-day India.

Eric Csapo, in his book, *Theories of Mythologies*, begins with Barthes’ understanding of mythology and takes it a step further, couching mythology in terms of ideology. He notes: “The new broader concept of myth embraces the characteristic expression of our own contemporary mass culture.” He attributes this to the “critical convergence of structuralism, Marxism, and liberation-oriented cultural studies…[which has generated] coalescence of the concept of myth with the concept of ideology.” Csapo notes that by the mid-to-late twentieth century mythology becomes entwined with ideologies and these ideologies are communicated through mass media such as

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25 Ibid., 110.
27 Ibid., 277.
newspapers, television, films, and advertisements. All of these media reach large audiences, acting as ways in which to understand national concerns. I have already discussed how cinematic constructions create an understanding of Indian womanhood. Television and comic books also act in this capacity. With satellite television, global film distribution and easy availability of Indian comics overseas, it is not only Indians in India who are affected by these messages. Any Indian overseas and any other person in the world who encounters these media are also exposed to the ideal of Indian womanhood and how it represents Indian nationhood. Because these media travel so easily across borders, they tend to create an understanding of Indian womanhood and its ties to nationalism that moves beyond India.

Additionally, Csapo agrees with Barthes’ idea that myth is a way to communicate what a society believes and that this communication can occur through writing or visual representation. But this form of communication, because of the way mythological messages are layered upon society, can make it seem as if that particular myth is a reality that is representative of the norm. The ideas are coming from so many different sources simultaneously, that it becomes standard, or expected, hence believed to be true. Thus, mythology creates an idea that becomes widely accepted as normal. This type of mythologization has already been discussed in relation to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century constructions of Indian womanhood. In the instance of India,

mythology and ideology come to together neatly in Bharat Mata who seems to be both a
goddess and a mortal woman. She embodies the concept of mythology as understood
within religion. Yet, she also represents an ideal of womanhood and the nation. Bharat
Mata figures were exactly what were needed during the late nineteenth century as Indians
began to aggressively question British rule. As discussed previously, that woman changes
as the needs of the nation transform. Phoolan Devi becomes a new symbol that represents
the nation, exemplifying how storytelling and politics come together to from new ideas of
mythology theory. Kapur’s film and the global distribution of the film, as well as the
many global newspapers covering Phoolan Devi’s story allowed for the Bandit Queen to
become the Indian woman at the front and center of Indian womanhood during the 1990s.
Reading Indian politics and ideology through Devi demonstrates that late twentieth-
century Indian womanhood is made up of a connection between the past and present as
Indian women take on more varied roles.

I would like to take Csapo’s theory even a step further. All the works examined
for my project were created post-1991. The works were conceived in a more globalized
environment, regardless of whether or not the artist was working in India or elsewhere.
India became even more globalized because of liberalization a change which came about
due to economic policies that were enacted in the nation. One of the largest changes
during this period was the introduction and re-introduction of foreign businesses into
India. Corporations such as Coca-Cola and McDonalds became part of both the economic
and cultural landscapes of India. Ideas on what constituted India had to be re-considered
within these influences. I argue that because it was the drastically changing economic landscape that re-defined Indian nationhood (and that includes its divides and bridgings), something like Indian womanhood, which has defined nationhood in the past, can be understood as a brand symbol. As I have stated previously, the meaning and function of mythology and mythologization change as a nation or a people change. In post-1991 India the largest change was through economic policies, thus mythology and mythologization need to be considered within the context of the economy. In the case of forming an identity in such a changed and charged economic background, images that were understood as mythological, then ideological can now be understood as a brand symbol of nationhood. Economic changes become the most influential factors on Indian culture. This was most clearly seen through the influx of foreign businesses and a more globalized market. The one way these businesses form identities is through the use of brand symbols. Anyone in India can recognize the golden arches of McDonald’s and the American ideal for which it stands. The branded symbol becomes the new mythology of late twentieth-century India because it allows the viewer to connect ideologies and national identities to each distinct emblem. Furthermore, branding can be understood as

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29 As noted earlier, Indians seems to constantly be turning to tradition or modernity as a national identity. In the 1990s, especially post-liberalization, the turn to tradition has been led by fundamentalist religious political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party who not only called for a return to tradition, but also made the claim that tradition is specifically Hindu. They adhered to the Orientalist ideas that Indians need to return to their golden age of religion in order to claim a unique identity. This approach to national identity lies in direct opposition to neo-liberalism, something that many countries, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, have embraced. This includes India. Those who advocate neo-liberalism do it in varying degrees. Some supporters want to see Indian business in control of Indian economics. But this camp has no problem with the Indian economy gaining that control through foreign investments. The more radical idea of neo-liberalism is seen in those who want to see a completely free-market capitalist economy in which it does not matter who controls the Indian economy, so long as that economy is stable and able to keep up with the global market.
mythologization in late twentieth-century India because branding and mythology have some very similar characteristics.

Brand is tied into the economics of a company\textsuperscript{30} (or in this case, country). It is a symbol used to build an image of a country, political party, business, or anything else that is trying to establish a visual identity. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu fundamentalist political party, has used an image of Ram, the hero of the \textit{Ramayan}, and a lotus blossom as symbols for their ideals. Specifically, they have promoted the image of a highly muscular (hence hyper-masculine) image of the hero, drawing a bow (Fig 1.1). The image embodies strength, tradition and a Hindu India. This image of Ram has been so widely used by the BJP that it has also become associated with the BJP like a brand symbol. The BJP has used this particular image of Ram to brand their political and religious ideologies because he represents a supposed past golden age of India and a powerful, masculinized and Hindu nation.

Mythologization, in this instance, becomes similar to branding. The BJP has taken a figure from Hindu mythology and used it as a symbol to articulate their values and ideals. With the entrance of more foreign companies and investors, branding has become ubiquitous in India. It is not necessarily new, but branding has taken on a new meaning when considered in the context of images of muscular Ram or even of Phoolan Devi.

Branding has some similar qualities to mythologization, especially when considered in the context of late twentieth-century India: “…a powerful political point about brands is their ability to cross borders, and to potentially bind peoples and cultures together….”31 Mythologization does the same thing. Initially, it was used to bring together people of one religion, or one nation. As mythologization slipped into the realm of ideology and semiotics, it began bringing people across borders together. In the case of the muscular Ram, this image is not only a recognized brand symbol for the BJP in India; it is also recognized anywhere in the world in which there are populations of Indians. In

31 Ibid., 4.
the context of my project, this border crossing of imagery is also seen in artists working in India and the diaspora. The three artists’ works examined in this project all focus on Phoolan Devi. Each artist has picked the Bandit Queen as a symbol through which they consider Indian womanhood in post-1991 India. Phoolan Devi takes on mythic stature for these artists, in that the Bandit Queen acts as a symbol of what India has become, but also because Devi allows the artists to question ideas about the nation. Each artist’s approach to the Bandit Queen is different, revealing how varied Indian identity becomes by the start of the twenty-first century. When contextualized within the history of representations of Indian womanhood, the artists’ choices do not seem far-fetched. Phoolan Devi, as a figure who straddles the line between tradition and modernity embodies the contradiction trying to be reconciled in India and Indian womanhood during the late twentieth century. At the same time, Devi is a figure who represents the part of the nation that was excluded from the benefits of neoliberalism. Devi is a figure who is not easily read and this is a reflection of the notions of nationhood during this period.

Additionally, mythology shares another trait with branding: “any successful brand…must continue to understand and anticipate changes in its audiences in order to remain successful.”32 This is also true in the case of myth, which shifts in relation to politics, culture and sometimes even technology. During the late nineteenth century, Indian womanhood, hence nationhood, focused on the past glory of India, because Indians were using Orientalist ideals to prove the nation was not savage. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Indian womanhood becomes embodied in Bharat Mata, because the nation is trying to rally people to come to the rescue of the enslaved

32 Ibid., 5.
nation and continuing with the notion of a glorious past. Once India gained its
Independence, womanhood turns to the dichotomy of tradition versus modernity, because
Indians had to figure out what it meant to be an independent nation. By the 1970s and
1980s, Indian womanhood had become a complex amalgamation of modernity and
tradition, with tradition usually coming out on top. Again, this was a reflection of some of
the struggles the nation encountered as it allowed some foreign corporations to enter into
India and electing its first female Prime Minister. The brand symbol has shifted as the
nation’s objectives have changed, just like any corporate symbol that changes to
incorporate new ideas behind their names.

In his book, *Shoveling Smoke*, anthropologist William Mazzarella examines
advertising in 1980s and 1990s India. He comes to the conclusion that advertising, which
is a way to spread a brand name, for Indian companies became, in part, about how to
project the nation. Mazzarella “theorizes the practice of advertising as a kind of public
cultural production, centered on a distinctive form of commodity production, the
production of commodity images.”33 This projection depended on who was the target
audience. For example, part of the anthropologist’s fieldwork involved observing the
machinations of Indian corporations and interviewing various players in these businesses.
What Mazzarella discovered was that in the 1980s and 1990s, Indian advertising and
marketing businesses were at the forefront of touting the gains obtained through
neoliberalism. Because they were the most visible in this realm, these businesses were
frequently entangled in issues beyond marketing and consumerism. These businesses

were so ubiquitous in India that they became the spokespersons for Indian culture.\textsuperscript{34} Frequently this culture was being defined as something both traditional and modern. The advertisers needed to appeal to those that saw globalization as an attack on \textit{swadeshi} (self-reliance) and those that viewed globalization as the mark of a confident, modern nation. Mazzarella notes that by the mid 1990s this form of Indianness “resulted in the promulgation of many of the same essentialized versions of Indianness that the proponents of the new \textit{swadeshi} supported…presenting [globalization and \textit{swadeshi}] as eminently compatible and even mutually reinforcing.”\textsuperscript{35} The advertising produced in India by the mid 1990s revealed an India that was both traditional and modern and, according to Mazzarella, that tradition and modernity were both needed in order to fully understand Indian identity during this decade. Mazzarella concludes: “For all that we realize the complexity and contingency at the heart of the production of advertising, we should not forget that the process is also highly ideological. This is because it cannot function without constantly intervening in a wider public cultural field.”\textsuperscript{36} Just as Csapo has concluded that mythology becomes about ideology in the late twentieth century, Mazzarella concludes that advertising, hence branding, is also tied to ideological notions.

In her book, \textit{Global Icons: Apertures to the Popular}, Bishnupriya Ghosh makes some similar arguments. But instead of focusing on advertising, which is most obviously related to commodification, she discusses general popular images of three women associated with late twentieth-century India: Mother Teresa, Arundhati Roy and Phoolan Devi. Ghosh is focused on how images of these women (in film, photography and other

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 12-13.  
\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 14.  
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 28.
everyday images that are not directly linked to advertising) become global icons. The author defines global icons as “embodying universal aspiration and circulating in industrial and social transnational networks.” These figures become global symbols because they embody ideas that appear to be relevant to anyone in the world. The figures’ meanings cut across borders, religions, economies and races.

Even though the images on which Ghosh focuses are from the realm of popular visual culture, they act as a critique of not only Indian womanhood, but also perform as a critique of the patriarchal hierarchies of developing nations. My project moves out of the realm of the popular and mass culture and into the area of fine arts. The three artists examined all start with Phoolan Devi as a critique of Indian womanhood. In some ways the artists do show her to be a new type of womanhood for late twentieth and early twenty-first-century India. But even more importantly, they interpret and present Devi in ways that allow for a critique of both Indian womanhood and the nation. Because the artists use Devi as a critique, not as a figure to build a solid national identity, Devi now becomes a challenge to the stable brand symbol of neoliberal India. A brand represents a very closed message that can only have one interpretation. But Devi, as she becomes the most famous Indian woman of the 1990s, does not stand for only one idea. Because Devi moves between tradition and modernity and her meaning changes depending on each artist’s interpretation of her image, Devi’s story and image do not function like a brand. The interpretations of her life and her image are too varied for that. Instead, Devi becomes a type of symbol that, in the case of Rodwittiya, Ganesh and Sandrasegar’s works, critiques the position of women in neoliberalized India.

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In his book, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey defines neoliberalism as

…a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.\(^{38}\)

Harvey is describing a society in which those with the means and ability to rise to the top, can do so without any intervention on the part of the state. This definition also implies that those that continue to be wealthy can become as wealthy as possible, because an unbalanced concentration of wealth does not have a negative impact on society. The concept of neoliberalism assumes that if there is a free market and trade, everyone in society will benefit from it. But Harvey, as he presents this definition, also questions it.

Harvey proposes the idea of accumulation by dispossession as another result of neoliberalism. Accumulation by dispossession can be understood as the negative effects of neoliberalism. Harvey points to the taking of land from peasant populations through commodification and privatization, changing property rights into exclusive private property rights, exploitation of natural resources and abuse of financial transactions. He concludes that because the state has access to the violence necessary to control society, it becomes the enforcer of these conditions.\(^{39}\) Neoliberalism redistributes wealth in a very uneven way. Those that are negatively impacted are the lower classes and, because they usually earn less than men, women. Harvey points out that it is those who had no power before neoliberalism that continue to be at the mercy of those who hold power.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 159.
Neoliberalism does not even the playing field for everyone. According to Harvey it makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

While advertising and mass consumer images tend to support neoliberalism, the works created by Rodwittiya, Ganesh and Sandrasegar act as further critiques to neoliberalism. All three of the artists challenge neoliberalism by focusing on a figure, Phoolan Devi, who is part of the oppressed population that tries to rise against the injustice of neoliberalism. By creating works of art that begin with Devi’s story, the artists show how India has not turned into the land of financial equality through neoliberalization. Instead, because the works seem to question rather than support neoliberalism, Phoolan Devi, in the context of the works examined in this project becomes not a brand symbol, but a challenge to the brand symbol. Devi’s story and how the works explore Indian womanhood uncovers the especial dispossession and uneven distribution of wealth in India during this particular period. Brand symbols attempt to create a cohesive message which usually promotes individualism as interpreted through neoliberalism. However, Devi’s story and the following images of her do the opposite. Instead, the images reveal a truth that mass media disguises; the negative impact of neoliberalism. The works of art discussed in this project transform Phoolan Devi into a symbol that questions this simplistic notion of India.

Why Phoolan Devi?

Ghosh sums up this question in the following remark: “Phoolan Devi is not the exception but a paradigm of highly visible public figures whose symbolically dense images and lives circulate at high speeds in transnational (televisual, cinematic, print,
oral, and digital) media networks.”  

Ghosh focuses her research on the period from 1989-2008, which overlaps with the period of my project. Ghosh is also discussing the use of images of particular Indian women to show how they have been appropriated by popular imagination and what these figures evoke once placed in the realm of popular visual culture.

Ghosh chose Devi as one of her case studies in the global transformation of an iconic figure through popular iterations because the Bandit Queen’s image has been seen in print, television and film, and she has been spoken about in many different countries. The story of her surrender was not only covered by Indian newspapers. It, like her assassination, was also covered by European, North American and Australian newspapers and broadcasts. Devi’s image has crossed borders and seems to hold meaning for many different people from different backgrounds. Phoolan Devi or the Bandit Queen are not household names, but Devi definitely grabbed the attention of the world and she has become much more than a localized phenomena. Devi becomes, as stated by Ghosh, a global icon:

> Icons, I argue, are one genre of signs that enables us to reconsider the efficacy of these great media flows in forging social bonds….Arguably, it is their circulation – precisely their historical materiality as intermedial signs we have encountered before – that positions mass-mediated icons as fecund “raw semiotic material”…for contesting global modernity in public cultures all over the world.\(^{42}\)

Ghosh argues that because images of Phoolan Devi have been encountered before, their new iterations in popular visual culture allow them to leave a deeper impact on the viewer. In the instance of Ghosh’s study, the impact is seen in how the image allows the

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\(^{40}\) Ghosh., 4.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid.,13.  
\(^{42}\) Ibid., 10.
viewer to re-think or even challenge ideas on global modernity. The viewer may begin to ask questions such as “what is tradition and modernity, is there such a thing as global modernity, how does this figure embody a sense of modernity and/or the global” and “is this figure representative of global modernity.” Ghosh reveals how images of women such as Phoolan Devi, because their images are so widely disseminated in the popular realm, “are annexed as signifiers for collectives” and “legitimate historically and culturally particular aspirations as widely shared universal ones.” Images of figures like Phoolan Devi, according to Ghosh, begin to stand for more than an individual. These figures, because the images are repeated through popular visual culture, become figures that represent, in this case, all Indians or, more specifically, all Indian women. Ghosh’s research shows that Devi becomes one of the new images in late twentieth-century India that allows for a re-examination of Indian womanhood. And it is not only in India that Devi’s image has had this impact. Ghosh crosses borders as the figures she studies cross borders. She analyzes how these figures engage people living outside of India as well. Devi becomes a wide-reaching symbol used to address larger notions of gender oppression.

I chose representations of Phoolan Devi for my study for much the same reasons. But instead of examining Devi’s image through the lens of the popular, I focus on images of Phoolan Devi in fine art. As Ghosh argues that global icons can serve as a catalyst for change, I argue that images of Devi in fine art (painting, print and mixed media installation) allow for a critique of Indian womanhood, hence a new understanding of the concept. Because the images I study are found within fine arts, and not popular culture,

43 Ibid., 12.
44 Ibid, 14.
reveal a personal approach to Devi. For Ghosh, global icons such as Devi are supposed to incite change and even revolution and are fashioned for mass audiences. But images of Devi in the fine arts do not have the same affect. Fine art images do not circulate as widely nor as freely as popular visual culture imagery. Moreover, fine arts are not created for mass consumption. Artwork acts first and foremost as a form of personal communication. Instead of creating images of Devi, the artists have created works inspired by Devi. In each of the different works, the artists, through media and subject, unpack their personal politics regarding the Bandit Queen. Rodwittiya’s take on Devi situates her within the context of Indian womanhood, while also acting as a critique and personal memorial to a slain hero. Ganesh’s series is about the various interpretations of Phoolan Devi as they tie into her own personal identity as a queer, South-Asian American. And Sandrasegar’s installation considers Phoolan Devi and Indian womanhood as dichotomies that reveal the unstable nature of Indian nationhood. The dichotomies in Goddess of Flowers also serve as a commentary on immigrant populations and the artist’s own identity as a Malayan-Australian.

Furthermore, even though fine arts images do not circulate as widely as popular visual culture images, there is a link between fine art and branding. In his article, “The Artist and the Brand,” Jonathan E. Schroeder considers how fine arts can be seen as part of branding. He discusses Andy Warhol, Barbara Krueger and Cindy Sherman.

At the beginning of his article, Schroeder notes that brands create meaning: “cultural codes contribute to, and constrain, how brand works to produce meaning.” Mythologies according to Barthes and Csapo also use cultural codes to create meaning.

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This similarity in how the three concepts work further shows how mythology could become ideology and then finally branding. Schroeder examines branding in the context of fine art and concludes “branding acts as a powerful representational system that produces knowledge through discursive practice, in addition to its traditional role as marketing strategy.”\(^{46}\) Brand, in its most basic understanding, is about market strategy. But when the scholar applies brand to art, he notes that it creates visual knowledge through logical conclusions. The conclusions are drawn because the artist’s work is contextualized within the period in which the work was made. According to Schroeder, “…artists create visual brands via their work….”\(^{47}\) Artists, like marketing strategists, are constructing knowledge concerning a particular image. Unlike marketing strategists, artists not only create visual brands via their works; they also use their brands to confront consumer culture. Andy Warhol’s work reveals how heavily commoditized the United States became in the 1960s. Images such as Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe question the price of commodification of identity. He questions the notion that film stars lead rich lives in which they have everything easy. Marilyn Monroe’s images were slick: she was sexy, and beautiful and stylish. Warhol’s take on the film star is one of the loss of her humanity. Warhol’s images of Monroe, which were those that people remember her for the most, through multiplicity show how she became a commodified product and was no longer an individual human being. Marilyn Monroe’s death in 1962, which could have been an accidental drug overdose or suicide, enforces the tragedy of the loss of her self through mass media. By choosing this tragic figure as a subject, Warhol brings questions of branding and consumerism to the forefront. In the case of my project, the artists, are

\(^{46}\) Schroeder, 1293.

\(^{47}\) Schroeder, 1300.
doing some of the same things. I reveal how the works of art discussed in this project represent a challenge to the singular meaning found in brand images. These artists are not possibly interrogating ideas of India and Indian womanhood; the images created show this critique clearly.

Part of the works’ assessment lie in the meaning of words such as modernity and tradition. In his book, *Imperial Encounters*, Peter van de Veer argues that religion must be considered when constructing a modern nation, whether that be in supposedly religious India or allegedly secular Britain. He notes that modernity is constructed in Britain in relation to its interactions with other nations, especially India. The scholar dismantles notions of Britain as modern while India is traditional by examining how the two peoples interacted. He concludes that these differences were a result of the “power relations of empire” meaning that whomever held power was the one to define what was modern and what was traditional. In the case of the Britain-India relationship, it was Britain that held the power to make these generalizations. Part of the reason for this labeling of India as religious, read traditional, and Britain as modern was because the British nation was defining itself against others seen as different. Van der Veer, in his chapter “Secularity and Religion,” discusses how voluntary religious groups in both England and India shaped the public discourse which also shaped politics and ideas on the meaning of nation. The separation of church and state did not lead to an exclusively secular society. Instead as religion was separated from state it found a new place in the public sphere in England. The idea that only India was a traditional nation that allowed religion to interfere in politics and other secular spheres was one created by the British in

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order to define themselves as modern. In my project, the words modern and tradition are very much used as constructed ideas. The simple notion that modern is western or traditional is Indian becomes a leftover construct from colonialism and the power relations between the periphery and metropole.49

With preconceived notions of the lives of Indian women embedded into the imagination of the west, Devi’s story becomes symbolic of modernization: a developing country which is known for treating its women like second-class citizens does not have to remain so. Instead, if a woman perseveres and fights hard enough, the status quo concerning the condition of women can be changed. Devi becomes an example of any low-caste woman trying to fight gender and caste discrimination and oppression. This idea is very appealing to the western imagination, as it shows India was trying to follow the teleological path of first world nations such as the United States or England. Even though Devi’s story is inspiring and could be indicative of a shift in attitude concerning gender and caste, her story is also one of horror and struggle in which third world women are lumped together and it is assumed all Indian women (and more broadly, third world women) suffer the same kind of trials. In her essay, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Chandra Talpade Mohanty has noted that western scholarship (including western feminist scholarship) has a tendency to group all third world women into the same category. “This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being third world (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic,

49 Ibid., 14-29.
Mohanty makes the argument that western scholarship assumes that all third world women are victims being crushed by a universal patriarchy. The scholar notes that every woman’s situation is colored by the culture in which she lives and her personal experiences. Women in the third world do not have a singular experience. Phoolan Devi, before she became a bandit seems to fulfill this stereotype that Mohanty challenges: she is poor, uneducated, sexually, physically and emotionally victimized, and seems to follow tradition (her arranged marriage). But once Devi becomes a bandit, some of these assumptions are shattered. Devi never learned how to read or write. But she was able to claim agency by stepping outside the role of a lower caste woman. She fought back against upper caste men, she became the leader of her own bandit gang and even took on a masculine name to reinforce that she was not a helpless victim. The change from the monolithic assumption of a third world woman into an individual woman who claims agency through rebelling against traditional gender and caste roles seems to be an exception.

Devi is quite different from the other ideals of Indian womanhood because she moves beyond the domestic sphere and into the public. Furthermore she does not stick to actions and qualities that would be considered feminine. Instead she ended up leading a bandit gang (the first woman to ever do so) and then goes on after her release from prison to become a politician. Devi is tamed when she is imprisoned, just like the cinematic female vigilante figures are tamed through marriage or obedience to a father or brother. However, I argue that because there was so much interest surrounding Devi, her

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reputation as a fierce bandit who protected those in need never faded. Up until her death she was still referred to as the Bandit Queen. The part of her life that set her apart from other women continued to be a marker of her identity. The fact that her transgressions of gender and caste boundaries continued to be part of her identity reveals that she was never fully contained in a way that would have been similar to the female vigilante figures of the 1980s. Unlike those heroines, Devi was always associated with violence, vengeance, and bringing justice to those who needed it. She continued to be an active agent in the public sphere. Because Devi moved beyond previous understandings of Indian womanhood in such public ways, she looms large in the public imagination. With her transgression of boundaries, new mythologies concerning Indian womanhood have emerged.

Contextualizing these images within the intellectual debates surrounding Indian womanhood beginning in the late nineteenth century, the image of Devi in the fine arts becomes yet another intellectual outlet in which messages concerning womanhood and nation can be examined and communicated. The messages of womanhood and nation are newly complicated because of each artist’s cultural background, her gender and finally her ties to the Indian nation. Additionally, the period in which these images were made, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, adds new complexities concerning the construction of Indian womanhood and nationhood as read within each artist’s works. I argue that the fine arts images of Devi reveal how these three artists, from their different perspectives, understand Indian womanhood, hence nationhood. Not all the artist’s works are as insistent concerning the construction of nationhood, but because of the long tradition of Indian womanhood standing in for Indian nationhood, nationhood must be
considered as part of the messages crafted by the works I study for my project. Additionally, all the works examined reveal a critique of Indian womanhood. The images raise questions concerning tradition and modernity, gender and the constructed nature of Indian womanhood, revealing Phoolan Devi to be symbol that challenges previous notions of nationhood.

Three Artists

Each of the chapters is focused on the work(s) of one artist. The chapters all answer the question of why Phoolan Devi. The most glib answer to this question is that Phoolan Devi’s story was so sensational and globally distributed through news reports and her autobiography as well as biographies, that her image and name become embedded in the minds of many as a definition of India during the 1990s. On Devi’s assassination, she, and her life story, again took center stage for the world as it was trying to puzzle out what was India of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The easy answer is not the complete answer. Each chapter demonstrates how the artist’s response to Phoolan Devi is grounded in each woman’s cultural and artistic backgrounds as well as each artist’s bodies of work. Because the artists have different cultural and artistic backgrounds and oeuvres that approach the idea of womanhood from different perspectives, the works I discuss reveal how Indian womanhood, as interpreted through this one Indian woman, cuts across boundaries but still maintains a connection. If Phoolan Devi embodies a challenge to neoliberal India, she reveals the tensions as well as inconsistencies of the nation during that period.

Chapter Two, “Biography, Oeuvre and Sisterhood: Rekha Rodwittiya’s Phoolan Devi,” examines Rodwittiya’s inkjet print, Untitled (Phoolan Devi), 2001. The work was
created shortly after Devi’s death. The chapter examines this work within the context of the artist’s oeuvre as well as the late twentieth century. One of the underlying concerns of Rodwittiya’s work has been the depiction of women and tradition versus modernization. "Untitled (Phoolan Devi), continues to explore these ideas. The artist created a work that seems to be both representative of the tensions of tradition and modernization while at the same time acting as a memorial piece to a fallen hero.

Chapter Three, “Multiple Maskings: Phoolan Devi’s Other Life” unpacks Chitra Ganesh’s series of paintings that were inspired by Phoolan Devi. The works were created in 1998, shortly after Devi was released from prison and entered into politics. This chapter examines the different ideas of femininity that could be interpreted through Phoolan Devi’s life. None of the paintings in this series is a literal depiction of any one event of Devi’s life. But each panel challenges notions of femininity in general and Indian femininity specifically. I interpret the works through the idea of masking and the way it allows for a shift in gender and power relations.

The final chapter of my project, “The Space Between the Two: Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s Goddess of Flowers” considers Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s series Goddess of Flowers, 2003. This work is a series of paper cut-outs adorned with folk art materials. When displayed each cut-out is slightly projected from the wall so that shadows created by the works become part of the installation. The series begins with the idea that Phoolan Devi can be understood as various incarnations of the mahadevi (great goddess) and that these traits can all be present within one figure. But the shadows of the works seem to hint at a more ephemeral nature to how Indian womanhood is understood.
Chapter Two:
Biography, Oeuvre and Sisterhood: Rekha Rodwittiya’s Phoolan Devi

Rekha Rodwittiya (b. 1958) is a woman artist living in Baroda, Gujarat, India. She has unabashedly called herself a feminist.1 Since the beginning of her career as an artist, she has been interested in depictions of women and how they either suffer at the hands of patriarchy or how they are able to move outside of it. Her works from the late 1970s and many of them from the 1980s show women who are abused or oppressed. By the 1990s, the artist was creating paintings of monumental women. These women were usually engaged in domestic tasks, had very large hips and were large in scale, giving them a sense of the heroic. These images elevated women and their work to a higher status. Rodwittiya turned from negative instances of womanhood to more positive images which emphasized fertility, domestic production and a sense of the creative. Because the artist typically only shows one woman per canvas, the women resemble iconic goddesses witnessed in images of worship. Yet, they can be considered as mortal women, because of the various tasks in which they are engaged. Rodwittiya’s body of work is about the everyday lives of women and how they navigate the world around them.

Untitled (Phoolan Devi), 2001, (Fig 2.1) is an inkjet print that was printed in an edition of twenty-five. I am using number three of twenty-five for this analysis. In the center of the print is an image of Phoolan Devi at her 1983 surrender. The Bandit Queen is wearing running shoes, pants, a man’s shirt, a shawl and a headband, and she casually holds

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her rifle. The expression on her face is stoic. Rodwittiya altered the image by tinting the original image sepia and placing an image of a heart on Devi’s chest. The heart contains a representation of Jhansi ki Rani, the warrior queen who led a revolt against the British in 1857. The top and bottom edges of the print are colored red. The red bleeds into orange,

Figure 2.1: Rekha Rodwittiya, *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)*, 2001
which bleeds into the golden yellow color of the print’s background. The background of
the print is dappled with thirty-five falling flower petals. In each petal, there are different
objects, sometimes, no object. The symbols in the petals show items that could be
associated with traditional Indian culture, while others reveal images that reflect a
nation that has moved into a more globalized world. The items, because they are in the
petals and are separated from one another, do not seem to come into tension. Instead, the
petals, combined with the appropriated image of Devi, act as a rich, and more complex,
tapestry from which to understand the unstable sign of late twentieth-century Indian
womanhood.

This print is a continuation of the themes explored in Rodwittiya’s oeuvre:
violece against women, domesticity, a sisterhood of all women and woman as goddess.
Instead of being a general statement on women and their everyday lives, Untitled
(Phoolan Devi), 2001, concentrates on a specific woman. I read specific moments of
Devi’s life being connected with the objects imaged in the petals, which leads to a
commentary about the relationship between tradition and modernity.

Some of the symbols in the petals have been used in Rodwittiya’s previous works.
Most prominent of these is the cowry shell. In Untitled (Phoolan Devi), the cowry shell
appears in two different petals: one is located in the petal above Devi’s left shoulder and
the other is placed in a petal by Devi’s right knee. The cowry shell, in many different
cultures, has been associated with fertility and the feminine because it is similar in shape

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2 When I use the term traditional, I am referring to the Hindutva understating of it. The
Hindutva understanding of tradition is a constructed notion, referring to a Hindu nation
that is focused on religion and rejects western influences. For more information regarding
the history of Hindutva, see Sharma, Jyotirmaya. Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu
to a vagina. As stated by anthropologist, Henry C. Koerper, “Cross-culturally employed as amulet/charm, money, gaming/gambling counter, divination piece…and for other purposes…the cowry shell has also stood as a life force symbol, owing to a perfunctory resemblance between the shell’s orifice and the human vulva.” He is referring to many different ancient cultures as well as a more broad examination of the shape of the shell.

In Koerper’s research, he discusses Southern Californian ancient cultures. What he discovered during his fieldwork was that some domestic implements, bowls and mortars, used mainly by women, were adorned with cowry shells. Koerper interpreted this to reinforce the notion of the cowry being associated with the feminine. Rodwittiya has also assumed this meaning by using the cowry shell to signify the feminine.

In her works, Sharing Secrets, 1996 (Fig 2.2), Untitled (Snakes), 1997 (Fig 2.3), and Mappings: Body Imprints, 1997 (Fig 2.4), the artist employs the cowry shell. In Sharing Secrets, Rodwittiya has painted an image of a seated woman. The woman has a cowry shell in her lap, holds one up to her right ear and has five more scattered around her feet. The shell placed directly in the center of the woman’s lap implies a connection between the woman’s sex organs and the cowry. The woman looks as if she is listening

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to the cowry shell held up to her ear. The title of the work, *Sharing Secrets*, seems to be about women sharing secrets among one another. In this painting, the woman is listening to the cowry shell, which in turn is symbolic of female genitalia. Genitalia are one of the ways women are essentially different than men, thus making it appear the woman is learning some kind of womanly secrets that only other females would know. The woman listening to the cowry shell creates an image that implies a bond of sisterhood between all women.

In *Untitled (Snakes)*, the canvas has been painted red. There are two snakes intertwining throughout the canvas, with handprints at the top of the canvas, a woman
holding a knife and pomegranate below that, a pair of footprints below the woman and, at the bottom of the image, cowry shells. Both the cowry shells and the pomegranate share a similar shape: one that resembles a vulva. This particular work of Rodwittiya’s makes a statement on fertility and fecundity, two ideas associated with cowry shells. The two snakes framing the images and intertwining with one another are symbolic of the phallus. Putting together the vulvic and phallic shapes, one gets a sense of reproduction. This meaning is further emphasized by the fact that the woman in the image is in the center of the canvas, where the bodies of the two snakes form a complete circle, thus reinforcing notions of women, fertility and creativity. Furthermore, because she is placed within a

Figure 2.3: Rekha Rodwittiya, *Untitled*, 1997
circle, the notion of the continuous circle of life, which begins with birth, something only a woman can give, can also be considered.

And finally, the cowry shell appears in *Mappings*. The shell in this painting is not as explicit as the previous two. In the third row of objects from the top of the canvas, the artist has depicted an image of a cowry shell. But the shell also has an oar across it. The image could be read as a boat or cowry shell. Because the cowry shell is considered to be symbolic of the feminine, I argue that Rodwittiya uses the object to convey that her works have meaning for women in general. The artist is not interested in trying to discuss

![Figure 2.4: Rekha Rodwittiya, *Mappings: Body Imprints*, 1997](image-url)
the meaning of one type of woman’s life, but is inclusive of different women’s lives. Additionally, if one were to interpret the form as a boat, the word vessel comes to mind. Vessels carry objects and items. In this instance, with the association of the feminine, the cowry/boat could refer to the woman’s body as a vessel for new life.

In *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* the two cowry shells appear to take on these connotations of the feminine that are seen in Rodwittiya’s previous works. The shells can, on a general level, be referring to Devi’s sex. In this image she is dressed not as a woman, but as a male bandit. Additionally at this point in Devi’s life she was leading her own bandit group and embraced a male persona while doing so. The cowry shells act as a reminder that Devi is indeed biologically female. But to be biologically female is not a weakness, as Devi was led to believe. In this instance, cowry shells remind the viewer that women, just like men, can hold power as it is symbolized in Devi’s rifle and calm demeanor.

The cowry shells can also act as a stand-in for all Indian women. Though Phoolan Devi’s life was extraordinary, other Indian women have had to deal with some of Devi’s trials. Women in India are constantly sexually harassed and the threat of rape is ever present. Rodwittiya, in her larger body of works, has always incorporated herself within her works. She has done this to reinforce that she, like all Indian women, experience some of the same things because of their shared sex. The artist has pointed out the negative aspects of the female experience in her oeuvre. But she has also created images which reflect a positive female experience. Both the positive and negative are ones that all Indian women could experience, thus linking them in a kind of sisterhood, as seen in *Sharing Secrets*. 
Additionally, the cowry takes on another meaning in this print. As noted with *Mappings*, the cowry shell could be read as a shell or a boat/vessel. In that painting, the vessel most likely refers to the life women create by giving birth. Their feminine bodies are vessels for the continuation of the human race. But if one reads the vessel in another way, one could see that Devi’s body is not a vessel for children (she never had any children most likely due to the brutal trauma inflicted upon her body throughout her life), but a vessel for a new type of Indian woman. The clothing Devi wears, the gun she holds and the situation to which this specific image refers all show a woman who is an independent leader who has made her own way in life, disregarding caste and gender norms. Devi’s image, by being appropriated in this print, gives birth to an alternative role model for Indian women. This woman is not the dutiful wife as seen in Sita or Parvati, nor is she even the feminine rage embodied in Devi, Kali or Draupadi. Instead, she is someone who chooses to move outside of gender and caste norms in ways that have not been seen in any other Indian female figure. The emphasis on the feminine, through the inclusion of cowry shells, reveals a new type of Indian woman. Placing this understanding within the artist’s overall oeuvre, one can then interpret Devi as a symbol for women in general. The cowry shell in the artist’s previous works seems to point to a sisterhood among all women. If this idea is applied to *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* one can see how Devi becomes the new type of woman brought into the sisterhood.

Another symbol that has appeared in the artist’s previous paintings and appears once again in the Phoolan Devi print are handprints. The handprints are seen in *Untitled (Snakes)*, *Mappings* and Rodwittiya’s *Scissor, Gun, Knife Cunt*, 1995 (Fig 2.5). In these paintings, the handprints are indexical of the artist’s presence, revealing her to be part of
the general conception of woman. The artist has stated: “I am concerned with viewing situations and circumstances that are about the ‘location’ of woman. I see myself as belonging to an ancestry of womanhood, so within that I would interweave my presence within the territory I examine.”

In *Mappings*, it appears the artist has literally dipped her forearms and hands in paint and pressed them onto the canvas to create the image. The artist is putting herself in the canvas. *Mappings* also seems to have impressions of the artist’s face. It appears that she painted half her face and then pressed it to the canvas to create the first row of images. At the bottom of the canvas, it seems the artist did the same for her feet. The fact that the artist has also included her face and footprints further reveal that she is putting herself in

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5 Milford-Lutzker, 11.
the canvas. The subtitle of the painting, *Body Imprints*, reinforces that the artist has used her own body to map out the canvas.

In doing so, the artist is aligning herself with the everyday Indian woman revealing that she deals with the same issues as any Indian woman. Again, the artist gives the impression that she is making a general statement on Indian women, or womanhood, and includes herself in that vision. The symbols re-appearing in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* reveal how Rodwittiya also places Devi into the general notion of Indian woman. To the artist, all Indian women are connected on some basic level. In the instance of *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* and the previous noted paintings, women are connected by their sex and the way they have to navigate their lives because of it.

*Scissor, Gun, Knife, Cunt*, 1995, is a watercolor that shows a woman on the left-hand side of the work. She looks like she is pregnant and clutches her belly. But from between the woman’s legs, there appears to be a stream of blood flowing, hinting at either a miscarriage or an abortion. To the right of the woman is a pair of scissors, a gun, knife and rope. The three objects, scissors, gun and knife, point at the woman and beneath each item is a set of red handprints. Again, these particular handprints look like they may be the artist’s, thus asserting her presence in the work. Because the handprints are red, it seems as if Rodwittiya has put her blood on the canvas in the form of handprints. This further creates a connection among all Indian women: the idea of shared blood.

The image speaks of a difficult loss for many women, if the woman is indeed suffering from a miscarriage, or if she has just gone through an abortion. But both of these events happen daily in the lives of women. Miscarriages and abortions become yet
more difficult things that women endure. The artist, by placing her presence in the canvas, is claiming an understanding of this type of pain that is most acutely felt by women. By placing her presence within that implied pain, she becomes part of the network of connected women, just as in *Sharing Secrets*.

The handprints in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* hold the same meaning as in the artist’s other works. Again, the handprints could be read as indexical of the presence of the artist. But in this instance, since the handprints appear to be generic and not the artist’s, they can be read as indexical of women’s general presences. While the handprints in Rodwittiya’s oeuvre stand for women in general, or a connection between all women, there are historical instances of women’s hands representing occurrences specific to women that elevate their status. Rodwittiya, by using the handprints in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* may be referencing these historical images in order to raise Devi’s status to that of a goddess.

In Maharashtra, various memorials have been found that act as reminders of *sati*.\(^6\) The monuments are made of stone and date from the 17\(^{th}\)-19\(^{th}\) centuries. A. R. Kulkarni in his article, “*Sati in the Maratha Country: An Historical Perspective,*” describes three types of memorials.\(^7\) The one that is most relevant to my work are the *sati sthambhas*, or *sati* stones. Kulkarni describes these memorials as

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\(^6\) The term *sati* has been used in a couple different ways. It is most commonly understood in the west to mean the act of a widow burning on her husband’s funeral pyre. The other way the word is used is as a title for a woman who has been burned on her husband’s funeral pyre. I use term in the second way. See John Stratton Hawley, *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse: The Burning of Wives in India*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, 3-5.

a stone on which an arm is represented with the upper arm held horizontally and the forearm vertically, with the hand fully open and the palm facing outward. Bangles, the ornaments of a married woman, are shown on the wrist, and often some figures are shown sitting or standing above the upper arm.\textsuperscript{8}

These stones (Figs 2.6 and 2.7) usually depict the right hand. The author does not note this. But from the images to which I have access, this is a reoccurring motif.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{sati_stone_pillar.png}
\caption{Sati Stone and Pillar. From a Hillock outside Rivan Sange, Goa}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 178.
The arms are usually shown coming out of a column. These stones were erected in places where a sati burned to death. The monuments are prayed to and sometimes pilgrimages are made to the location. The sati, upon her death, is usually assumed to take on the powers of a goddess. She has the ability to both bless and curse those that attend the burning. And after her death, she is prayed to as if she were a goddess.

These memorials, on the surface, seem antithetical to Rodwittiya’s latest works which show women in a positive light. And in the case of Untitled (Phoolan Devi), the artist also seems to elevate the status of one particular woman because she is symbolic of the breaking of traditions associated with patriarchy. Both Rodwittiya’s print and these

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sati memorials elevate the women represented into goddesses. In the case of the memorials, the woman is being honored because of her sense of duty, loyalty and sacrifice to her husband. Some of these same ideals are also seen in Phoolan Devi, whom the artist elevates. But Devi’s sense of duty, loyalty and sacrifice are not in the name of tradition. Instead, Devi’s sense of duty, while she was a bandit, focused on assisting women and lower castes. She would ensure they received justice, which was not how typical village hierarchies operated. The Bandit Queen’s sense of loyalty is not to a husband, as is expected of Indian women. Instead she is loyal to her principles. Devi was known for protecting women and the lower castes, even if she had to result to extreme measures such as mass killings. And finally Devi’s sense of sacrifice is seen when she surrenders to the police. Her surrender occurred because her life as a bandit was starting to become more and more uncertain; she was running from police even more frequently than in the past months and she was also losing members of her gang to police fire. Devi knew that her entire gang would be arrested and jailed once they surrendered. But it was her surrender that mattered most, symbolically, to the state, because she was a woman who was disregarding cultural norms and upsetting social hierarchies.\(^{10}\) Symbolically, her surrender became a sacrifice for her gang, and became a sacrifice to the people she protected. In a proper Indian woman, sacrifice is usually associated with giving to one’s husband, even if that means the death of the woman. Devi was not committing her sacrifice for this reason. Instead, she sacrifices herself for her and her gang’s own reasons. A sati is considered to be extremely unselfish, because to throw herself on her

husband’s funeral pyre shows her full commitment to her spouse. Devi’s surrender, when contextualized within how her life as a bandit was unfolding, also appears unselfish because she partly surrendered to make sure her gang members were not all killed by the police.

Another image in Rodwittiya’s print that can be understood within the context of sati memorials is the image of the single hand, which is a left one. The hand is located in a petal in the upper right-hand corner of the print. In this image, the hands seems to be demonstrating an abhayamudra, or the gesture that is supposed to assure worshippers that they need not fear death. This is a gesture associated with both Hindu deities and images of the Buddha (Fig 2.8).

Figure 2.8: Seated Buddha, 2nd Century
The gesture is typically made with the right hand. This same gesture may be what the hands on the sati memorials are making. As noted by Paul B. Courtright in reference to the sati stones, “The gesture in which the hand is raised suggests something more, for it resembles the fear-dispelling gesture (abhayamudra) often displayed in icons of deities as a testimony to their power to dispel the terrors of separation and death.”11 This scholar also sees the single upraised hand, with palm turned out towards the viewer as a gesture made by deities. By comparing the gesture on the sati stone to that made by deities, Courtright is implying the divine nature of the sati, but he also stresses that the sati memorials always show the arms with bangles, as they are symbolic of a married woman. Once a woman is widowed she is supposed to break her bangles as a symbol of her new status. By having the bangles depicted on the sati stones, the author notes that she is never considered to be widowed, because even in death she is still united with her husband.12

Rodwittiya’s image of a hand only shows the hand to the wrist, without any bangles. This omission shows that the artist is not trying to honor a sati. Instead, Rodwittiya’s image is one of an unmarried woman. She still gives a blessing. But the woman is able to do so without giving up her life for a husband. According to the image, women need not be married to be considered sacred. Phoolan Devi, while she was a bandit leader, was unmarried and women and the lower castes referred to her as Durga, a goddess. Phoolan Devi was elevated to the level of a goddess without having to commit a form of suicide, but that is only because Devi was referred to as a consort-less goddess. By including the hand making a divine gesture and then removing any marker of this

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11 Courtright, 35.
12 Ibid.
being a married woman, Rodwittiya has made a case for the honoring of a woman who does not sacrifice herself for patriarchy. Instead, Rodwittiya displays an unmarried woman who deserves to be venerated as much as a married woman. The artist is showing a new ideal of the feminine by associating this particular image of Devi with the un-bangled hand.

Another common factor seen within Rodwittiya’s works is the use of the color red. Rodwittiya has stated: “[Red] has always evoked and signified sacrifice, passion, “desire and protest for me.”

Red is seen within many of the artist’s works of the 1990s, and is used again in Untitled (Phoolan Devi). The color in Untitled (Phoolan Devi) embodies the artist’s ideals when thinking of it in terms of Devi’s life. Devi is a figure around which passion, sacrifice and protest can be read. As a woman who broke gender and caste barriers, Devi embodies all of those qualities. Of Untitled (Phoolan Devi) the artist has stated, “The complete image is bracketed by a "blood stained " edging on the top and bottom of the visual.”

The bloodstained color is red. It is not surprising that the artist reverted to poetic language to describe the color. As noted in the previous quote by the artist, red signifies passion, sacrifice and protest for her. All of these are qualities found in the Bandit Queen. Devi literally bled to protest various forms of unfairness, whether that was being beaten by wealthy family members who stole from her family, or even enduring beatings once she was kidnapped and gang-raped. They showed what Devi was willing to suffer to make her point concerning justice. Additionally, Devi’s passion, which was the root of her protests, could also be associated with blood. Finally, sacrifice

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14 Personal correspondence with Rekha Rodwittiya, 4 April 2006.
can be read in Devi and blood because of the beatings she took to prove her strength and to ensure that other women would not be treated as she was before she became a successful bandit leader. Devi, even if she would not have articulated it in these terms, was willing to shed blood to earn the lower castes and women respect within society. Because Rodwittiya uses this color in her earlier works, one begins to see that the artist associates these ideals with a wider web of Indian women.

While not all women in India chose the same radical path which Devi chose, many have revealed passion, protest and sacrifice through their participation in political protest and movements. In *Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema* Geeti Sen discusses the case of Medha Patkar. Patkar led the opposition to the building of the Sardar Sarovar Dam. The project began in 1979, but Patkar did not get involved until 1987. While the dam project would have helped to irrigate dry areas, it also was going to displace many locals who lived alongside the river. Patkar protested by going on a hunger strike by the Narmada River. Once she became involved, other women became more involved and in greater numbers. The women realized that once all the male protesters had been arrested it was up to them to continue the protest. Patkar described the women’s tactics as such: “If a policeman picked up a lathi, women would turn their bare backs and say *maro maro* [Hit me, hit me]. Another tore the badges from a policeman’s shirt….this is a full and free expression of anger. From the women’s point of view displacement is important because it would give rise to problems connected with fuel and fodder.”¹⁵ This quote demonstrates these women’s passion and determination to save their own lands. These women knew that if they were

displaced, it would impact their domestic tasks and disrupt the household. The women were willing to shed blood and faced beatings and arrest to maintain the status quo. These women’s actions, while in the service of domesticity, show how women in general, just like Devi, are willing to sacrifice themselves for important causes. While these women do not state it directly, they are protesting the dam in order to maintain the status quo of the villages along the river, which was built upon traditions created by a patriarchal society. These women were funneling their passion and sacrifice into a cause which, when examined at its core, was one that made them display this behavior for tradition. But these women are not the only women to have done so.

In her book, *Make Me a Man! Masculinity, Hinduism and Nationalism in India*, Sikata Banerjee discusses what it means to be feminist or feminine in the context of nationalism. The scholar examines the political participation of women in Hindutva. She comes to the conclusion that these women who espouse to be following tradition tend to have multiple interpretations of what it means to be a traditional woman.\(^\text{16}\) Banerjee begins by noting that these women see themselves as constructing female empowerment through the Hindu models of heroic mother, chaste wife, and citizen warrior. These women also accept that their views on female identity embrace violence. But the violence that is acceptable is in the service of nation and religion.

Rodwittiya’s print, with the appropriation of this specific image of Devi, moves beyond the Hindutva understanding of the empowered woman. In the borrowed image, Devi is not a heroic mother, chaste wife, or even a citizen warrior subverting her individuality for nation. Instead, she reflects an ideal of womanhood that started gaining

ground in the late 19th century. This particular image of woman was that of woman as goddess. *Shakti*, the female power inherent within Hindu goddesses, is used in order to define new roles in society for women. *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* reveals this new woman, who is a product of modernity and tradition. Modernity is witnessed in the iconic way in which Devi, a woman who broke caste and gender norms, is being shown as a goddess. Instead of fitting into roles considered to be traditional (heroic mother, chaste wife, citizen warrior) Rodwittiya creates the new Indian woman of the 1990s. Devi is still anchored in tradition because she stands for the power of *shakti*. But she used that power to upset the social order of the nation, by fighting back against upper-caste people and taking on the masculine role of bandit leader. Additionally her role as bandit leader led her to commit violence on behalf of individual women and lower-caste people who had been wronged. As seen in her autobiography and biographies, Devi never once considered nation building as she committed her acts of banditry. Rodwittiya’s appropriated Devi image further reinforces that the Bandit Queen was focused on committing acts of violence in service of the individual.

The particular photograph of Devi in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* was used as the cover illustration of both her 1996 autobiography and Marie-Thérèse Cuny and Paul Rambali’s biography (Figs 2.9 and 2.10).
Figure 2.9: Cover Illustration of *I Phoolan Devi*, 1997

Figure 2.10: Cover of *The Bandit Queen of India: An Indian Woman’s Amazing Journey from Peasant to International Legend*, 2003
This image was taken during Devi’s surrender. During the surrender the individuals Devi had protected (women and lower-caste people) were the ones that came to witness her capitulation, creating a sense of Devi as a heroic icon. But this heroic icon is not the citizen warrior who committed banditry or surrendered for the good of the nation. Instead, Devi used violence as a tool to subvert patriarchal and caste order. Her use of violence to question the status quo reveals the Bandit Queen as resistant to the accepted conditions of late twentieth-century India. As discussed in the “Chapter One,” neoliberalism had the effect of expanding the wealth gap by making the rich richer and the poor poorer. I would also argue that the unequal distribution of wealth leads to an unequal distribution of power. Those with financial resources control society, thus disempowering the poorer segments of the population. Devi’s attacks on patriarchal and caste order reveal her to be someone who disrupts the unbalanced power relationships inherent in neoliberal cultures. I argue that one of the reasons Devi was able to do this was because she was associated with shakti.

Devi is not the first mortal woman to be associated with a goddess. Historically, mortal women who have become symbolic of India have been understood as goddesses. As Geeti Sen has noted:

> On an ideological level, the Indian woman is believed to be “Devi, As one revealing in herself Woman the Divine.” By social mores she is to be tamed and domesticated within the private domain of the home. To the contrary, in the modern context she is empowered to move into public spheres, invested with supreme authority….. She resumes the role to represent adyashakti, primal energy activating all of life.\(^\text{17}\)

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The notion of mortal woman as goddess has been accepted in the past. But believers of woman as goddess assumed that women would use their powers to keep domestic harmony. Instead, as seen in Rodwittiya’s œuvre, and in Devi’s life, women have taken the power invested in them as goddesses to act outside the domestic sphere.

Some of the women who have been elevated to the level of goddess include Indira Gandhi18 and Madha Patkar. It was their courage and convictions that gave these women the status of the divine. The label of goddess seems to be a way in which to understand and accept these women’s extraordinary strength and will being used outside the domestic sphere. Both Gandhi and Patkar were seen as using their power and influence for the greater good of the nation. Figures like Devi do not follow this track. Instead, the Bandit Queen, in her use of shaktism, upset the social order by empowering women and the lower castes. The symbols Rodwittiya has placed around this particular image of Devi reveal the contradictions of Indian womanhood in liberalized India and it is these contradictions that further reveal Devi as challenging the status quo of Indian culture. Devi, and especially Rodwittiya’s image of the Bandit Queen, show a woman who is respected for going against the social order. The individual is accepted for actions that would not necessarily benefit the nation. Instead, liberalization has allowed the voice of the individual who breaks from tradition to challenge the idea of nation, hence womanhood.

In Rodwittiya’s print, Devi is shown in a similar light. From the very beginning of her autobiography, Devi questioned why upper caste people have the right to mistreat

18 When Indira Gandhi had returned to power in the 1980s, many Indians saw her as a Bharat Mata, or Mother India. See Geeti Sen, Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting, Photography and Cinema, Ahmedabad: Mapin Publishing, 2002, 155-156.
people of lower castes. She also questioned why females must act in certain ways and why women’s life courses are planned in such a way to leave women subservient to men. Devi’s convictions that upper caste and patriarchal bullying are wrong are partially what gave her the courage to defy societal norms.\textsuperscript{19} In addition to caste norms, Phoolan Devi attempted to shed normative gender roles: she was the leader of an all male gang, she holds a rifle and appears to hold power. Additionally, once Phoolan Devi became the leader of her second gang, she demanded that they see her as a man, not a woman. She went so far as to have herself referred to as Phool Singh, a male version of her name.\textsuperscript{20} Because these qualities are witnessed in both Devi’s autobiography and in the particular image Rodwittiya has chosen to appropriate, Devi moves beyond an ordinary Indian woman and into the realm of goddess, as it is only through the metonymy of a goddess that such changes in Indian womanhood could be located. By anchoring the wild female in the image of the goddess, it appears she is still tied to tradition.

In her article, “Representation and Reflection of Self and Society in the Bombay Cinema,” Reeta Chowdhari Tremblay examines the figure of the female vigilante in Bollywood films of the 1980s. She notes that even though these heroines step outside the bounds of femininity, the figures are justified in doing so because of a wrong committed against the woman or her family. The films appear to be about an individual’s actions. Placing the films into the context of 1980s India, it becomes clear that these figures only are allowed to act as they do because their actions “emphasize the primacy of collectivity and the enforcement of personal values such as honour, justice and love within the

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 386-391.
context of societal norms.....the end result is almost always the reassertion of equilibrium in favor of society.” Tremblay contends that even though female heroes are acting outside the bounds of Indian womanhood, it is to protect and maintain society. They are allowed to do so because the women represent the fierce and chaste qualities seen in the traditional icons of Mother India, Durga and Kali. At the end of these films, the heroine is always tamed by being re-incorporated into society. All of this is able to come about because, as Tremblay notes, in the 1970s, Indians became disillusioned with government institutions, more specifically the police and court system. Both are seen as corrupt and ineffective. As a result, the female hero must take justice into her own hands to correct social, political and economic injustices. While the individual’s actions are justified, they must always be reconciled with society. Tremblay uses the films Sitapur ki Geeta, Mera Shikar, Sherani, Zakhmi Aurat and Pratiighat to illustrate her points. All of these films focus on female vigilante figures, who from the beginning of the narrative are strong-willed and reveal honesty, loyalty to the family and community, and conscientiousness. These women act outside the bounds of gender norms, but this is balanced by “their adherence to the traditional archetype of ideal femininity;” the goddess. These women are seen as both protectors and destroyers, two roles which are not contradictory because they are contextualized within vengeful goddesses.

Some of these qualities and ideas are seen in Phoolan Devi. Devi, as noted in both her autobiography and biographies, questioned, from a very early age, the abuse of the lower castes and women. She exhibits the quality of being strong-willed and

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
conscientious. She becomes a bandit to help the lower castes and women, giving them money and food, but also took vengeance for them when they were wronged. She spread hope and fear, which can be associated with protector and destroyer.

Devi is not loyal in the same way the heroines of the above noted films are. Throughout her autobiography and biographies, Devi exhibits loyalty to lower caste people and women, but not towards other parts of Indian society: particularly upper-caste men and government institutions. The films discussed by Tremblay were made in the 1980s. She noted that the vigilante figure became popular because of the perceived corruption of government. At the ends of these films, the vigilantes (whether male or female) are brought back into the status quo order of society. Devi’s tale does not end in this way. She finally chose to surrender because she had had enough of being a hunted outlaw. She felt her life as a bandit was becoming too precarious. Devi did not stop her banditry because she was trying to restore social order. Instead, hers was a personal decision, based on her needs.  

This differs greatly from the heroines of the 1980s films. I contend that this difference arises because Devi’s story became known internationally after her autobiography and biographies were published in 1996. By 1996, India had experienced liberalization. The enacting of liberalization brought with it foreign businesses, but it also reinforced some foreign ideas - namely an interest in the welfare of the individual, regardless of how it affects the community or nation. Devi is still situated to be as much of a heroine as any of the women in the films. However, the outcome of

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24 Devi, 447-463. To some extent, Devi’s terms of surrender reflect her concern over her family’s fate. She wanted to make sure her brother would not be banned from government jobs and she wanted to ensure there would be no retaliation against her family. But the majority of her surrender terms focused on how many years she was to spend in prison, how and when the surrender would take place.
her vigilante behavior is not being brought back into the fold through marriage or family reunion. Instead, Devi has to be controlled by the police and jailed. Again, by questioning societal norms, Devi acts reveals the contradictory and unstable nature of late-twentieth century India. Tremblay would also see this as a mark of bringing Devi’s sexuality under control. The author continues in her article noting that the women in the films take on the aspects of Durga and Kali, two Hindu goddesses who are without consorts. In the films, the women are not without men of some kind (father, brother, husband, husband-to-be), but they put aside their relationships with their consorts until vengeance is taken. Tremblay implies that women who are divorced from some male presence are aggressive and their single-minded devotion to revenge also reveals the power of chastity in these consort-less goddesses. In the end, all the women are “reunited with their male consorts” which reintegrates them into society. Because it is a male figure who brings these women back into the fold, the action also appears to reveal the control of female sexuality.25

Phoolan Devi is brought under control by a male figure, Rajandra Chaturvedi, who orchestrated her surrender. Once she is in prison, the male guidance is gone. She is in a women’s prison, in which the warden is a woman. Devi does marry, but her marriage seems to be one of convenience that helps to increase her fame and notoriety. And once she leaves prison, she becomes a politician, not dutiful wife and mother.

Even though the artist has picked a woman who seems to radically deviate from tradition to question ideas of Indian womanhood, there are other aspects of the print that reveal an interest in tradition. The media in which Rekha Rodwittiya has chosen to render this image of Devi is an indication of older, market practices. Throughout much of Indian

25 Tremblay.
history, the place to purchase items in India was the bazaar. It was considered (and is still considered) to be a general marketplace for the sale of anything. Poster images of Hindu goddesses, gods and important political and historical figures have been sold in bazaars (Fig 2.11).

Figure 2.11: S. Murugakani, *Saraswathi*, 1995

These images were made in multiples and were purchased by various consumers for purposes of worship. Even though the images were reproduced in runs of hundreds of thousands, each print has special meaning to the consumer.

Rodwittiya, by using a medium of multiples, is referring to the bazaar print, which brings to mind the economics of a bazaar. The transactions in a bazaar are fluid and objects can be traded not only for currency, but also for other objects. This type of business model is seen in pre-capitalization cultures. Once liberalization policies were enacted in India, the country saw capitalist business models alongside the more
traditional model of the bazaar. Liberalization was not about eradicating business
practices that had previously been in place. Instead, liberalization and tradition exist side-
by-side. Sometimes they are in tension, but at other times they exist along side one
another without issue. A specific example of this is the Colaba bazaar in Mumbai. The
north end of the bazaar is marked by the Regal Cinema theatre. But as you traverse
further south down the bazaar, one encounters both open stalls selling a variety of objects
(food, books, clothing, prints, phone cards) and storefronts that look western in nature, as
well as western businesses such as McDonald’s. Looking at this particular bazaar reflects
the effects of liberalization. Older practices of exchange exist alongside foreign
businesses and business practices that entered the market post-1991.

Rodwittiya’s choice of using print as the media in which to execute this work
shows her interest in the more traditional bazaar print. In her book, Gods in the Bazaar:
The Economies of Indian Calendar Art, Kajri Jain discusses how bazaar prints are
associated with tradition. She interviewed artists and other employees of the calendar
industry to uncover how bazaar prints either fit into post-Enlightenment discussions on
“aesthetic value; artistic judgment and taste; autonomy as opposed to commercial and
other forms of interest; authorship and originality.” Jain goes on to discuss how the
bazaar print seems to fit into traditional modes, but can also operate in the modern. She

26 Colaba is a tourist part of Mumbai. It includes not only the famous Regal Cinema, but
the arts district which has the Jahangir Art Gallery, National Gallery of Modern Art, and
the Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya. When I was last in Mumbai, I
ventured out of Colaba and into Kalbadevi, a neighborhood north of Colaba. One of the
bazaars there included one in which it only had unnamed stalls that were loaded to the
point of bursting with various items. The other bazaar I visited in Kalbadevi had some
storefronts, but there was no sign of anything like a McDonalds or any air-conditioned
stores.
27 Kajri Jain, Gods in the Bazaar: The Economies of Indian Calendar Art, Durham: Duke
notes that Enlightenment notions concerning the image deal with aesthetics and taste, but
the bazaar prints seem to circumvent that approach because they are images of gods—and one cannot criticize an image of deity. It is the very public display of religion in India which allows the prints to not be concerned with aesthetics or taste as the primary markers of value. Additionally, Jain notes that some of her informants made a distinction on how these prints were used. The interviewees found it acceptable to have the prints in a private shrine in the home, but deplored the prints being hung in public spaces. If the prints were hung in public spaces, many of Jain’s interviewees felt that it was vulgar and a sign of someone being of a lower class. If the prints were only used in private spaces it would reflect a higher class and more educated individual because he is not bringing religious, read irrational according to Enlightenment thought, parts of their life into the public sphere.\(^{28}\) The bazaar prints could be used for traditional purposes. But the prints, because they are connected with religion, needed to remain in the domain of the private. The artists she interviewed also lamented that the print consumer was not interested in taste and aesthetics so much as the eye-catching.\(^{29}\) The bazaar print straddles the line between the traditional and the modern, depending on its uses and where the item is displayed.

Rodwittiya does not allow hundreds of thousands of copies of her work to be created like the bazaar prints. Instead the artist’s print is an edition of twenty-five. This notion of limited run prints is something that is tied into a western model art market\(^{30}\) and

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 181-183.
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 176-190.
\(^{30}\) Raja Ravi Varma was the most prolific printmaker of 19\(^{th}\) century India. He printed his images in runs of thousands, because it was solely a commercial process. The prints were heavily in demand and Varma took advantage of this to make money. He was not as
issues of the private. In this case the value of the work exists because of the limited edition, the aesthetic value, the particular artist that created and signed each individual impression and that the print possessed a personal appeal for its admirers. The physical object produced by the artist seems to show the idea of a traditional format mixed with more westernized ideas. The artist is putting the two, seemingly opposite, ideas together in one print.

Additionally, the work can be valued in two distinct ways. It can be valued as a traditional bazaar print has been: there is a frontal image of Phoolan Devi that can be interpreted as an icon, and Rodwittiya’s print can be appreciated as a work of fine art. Bazaar prints, when illustrating Hindu deities, tend to show the subjects frontally, or in a moment that is significant to their stories. This image of Devi does the same thing. She seems still and frontal, nearly iconic in nature. She is also depicted at an important point in her life-story: her surrender. By the time of Devi’s surrender, lower-caste villagers were referring to her as the goddess Durga, and interpreted Devi’s actions as meting out justice for women and the lower-castes. During the surrender, many people came to pay homage to Devi, just as they would a goddess or an image of a goddess.

The connecting of Devi to a goddess and people coming out to see her during her surrender brings to mind the Hindu concept of *darshan*, or seeing. *Darshan* entails both the worshipper seeing an image of a deity and the deity in turn looking at the worshipper.

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concerned about making sure buyers knew they were getting a Raja Ravi Varma. Though he did make sure that his prints were labeled with his print house. This continues to be the case where bazaar prints are concerned. The print house, and making sure there were unlimited amounts of prints available to the buying public is more important than creating a limited run with the artist signing each individual impression. See Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
Hinduism posits that any image of a deity can be used for this purpose, because when the image is engaged in worship, the deity inhabits the image. Commonly, this is seen in sculptural figures that were made for temples. As prints became readily and economically available, Hindus would turn to these for in-home shrines. Even though the image of the deity is on paper, it is still assumed that the deity inhabits the image during worship. Rodwittiya’s print and this particular image of Devi reveal this very basic understanding of darshan.

This particular image of Phoolan Devi reveals a woman who has been elevated to the level of goddess: Devi is frontal, appearing ready to give and receive darshan, she is being showered in flower petals and the colors of the print, mainly red and yellow, are associated with the sacred in Hinduism. Devi looks like a commonly imaged Hindu icon. The connection to icons becomes especially true as one examines bazaar posters that depict Hindu deities. Moreover, the petals in the background can refer to a Hindu ritual: the act of puja (worship), in which Hindu worshippers sprinkle the image with flower petals. The falling petals give the impression that Devi’s image is being venerated in an act of puja. When a Hindu is before her deity, he not only wants to gaze on the image and have the image gaze back at him, he also wants to offer something to the deity. Offerings can include food, money, or even flowers. The flowers look like they are being rained down on this image of Devi, further reinforcing that this could be an image for purposes of worship.

Furthermore, the image of an eye, which is located in the lower right-hand corner of the print, could be a reference to darshan. When a Hindu image is created, the last thing

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to be done on the image is to “open” its eyes. In the case of sculptures, this entails painting the eyes. This painting is a ritual to show that the item is ready to receive the deity who will then gaze out of those eyes upon the worshipper. Rodwittiya’s use of sacred eyes is imaged in the singular eye, not a set, in one of the petals, but still has the same connotations as a pair. At many Hindu pilgrimage sites, vendors sell various souvenirs. These can include images of the deity in various formats, or even enameled eyes that look exactly like the eye imaged in Rodwittiya’s print. The eye in this instance can refer to aspects of puja, because the gaze is the most important part of worship. Coupling the eye with the frontal, still image of Devi reinforces the idea of Devi as goddess.

The eye could also take on the broader idea of all seeing. Interpreted in this way, the eye can refer to Devi as all-seeing, since she seemed to be able to evade the police, and to be watching over the entire region of Jalaun District in Utter Pradesh to make sure that lower-caste people and women were protected. Devi’s seemingly omniscient powers further associate her with a goddess, as only deities would have this kind of insight.

But darshan, according to John E. Cort, is not simply about the gaze of worshipper and deity. In his article, “Situating Darshan: Seeing the Digambar Jina Icon in Eighteenth-and Nineteenth-Century North India,” Cort notes that darshan is discussed as a component of Jain worship, but that it does not seem to be about the deity and worshipper coming together in an ecstasy of the reciprocal gaze. Instead, he posits: “It (darshan) is not a case of mutual occularity in which the worshipper sees and is seen by the icon. The sight of the icon provides the poet and then the worshipper with the impetus

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and means to focus on his or her karmic failings at the same time that he or she gazes upon the icon as the very embodiment of the perfections of the Jina.\textsuperscript{33} This form of darshan gives one a more nuanced understanding of the concept. According to Cort, darshan differs according to South Asian religion, gender, caste, class, and any other marker of separation in society. His reading of darshan within the Jain tradition suggests that a more expansive notion of darshan is at work in Untitled (Phoolan Devi).

As one gazes at the image of Phoolan Devi within this print, the individual may feel some kind of connection to the heroine. However another way a viewer may understand the appropriated image within the context of both Rodwittiya’s oeuvre and the symbols within the image is by examining past models of Indian womanhood and coming to the conclusion that they may fail to be adequate for late twentieth-century India, just as the Jain worshipper recognizes his karmic failings by gazing upon the Jina. The previous models of Indian womanhood reveal women who are closely connected with some kind of male guidance. Devi’s story, the symbols used in the petals and the fact that many of these icons refer to the artist’s examination of the lives of everyday Indian women all come together to show that a new model for Indian women is needed for late twentieth-century India, and that model may require a woman imaged as independent of male guidance. As noted by Cort, karmic failings are acknowledged; in the case of Rodwittiya’s print, the models of Indian womanhood that do not seem appropriate for 1990s India are the failings. By gazing upon Rodwittiya’s work, the viewer can find an embodiment of a model of Indian womanhood that works for this time period. Devi is by no means a perfect embodiment of Indian womanhood. But the way the artist situates this

appropriated image within the symbols in the background leaves room for a re-thinking of Indian womanhood and what is considered to be an appropriate model.

Another part of Cort’s research that can be considered in relation to this work and can act as a different take on how darshan may be operating within the image is how the image of the Jina looks. Cort states “[The Jina’s] gaze is not outward, interacting with that of the worshipper. Instead, it is focused on the tip of his nose, and so is situated inward on his own liberated soul. By not interacting visually with the worshipper, the Jina forces the worshipper to realize that his or her own karmic faults have led him or her to this situation of suffering.” Cort notes, that the common understanding of darshan assumes that the deity is focused on the worshipper, but in his examination of Jain worship, he realized that the images of Jina do not look at their worshippers. He states that this difference is there to again remind the worshipper that the Jina is the embodiment of the essence of the religion and the viewer needs to reach that point. Jainism, like Hinduism and Buddhism, is focused on notions of the illusion of this world and the need to look beyond it. The Jina, by not looking at the worshipper, is no longer of this world. He is focused on his liberated soul, which is no longer connected to the world around his body. This in turn leads worshippers to realize that they also need to turn away from the world, or turn inward, in order to reach the same state.

In Rodwittiya’s print, some of these observations are applicable. The image of Devi Rodwittiya chose to appropriate does not show Devi gazing out at the audience. Instead, Devi seems to be looking off to the side. Her gaze, like the Jina’s, may also be turned inward on herself. Or Devi’s gaze may even be turned to a future that has yet to

34 Ibid., 31.
arrive. Either way, this non-interactive gaze forces the viewer to again realize the shortcomings of previous types of Indian womanhood. If Devi is focused on herself, she could be reinforcing the need for an Indian womanhood for post-1991 India in which women are more like her: independent, fierce, unconventional and constantly questioning the status quo. If her gaze is not turned inward, but turned towards something distant, Devi could be seen as hinting that the future of Indian womanhood is something even different than what she herself embodies.

_Darsan_ is one way worship is revealed in this image, but some of the items in the petals also reflect the idea of _puja_. One of the objects, which is located in the lower right edge of the print, is a small pile of incense that is lit. As well as sight, smell is part of the _puja_ process. Incense is burned during Hindu rituals to cleanse the air, so that the location becomes even more hospitable to the deity. Another object that appears in one of the petals is a flame in a dish located in the middle of the right-hand side of the print. During Hindu rituals, it is also common to see the use of flames. The image of a flame in a dish is also common in Hindu iconography: when Shiva Nataraja (Fig 2.12) is illustrated, he is always shown holding a flame (with or without a dish) in his left, raised hand. The flame can serve, in the case of Shiva Nataraja images, as a reminder of the renewal which comes out of the destruction created by the deity (though this is especially seen in the circle of fire around the figure). The flame is symbolic of purification and renewal, two more aspects of Hindu worship.
But examining the general use of the flame during Hindu worship further gives insight into how Rodwittiya’s print becomes an icon. According to C.J. Fuller, “Showing the camphor flame is the climax of worship and…represents the entire ritual.” By including a flame in a lamp, Rodwittiya is creating the implication of Devi being worshipped. Fuller specifies camphor because it has particularly powerful symbolic properties because it burns with a very strong light and fragrance. The flames symbolizes both the deity’s embodiment during puja, by appealing directly to the physical senses, as well as the deity’s transcendence of its embodied form, for the burning camphor, which leaves no sooty residue, provides an intangible display of incandescent light and fragrance. As the all-consuming flame acts upon the senses of the worshipper, as well as of the deity, it simultaneously symbolizes the total disembodiment of the human worshipper. And although the deity was and remains in an embodied form, to be treated like

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a human guest, this state is now partly dissolved, so that both deity and worshipper together can transcend their embodied forms....the divine and human participants are most fully identified in their common vision of the flame...the perfect darshan. God has become man and a person, transformed, has become god; they have been merged....

Fuller is speaking of the worship of a religious icon. The end result of the worship is for the deity and worshipper to merge and become one. According to Fuller, this occurs when the camphor flame, which is the climax of Hindu worship rituals, is waved in front of the deity. When this occurs, according to Fuller, the worshipper then feels a disembodiment. He feels as if he is no longer anchored in his body and he becomes one with the deity, who in turn becomes one with the worshipper.

When this process is connected to Rodwittiya’s print, one can place the print in the role of the deity and the viewer in the role of the worshipper. The artist’s inclusion of the lamp as one of the symbols in the background petals shows that she wants there to be a connection between Devi and the viewer. In this instance, if the viewer is a woman, she can see herself in Devi as she meditates upon the image, becoming part of a history of Indian women. As the female viewer gazes upon this image of Devi, she may even be considering similar ideas that the Jain worshipper has as he sees an image of a Jīna: she may understand not that she is a lesser being than Devi. But instead the female viewer may recognize there is room for a critique and change concerning Indian womanhood and that the qualities embodied in this image of Devi are ones to aspire to and admire, just as the Jain worshipper aspires to the state of transcendence seen in a Jīna.

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36 Ibid.
Another object that echoes a traditional Hindu iconography is seen on Devi’s chest. In the center of Devi’s chest is a heart. As noted earlier, the heart contains an image of Jhansi ki Rani, a Rajput Queen who sacrificed her life to lead her people against the British in 1857. Hanuman (Fig 2.13), the Hindu monkey-god of the Ramayana, is also depicted with his chest open, his heart exposed. He is usually seen pulling open his chest to reveal Ram and Sita, the heroes of the Ramayana, in his heart. This depiction of exposing his heart is supposed to show his devotion to Ram and Sita. Everything Hanuman does, he does for the hero and his bride, and both of them inspire Hanuman to great deeds. With the image of Jhansi ki Rani, Rodwittiya is implying Devi had Jhansi ki Rani in her heart. By placing the image within the heart, Devi is now transformed from a bandit who is simply robbing people to a woman who struggles for a just cause. In Jhansi ki Rani’s case, she struggled for the nation. Devi struggled for gender and caste equality. Devi was known to steal money and food from upper-caste
families and redistribute the stolen goods to those of lower, poorer castes and in doing so challenges the order of a neoliberal society. She was also known for meting out justice for women who had been wronged. If Devi arrived in a village and heard there was a rapist in town (even if he was attacking animals and upper-caste females), she would at least beat the man, and sometimes even castrate and/or kill the perpetrator. The image of Jhansi ki Rani in Devi’s heart reveals that Devi committed banditry for a greater good by challenging gender and caste norms. With the addition of Jhansi ki Rani to the Phoolan Devi image, Rodwittiya now situates her in the context of citizen warrior. Thus, according to Banerjee’s research, giving Devi a place in traditional roles for Hindu women. Once again, even though Devi was an outlaw that moved outside of gender and caste boundaries, the inclusion of Jhansi ki Rani in a heart on the Bandit Queen’s chest reveals her to be connected with traditional women as well. Rodwittiya pulls together these seemingly disparate women and reveals a wider web of sisterhood that does not concern itself with differentiating between tradition and modernity. It can embrace both at the same time.

Furthermore, the heart on Devi’s chest looks very similar to the Catholic Sacred Heart. During her grade school years, Rodwittiya attended Catholic schools, thus would have been exposed to Catholic iconographies. In the Catholic context, the sacred heart

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37 Devi, 386-398.
(Fig 2.14) is usually depicted as “a heart aflame (with love), bearing an open wound, surrounded by a crown of thorns, and surmounted by a small cross.” (Fastiggi, 2011)\(^{38}\) It refers to Christ’s heart, which “symbolized the Catholic doctrine of Christ’s death for all people.”\(^{39}\) It is assumed that Christ sacrificing his life is a show of compassion and love, despite everything he suffered. Phoolan Devi also endured severe trials during her life: the constant physical and sexual abuse she endured should have turned Devi into either a frightened, broken woman, or a woman who could not feel anything for anyone. Instead, like Christ, her suffering simply increased her compassion towards women and lower caste people. While the love symbolized in Christ’s Sacred Heart is the love of God for


\(^{39}\)Ibid.
humanity, the love in Devi’s heart comes from her passion and commitment to the causes
for which she fought. For Rodwittiya to claim this Catholic symbol as part of her Devi’s
iconography reveals the great respect and admiration the artist holds for the Bandit
Queen. Rodwittiya’s image reveals Devi to be a great savior, just like Christ, thus
contextualizing her banditry as social justice.

The final aspect of this image that makes a reference to tradition is the sepia tone
of the Phoolan Devi image. Rodwittiya has stated: “the entire portrait of the bandit queen
is layered with a sepia overtone, that suggests the feeling of......an era long
gone/nostalgia/past/cherished memory............”\textsuperscript{40} The notion of a past or era long gone,
could refer to tradition. But, that would seem contradictory, as tradition would hold to
status quo caste and gender roles. Instead, the artist has used the sepia tone to create a
sense of “nostalgia/past/cherished memory” of a woman who is now dead. Rodwittiya
created this print after Devi’s assassination. By placing a sepia tone over this image, the
artist seems to want to remember a time in Devi’s life when she was heroic, a goddess
figure beloved by the lower-caste and women. Once Devi became part of the Indian
political scene after she left jail, she seemed to go the way of many Indian politicians; she
became more interested in serving her own interests than the interests of the people who
placed her in power. This image of Devi, the woman at her surrender and a heroine to
those who needed one the most, shows how Rodwittiya wants to remember Devi. The
artist realizes that her political career is part of Devi’s legacy, but the artist choosesto
focus on a time in Devi’s life when the Bandit Queen was upholding her beliefs and
questioning patriarchal, gender, and caste norms.

\textsuperscript{40} Personal Correspondence with Rekha Rodwittiya, 4 Apr 2006.
Rodwittiya is not the only contemporary artist to appropriate an image of a famous Indian and re-invest it with new meaning. In her article, “The Afterlives of Images: The Contested Legacies of Gandhi in Art and Popular Culture,” independent art critic and curator, Gayatri Sinha, discusses how images of Gandhi during the modern period showed Gandhi as father of the nation. Sinha states: “We are here confronted with two Gandhis. The first is the museumized father of the nation, the son of India figure that appears as the imprint of Indian officialdom….The other Gandhi, perpetually immanent and in a state of reinvention, is invoked to interrogate the nation that he fathered.”\(^\text{41}\) The critic notes that an image is not stable. It, even something as iconic as images of Gandhi, can take on new meanings depending on the context of the work. In this instance, Sinha notes that with liberalization, there was a change in how Gandhi images were interpreted. She cites the works of Atul Dodiya as a marker of this shift,\(^\text{42}\) noting that “Dodiya’s Gandhi does not challenge existing tropes of father of the nation, [but the] reinscription sets up a field for subsequent discourse.”\(^\text{43}\) At this point in the article, the scholar discusses how various contemporary artists have used the Gandhi image to re-examine the concept of nation. Most telling of her examples is Jatish Kallat’s Public Notice 2, 2007 (Fig 2.15). Sinha describes the text of the work as “mounted in simulated bones,


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 122.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 124.
communicating the artist’s view that ‘in today’s terror infected world where wars against terror are fought at [sic] prime time television, voices such as Gandhi are like discarded relics.’ There is a sense of nostalgia in the work for a time when the Indian nation was enthralled with the words of Gandhi, the peaceful demonstrator. The artist, surrounded by the violence of the war on terror, seems to yearn for a time when things were settled more peacefully. Longing and nostalgia are also seen in Rodwittiya’s print.

Rodwittiya, by creating a sense of reminiscence in her image of Phoolan Devi is also questioning the concept of nation. As noted by the artist, she sepia-toned the appropriated image of Devi to give a sense of “... an era long

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44 Ibid., 126.
The artist when she states these words does not use them to refer to a distant past, as the work of Kallat does. Instead she wants to remember Phoolan Devi as a heroine to the poor and lower castes, not the corrupt politician she became at the end of her political career. Furthermore, the artist wants to resurrect the image of an independent woman who disrupts caste and gender boundaries as an image of India. Devi the politician became symbolic of all that was troubling in the world’s largest democracy. She was fairly and honestly elected to parliament. But instead of continuing to assist those that needed her most, she became embroiled in various scandals that revealed she was a greedy and corrupt individual. The Phoolan Devi who was elected to office was no longer there by the time of her assassination. By sepia-tinting the appropriated image, Rodwittiya makes this particular image of Devi seem like it is a relic from the past. Devi, just as Gandhi, is used in a similar way to challenge the corruption of Indian politics, by having her remembered in a more altruistic light.

As well as challenging traditional iconography, Rodwittiya has confronted images of modernity throughout her oeuvre. Much of the artist’s work is focused not only on the female form, but also on how females navigate, on a daily basis, through a culture that can hold tradition and modernity in tension. What the artist reveals is that the objects are double-edged. In one interpretation they can stand for tradition and in another the object can be indicative of modernity.

Two symbols that are placed within the petals, and have shown up within the artist’s oeuvre are scissors and the gun. The scissors, which are located by Devi’s left-hand shoulder, have been seen in Rodwittiya’s *Scissor, Gun, Knife, Cunt*, 1993. I

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45 Personal Correspondence with Rekha Rodwittiya, 4 Apr 2006.
interpret the crude implements inferring a woman who will face shame on many different levels – rape, violence, cruelty, and lack of agency. The gun could be associated with the rape. It becomes a symbol of force and domination. The scissors and knife could be associated with the abortion. Both could be tools used in the procedure. But placed alongside the gun, the other two objects take on a sinister cast. All three become tools to injure women, one being nonconsensual, and the other two serving to symbolize a consensual act, albeit an act that is forced upon the woman because of societal pressures.

But the scissors have also appeared in Rodwittiya’s oeuvre to represent a more traditional, less threatening, understating of woman. In *Untitled*, N.D. (Fig 2.16), The artist created a gouache painting with an image of a woman holding up her *chuni* in one
hand and a pair of scissors in the other. The implication is the woman is perhaps trimming the *chuni* or has just completed trimming it. The scissors in this instance become associated with sewing, a domestic task linked with women. In this image, the scissors remain within the realm of the domestic, which is traditionally considered the appropriate place for scissors, women and their daily activities. The artist has shown how within a traditional context of domesticity the scissors take on a positive connotation, but when used for modern, non-domestic purposes the scissors become an object of threat to women.

In the first interpretation of the scissors, they seem to speak of a modern India in which women have great difficulty navigating their lives because of their sex. Women are constantly under the threat of sexual harassment, molestation and rape when they choose to leave their homes.\(^{46}\) The second interpretation normalizes the scissors into a tool for domestic use, because *Untitled*, N.D. is one of Rodwittiya’s monumental women images in which the viewer gets the impression that women’s work and domesticity are being heroicized.

The gun, which is depicted in the appropriated image of Devi, and in the petal located in the upper left part of the print, directly above Devi’s right shoulder, is another symbol of modernity that reveals tension. The gun, as previously noted, also appears in *Scissors, Gun, Knife, Cunt*. Contextualizing the gun in Phoolan Devi’s life reveals a tension between modernity and tradition. The gun is a modern weapon, and typically, in India, women are not the wielders of this weapon. When Devi was first kidnapped by a

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\(^{46}\) The rape that took place in India on 16 December 2012 is an indication on how difficult it is for women to be outside the home. The fact that the woman dared to act like a modern woman (i.e., being out at night with a male friend) seemed to have been part of the reason the men attacked her.
gang of bandits, they used their guns to quash any resistance her family had to their act. The bandit leader then used the gun as a threat as he raped Devi. The gun, in these instances, can be read as a threat to women. But, in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)*, the artist questions this one-dimensional understanding of a gun. The gun in this work can also be read as the symbol of a modern, empowered woman. In the print, the gun is not threatening the female figure. Here, Devi holds the gun, which became a way for her to empower herself. Once Devi had the gun, she was able to fight back against the males who had previously terrorized her. This modern weapon served to transform Devi into a modern woman, who used the technology available to her to demand respect for herself and other women. In this context the gun becomes a symbol of female empowerment.

Rodwittiya is not the only woman artist who has used the gun as a symbol of modernity. In her work, *Durga*, 1992 (Fig 2.17), Aprita Singh creates a new image of the goddess Durga. This painting was done for *Desh* magazine, a well-known publication in Calcutta. Every year the magazine would invite an artist to create an image of Durga for the cover of the annual issue which celebrated the goddess. In this painting, her white clothing reveals she is now a widow. She holds multiple items like the goddess, but Singh’s Durga’s only weapon is a gun. The gun becomes a symbol of modernity that is being used alongside a traditional idea. In this instance, the traditional idea comes from Durga: she still defeats a male opponent (though Singh has made him a mortal man, not the buffalo demon), but does so in way that locates the woman in the late 20th century.

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47 Sen, 188.
The gun and widow’s dress become the objects that allow the artist to create a new Indian woman who seems to tread between tradition and modernity.

When the cover was revealed, it received much criticism: The response to the cover of Desh raised angry voices of dissent in Bengal. Durga could not be garbed like a widow when she was a virgin [goddess]; she could not be holding the gun which is not a traditional weapon. The figure prostrate below her is neither the demon buffalo slain by Durga nor the god Shiva below Kali…. [but] reconsidered, the painting does narrate a story most apposite for our times.\(^{48}\)

The image does indeed illustrate how the gun and a reinterpretation of a goddess can reveal the tension between modernity and tradition in liberalized India. Sen notes the image is relevant to victories won by women. The work can be understood as a way in

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 190.
which modernity and tradition are combined to create a new iconography. In this case, it is an iconography of female empowerment: Durga no longer needs to be understood in traditional terms. She, like the modern Indian woman, can now choose to be traditional, modern or both and still have relevancy to Indian culture.

The gun is not the only symbol in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* that seems to straddle the border between modernity and tradition. The knife, one located at the image of Devi’s right elbow and the other in the upper right corner of the print, can be seen as a pre-industrial object. But once India becomes industrialized, the knife does not disappear. Tying it into Devi’s life as well as Indian womanhood, reveals how it represents the traditional and the modern simultaneously.

Rodwittiya has created paintings that show women engaged in domestic tasks (Figs 2.18, 2.19, 2.20). These works from the 1990s also show a single, monumental female form. She has depicted the women as spinning thread, cutting vegetables and in one instance, carving images of birds. In the image with the woman cutting vegetables, the knife is being used as a domestic object. Historically, women have been expected to
Figure 2.18: Rekha Rodwittiya, *Untitled*, N.D.

Figure 2.19: Rekha Rodwittiya, *Untitled*, 1997
prepare food for their families. This woman chopping the vegetables seems to be engaged in that process. In this particular image, the knife is being used in a more traditional sense because the woman is using it to complete a domestic task.

The woman using a knife to carve birds (Fig 2.20), also remains within the realm of the domestic, while at the same time moving outside of it. Another notion associated with women is the idea of creation, because it is women who bear children. Again, women bearing children is an expectation of many patriarchal societies. While the woman in this image is not creating life by giving birth, she is creating something with the knife. The birds in this painting appear to be sculptures. This painting shows woman as creator-artist, not creator-mother. By playing with the idea of creation, Rodwittiya
reveals how the knife can be understood as a symbol of domesticity, yet also take on a meaning outside the domestic. Is the woman now an artist, who works outside the home, thus earning her own living? A woman working outside her home and supporting herself would not have been as feasible in late 19th century India as it is in late 20th century India. Or maybe she is a woman who is in the home and creating these images for amusement? The knife takes on two possibilities in this painting.

Considering that Rodwittiya has used the knife to communicate two possibilities in this work, it is of value to consider the knife in different ways in *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* as well. The knife again takes on a double-edged meaning when placing it within the context of Devi’s life.

When Devi finally became a bandit herself, she was given a gun like the other members of her gang. In addition to her gun, Devi always carried around a knife. Both were symbols of her power and her ability to punish those who had terrorized her throughout her life. Rodwittiya turns these items, which could be considered weapons against women, into symbols of empowerment, because she attaches them to an image of Devi when she was at her most powerful.

As noted in Chapter One, Devi, when she was married to Putti Lal was constantly under threat of harm. One of the tortures committed by Putti Lal was rape. Devi clearly remembers the first time Putti Lal tried to rape her. She recalls:

> He began beating me in a way I had never been beaten before. I couldn’t even scream at the pain of the serpent pressing at my flesh. He was beating me inside! I thought the serpent was going to tear me apart! It tore me and began to devour me…then he said he couldn’t do anything with me, and he was going to get a knife and open my belly to put his serpent in…He held [the knife blade] to my belly, playing with it, showing me the part of my body that was making him angry. ‘I’ll open it a little
and then it’ll be easier,” he grinned “It’s a very nice game.”

Putti Lal’s first attempt was hampered by biology. He decided to speed the process of biology by cutting Devi’s vagina so that his phallus would be able to enter. There are two forms of terror here. One has to do with the rape. Devi, at the age of eleven, did not even understand the meaning of intercourse. No one had explained the act and the outcome to her. Due to that, Devi was unable, at that age, to realize that a rape was taking place. Another level of fear was generated by Putti Lal using a knife to first psychologically torment Devi and then by using the instrument to physically rip her apart. Devi may not have known what rape was, but she was aware that being cut by a knife would be painful. At this point in her life, Devi was powerless to protect herself from a danger she could hardly comprehend.

Later in Devi’s life, the knife becomes a tool with which to empower and protect herself. The first instance of this is seen when she exacts revenge on Putti Lal. According to Sarah Caldwell, she not only beat Putti Lal, but she also castrated him. The knife, in this instance, is turned into a tool of empowerment as Devi acts to control a situation that was, initially, out of her control.

Additionally, the notion that Devi saw the knife as a symbol of her own power and independence was revealed when she was sent to prison after her surrender. It was

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not until she was taken to prison in 1983 that she was without both rifle and knife. Devi states:

A tall iron door swung open in front of us and, after we were led through, closed again behind us.
‘Hand me your knife,’ said a prison guard to me.
I had refused to hand over my knife at the ceremony in front of the CM and I wasn’t going to hand it over now that I was there in prison….
Finally the prison director came and persuaded me to hand over my knife.
He told me that nobody had weapons in there….
‘I know what you want,’ I snapped. ‘You want to kill me!’

Throughout the surrender process, Devi kept having regrets about what she was about to do. By being able to keep her knife with her during the ceremony (her gun was surrendered before the ceremony), she still felt secure in her power to protect herself and seems to have felt in control of the situation. Once the knife was confiscated, she felt vulnerable and screamed out what she had been thinking through the entire surrender.
The knife went from a metonymy for terror to one of protection and self-sufficiency. It no longer was a negative symbol in relation to Devi’s life. Between Devi’s personal understanding and experiences of the tool and Rodwittiya’s use of it in her oeuvre, the knife transforms from something to be feared or tied to the domestic into an icon of both celebration and independence.

Another object that seems to straddle between the traditional and modern is the bird. There are two birds located within Untitled (Phoolan Devi): the first is in the upper left hand of the print and the other is located in the lower left hand corner. As noted previously, the bird has shown up in Rodwittiya’s oeuvre as an object that was being created. The bird, when looked at in the particular painting of Untitled (Carving Birds)

51 Devi. 446-447.
reveals it to be a symbol of freedom. The woman who is carving the bird is proud of her accomplishment, which is revealed in her facing the audience and stopping, mid-carving to address the viewer. I imagine the woman pausing in her work to explain to the audience what she is doing and what the birds mean. Here again, Rodwittiya is playing on the notion of women and creativity in the sense of giving birth. But because the woman in the painting is not giving birth, but creating images of birds, the viewer sees her freed from assumptions of women’s roles. The woman in this painting is creating, but not as one would expect a woman to create. Furthermore, birds have been symbolic of freedom, usually signifying freedom from something oppressive. In this case, the carving of the birds reveals how this particular woman is freed from patriarchal assumptions of women’s creativity.

When more closely examining Untitled (Phoolan Devi) in the context of liberalization, it is evident Rodwittiya is making some statements on how liberalization has affected and changed notions of Indian womanhood. What an Indian woman should be has run the range from submissive wife, to intelligent companion, to fierce goddess. With the onset of liberalization, womanhood becomes a combination of these. In her book, Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, discusses women in the context of advertising. Her work focuses on the early-1990s. The scholar notes that women were being used to advertise and brand products, by being positioned as the gatekeepers of the domestic. The appearance of women on packaging and in commercials leads the viewer to assume that women are making the decisions on what products are purchased. I argue this combination of

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domestic gatekeeper and decision maker, makes Indian women seem to be a combination of the submissive wife who takes care of her home and the intelligent companion who makes decisions and has purchasing power. Liberalization, because of the use of women for marketing products, reveals Indian womanhood to be a multi-faceted notion. Women can be all of these and still appear to stay within the boundaries of the expectation of women in Indian society.53

As Indian populations moved out of India and into other parts of the world, these products have also arrived at distant shores. Many cities in which there is a strong South Asian presence reveal a type of Little India. There are storefronts set up similarly to a bazaar market, South Asian restaurants are evident and as one walks through these neighborhoods, one encounters the different languages of South Asia being spoken in casual conversation and to conduct business. One of the ways to make Little India even more home-like is to sell products specifically from India. For example, many Indian groceries carry brands of rice, henna dyes, or movies and music that are imported from India. As these products reach the shelves perused by diaspora populations, the diaspora populations become as inundated by messages sent through advertising as do South Asians in the motherland. The diaspora consumers also see the use of women in advertising and these images tie into their conceptions of Indian womanhood as well.

In the case of _Untitled (Phoolan Devi)_ , Rodwittiya reveals this move into a liberalized, and more globally integrated India. As noted previously, the artist tinted the appropriated image of the Bandit Queen in a sepia tone to make the viewer think of a period that has passed and nostalgia for an earlier time. Placing this image of Devi among

53Ibid., 131-133.
some of the symbols of tradition, it seems that the artist is referring to a time in which tradition was the most prominent aspect of India. But this is belied by the fact that Rodwittiya has sepia-toned an image of Phoolan Devi, who was an atypical example of Indian womanhood. Instead of referring to a traditional past, Rodwittiya seems to be referring to the time in Devi’s life in which she was able to make decisions that supported her own beliefs and worldview. When considering *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)* alongside the advertisements examined by Sunder Rajan, Phoolan Devi also becomes a woman with the power to make decisions about money and life, but she does so outside the domestic sphere. Devi’s image in Rodwittiya’s print is being used to advertise a new Indian womanhood. But that womanhood is mult-faceted in way that counters the women discussed by Sunder Rajan. Sunder Rajan correctly implies that women were being used to brand India, not only in the motherland, but also in the diaspora. The image of Indian women on these products could be construed as the ideal construction of an Indian woman. And it is this ideal that becomes the brand symbol of the nation. But Phoolan Devi, while she also holds power concerning money and individual decisions, is an autonomous woman who exists outside the domestic sphere. She has no husband to which she must answer, and her decisions are focused not on uniting and stabilizing a family unit. Instead, Devi is a public figure whose actions and decisions effect the public realm. She becomes the opposite of the women used to advertise products, thus resisting attempts to use woman to brand India.

Phoolan Devi’s story went global in the mid 1990s due to the publication of her autobiography, her biographies and Shakur Kapur’s film. Once Devi was a globally recognizable figure, she became a stand-in for India. The image she portrays is one of a
woman who fought back against oppressive patriarchal and caste culture, but still retained a sense of traditional Indian femininity in her association with Durga. India, through the image of Phoolan Devi, was understood as a country in which the traditional still exists. However tradition is not necessarily the trajectory on which the country will continue. Devi’s decision to move outside gender and caste norms reveals an India in which women can make decisions concerning their personal preferences, despite some of the more traditional aspects of the society. Devi becomes a symbol for India during liberalization: it is a country still following tradition, but it is also a country willing to move onto the global market. One would assume that these are conflicting ideas. But appropriating this particular image of Devi and placing it within symbols from the artist’s body of works shows how tradition and modernity need not be diametrically opposed concepts. Instead the two ideas work together to challenge the branding of India through the concept of womanhood.

Rodwittiya’s interpretation of Devi differs from the other two artists’ works discussed in this project. As a woman artist who was born and raised in India, lived outside the country for a few years to complete her Master’s Degree, and then returned to settle in India, Rodwittiya views Devi through the lens of a Resident Indian. The Resident Indian, who is immersed in the daily activities of life in India, would be keenly aware that India, especially in the 1990s, is a mix of the modern and traditional, which sometimes creates tensions while in other instances creates a melding of the two. This is seen in the artist’s work, *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)*, 2001, which reveals how there is tension, but also the blending of tradition and modernity in late twentieth-century India through the disruptive figure of Phoolan Devi.
Chapter Three:
Multiple Maskings: Phoolan Devi’s Other Life

Chitra Ganesh (b. 1975) is known for her paintings, video and installations that serve as critiques about Indian womanhood. Like Rekha Rodwittiya’s *Untitled (Phoolan Devi)*, Ganesh’s works challenge the idea of a stable sign of Indian womanhood, thus also revealing an image of a woman who challenges the status quo of neoliberal India. Ganesh has been inspired by Hindu goddesses, Jhansi ki Rani and Phoolan Devi. The women in her works reflect different aspects of womanhood: women are seen as both the victims and instigators of violence, and simultaneously depicted as both submissive and subversive. These qualities seem contradictory, but Chitra Ganesh, through her series of paintings, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life* (Figs 3.1-3.5), 1998, imagines how all of these qualities can be seen within

Figure 3.1: Chitra Ganesh, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life (Bandit Queen and General)*, 1998
Figure 3.2: Chitra Ganesh, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life (Judith and the Bandit Queen)*, 1998

Figure 3.3: Chitra Ganesh, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life (Boys in Masks)*, 1998
Figure 3.4: Chitra Ganesh, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life (Girls and Guns)*, 1998

Figure 3.5: Chitra Ganesh, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life (Smoking a Hookah)*, 1998
one Indian woman. In her artist’s statement for *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life*, Ganesh said the following:

> By highlighting how violence and performance are such...crucial aspects of popular stereotypes of gender and class, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life* used the Bandit Queen figure as a lens to examine at the problematics of representing a complex and unconventional female subject in the postcolonial era. The title of the series refers to the feminist, murderer, and freedom fighter known as the Bandit Queen, or Phoolan Devi, whose symbolic role in Indian politics disrupts traditional social structures such as family, law, and nation. The Bandit Queen's life is distinguished by contradiction.¹

Ganesh’s point is that Indian womanhood, in late twentieth-century India, can be envisioned as complicated and multi-faceted masks that are used to disrupt the status quo. While construction of images is a central theme within Ganesh’s oeuvre, within this particular series, the paintings explore how different types of Indian womanhood are constructed through masking. *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life* reveals how one Indian woman can embody various and contradictory aspects. Moreover, the contradictory nature of these images speaks of how woman can disrupt social order. The series understands Phoolan Devi as being submissive and subversive and weak and powerful at the same time. Because the women represented in these images are not fixed, they slip between cracks and disrupt the status quo. As discussed in Chapter One, brand symbols are stable and send a very clear and directed message of the entity behind that symbol. *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life* acts as a rejection of neoliberal Indian brand symbols. Instead of constructing a clear and solid identity, these paintings address David Harvey’s idea of accumulation by dispossession² by showing how the oppressed can hold some power by

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¹ Author’s emphasis. Email Personal Correspondence, 28 Sept 2011.
interrupting societal norms.

These paintings reveal these disruptions by examining the many masks one woman can wear. I will be drawing on the theories of Joan Riviere, Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha to analyze each painting in the series. This series could be read through the theories of queer theorists such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Michael Warner, but I choose postcolonial theorists because it offers a different approach but still allows me to critically engage with the “norms” presented by queer theory. Moreover, using the works of Riviere, Fanon and Bhabha allows a more connected theoretical approach, not only in this chapter, but also among the other chapters of this project. Each theory either states or implies that masking, in the sense of a complete transformation, is not useful or even possible. But once the subject uses masking as a strategy to upset social order, it becomes a powerful tool for anyone in an oppressed group. When examined within Ganesh’s paintings, the theories reveal how different masks allow Phoolan Devi to upset the status quo social order and knowledge concerning Indian womanhood. According to Niti Sampat Patel in her book, Postcolonial Masquerades: Culture and Politics in Literature, Film, Video, and Photography, “postcolonial masquerade cannot be considered to be a singular term, but a strategy that is profoundly heterogeneous.”

The scholar notes that one form of masking is not a useful tool of analysis for multiple postcolonial situations, because these situations are not homogenous in nature. The same holds true for Phoolan Devi’s Other Life; each image is reveals a different strategy that fits the particular situation of the narrative. Even though Ganesh’s series is focused on one woman, the multiplicity of that one woman warrants a similar approach.

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One of the works in her series, *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life* (Fig 3.1), depicts the ex-bandit, at the moment of her surrender. Here Ganesh has changed many of the facts in order to show that Devi is many different women simultaneously. The artist depicts India’s Bandit Queen as a heroine out of western romance novels and Bollywood films. As previously noted, when Devi surrendered, she was dressed as a bandit, and did not look like a pampered lady in need of rescue. But the pampered lady is exactly what Ganesh has depicted: Devi wears a blue sari, silver necklace, earrings and nose ring. The Bandit Queen’s nails look perfectly manicured, her hair is swept up, with not a strand out of place, and she is wearing make-up. Devi looks more like a glamorous actress or heroine than a beleaguered bandit who, despite having second thoughts on the process, is about to surrender to police and government officials.

In addition to the Bandit Queen, there are three other figures in the canvas: the general, a turbaned figure and the arm and hand of a third individual. The Bandit Queen leans into the general’s chest. In this painting, the general wears some kind of military-looking hat, sunglasses, and a blue workman’s shirt. The shirt is partially unbuttoned and reveals his chest. Devi clings to the general’s chest, with her hand on his bare flesh. The general’s hand seems to be placed protectively over Devi’s.

Of the final two figures one is turbaned, while the other individual’s arm and hand are the only parts that enter the frame. The second figure holds a gun. The turbaned figure holds the gunperson’s wrist as if to direct the gun away from Devi and the general. The image is completed with bars in the background, through which a reddish sky can be seen.
In this particular instance, the painting reveals the celebrity-power of Devi in a way that is more colloquially understood. By the time of Devi’s surrender she was as famous as a Bollywood actress. Here, Devi looks like a typical woman in a Bollywood film: this is seen in the vulnerable pose of her body, and her leaning on the general. Even though Devi looks vulnerable and seems to be seeking comfort from the general, the way she is dressed belies the helpless virtuous Indian woman. As noted earlier, Devi appears to look like a Bollywood actress who plays a protagonist: a woman who adheres to tradition. In this instance, tradition is witnessed in how the Bandit Queen clings to the general. But her perfect clothing, jewelry, hair and garish make-up also seem to speak of a different kind of woman: the vamp.

In Bollywood films, the virtuous Indian woman is usually set opposite a vamp. The vamp is an Indian woman who is more western than Indian in nature. This type of female role is especially seen in films from the 1940s and 1950s wherein directors were exploring notions of national identity. For example, in Raj Kapoor’s Shree 420, 1955, a
man from rural India attempts to start a new life in Bombay. Initially he tries to begin that life in an honest way. During this period in the film, he meets and falls in love with the Vidya (Fig 3.6), who is modest, honest and virtuous, but comes from a poor family. When Kapoor’s character realizes the only way to get ahead is to be unethical, he falls in with other villains and meets Maya (Fig 3.7), a woman that is involved in the
criminal acts of Raj’s acquaintances. She is the complete opposite of Vidya: she smokes, wears western and somewhat revealing clothing and is driven by money. The vamp is a manipulative woman who pursues her own self interests at the expense of others. In Ganesh’s painting, Devi becomes the virtuous woman and vamp in one character.

Devi leans into the general as if she needs to be protected from someone or something. The pose in which the artist painted Devi is one usually struck by women in Bollywood films who have run to the male hero of the film seeking protection from some perceived threat. That woman is vulnerable and she acts in an appropriately feminine manner by turning to a man for help. Additionally, Devi has tillak on her forehead, implying that she is either married or has received a blessing. Both of these are things a traditional – read, virtuous – Indian woman would do. But the way she is dressed seems to speak of the vamp. As seen from the image of Maya, Devi looks similar in the sense that she is richly jeweled, is obviously made-up with lipstick and nail polish and has a
bared shoulder. Furthermore, her eyes seem to look at something off the canvas and have a dead expression to them. The character of Maya displays some of these qualities as well.

The contradictory iconography raises the following question: who is Phoolan Devi? Is she the virtuous Indian woman or is she a vamp for breaking with tradition? I don’t believe that the image is supposed to be calling the Bandit Queen either virtuous or a vamp. However, when an image of a woman like this is contextualized within South Asian visual culture, these stereotypes must be considered. I contend that the image is deliberately confusing so that the viewer gets a sense of the complex nature of the Bandit Queen. Devi, the person, was not an easily understood figure. She broke caste and gender boundaries and because of that, it becomes difficult to situate her within the tradition of Indian womanhood. She becomes a figure that exists in her own space. The same is true for the woman in this painting. The imagined Bandit Queen is neither completely traditional nor westernized. This particular image of Devi shows how she could be construed as both at the same time as she wears the costume of a vamp and enacts the gestures of the virtuous Indian woman. This Devi becomes one that is difficult to explain, which allows her to move beyond the expectations of Indian womanhood, thus upsetting preconceived notions of the subject.

Another contradiction is seen in that Devi looks vulnerable, but the image also reveals the Bandit Queen to be a source of violence. Perhaps the leaning into the general is an attempt to escape some kind of violence committed against her. If that is the case, Ganesh has shown Devi to be a victim, or potential victim, of violence. But this Devi’s fear of violence does not explain the entire story in the panel. Despite this exaggeratedly
feminine image of Devi, the gun in the lower left hand of the canvas acts as a reminder of Devi’s life as an armed and dangerous outlaw. The bars in the background also reveal Devi as a dangerous criminal. She has to be enclosed in a jail in order to make sure she does not commit more violence. I would argue that a hyper-feminine Devi is used to disguise the Bandit Queen’s unwomanly behavior. But the details in the panel (the gun, bars, reddish sky) are lingering clues that Devi’s unwomanly behavior cannot be disguised by a mask of hyper-femininity. The tension between a violent female and a hyper-feminine one becomes yet another contradiction in the image that does not allow for an easy understanding of the heroine.

Psychologist Joan Riviere in her article, “Womanliness as Masquerade” discusses the concept of masking and hyper-femininity. Riviere analyzes the notion of a woman who seems overly feminine. The psychologist states, “I shall make an attempt to show that women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men.” The author discusses a specific case study in which a woman seems to be fulfilling society’s understanding of womanhood. “They are excellent wives and mothers, capable housewives; they maintain social life and assist culture; they have no lack of feminine interests….At the same time they fulfil (sic) the duties of their profession at least as well as the average man.” The author concludes, that she is not sure how to classify this type of woman in terms of psychology. Riviere continues discussing how the woman would act as a professional while lecturing to her colleagues as a group, but would then act coquettish when relating with her male colleagues in individual interactions. To Riviere, “it was an unconscious attempt to ward

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off the anxiety which would ensue on account of the reprisals she anticipated from the father-figures after her intellectual performance.”\(^5\) The fact that the woman was successful in her public performance as lecturer and expert shows, according to Riviere, that the woman was “in possession of the father’s penis, having castrated him. The display once over, she was seized by horrible dread of the retribution the father would then exact. Obviously [her coquettish behavior] was a step towards propitiating the avenger to endeavor to offer herself to him sexually.”\(^6\) Riviere is stating that a woman acts overly feminine as a way in which to seem subservient or harmless (sexually, intellectually, or whatever the scenario may be) to a male figure in order to downplay the fact that she has metaphorically castrated a male by besting him in some way. Riviere concludes: “Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it.”\(^7\) The author continues by noting “that there is [no] difference, whether radical or superficial, [of genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’] they are the same thing.”\(^8\) Riviere states it is difficult to distinguish between “genuine womanliness and the ‘masquerade’” because every woman has genuine womanliness in her to begin with and the “masquerade” is a façade that appears to amplify any womanliness that a woman possesses. There is also the implication of gender role ambiguity between the woman as she acts in a “masculine” way while being successful in her career, but then reverts to assumed “womanly” behavior when she interacts with her male colleagues one-on-one.

\(^{5}\) Ibid. 37.
\(^{6}\) Ibid., 35-37.
\(^{7}\) Ibid., 38.
\(^{8}\) Ibid.,
I have adopted Riviere’s theory on womanliness to explain why Devi, in this particular panel, was depicted in this guise. In order to hide the masculine qualities Devi assumed once she became the leader of a gang of bandits, the artist depicts her as the antithesis of a bandit. Instead of revealing Devi as a woman who is in control of the situation, Ganesh depicts the Bandit Queen as a helpless woman who needs to be protected by a male figure. This was not how Devi acted at her surrender. In her autobiography, *I, Phoolan Devi*, the Bandit Queen discussed the misgivings she had about the surrender, stating: “Man Singh kept saying we ought to make a deal and give ourselves up, but I had no intention of doing that – just the opposite. I taunted the police, sending them messages saying that I was going to ruin their lives and haunt their dreams, and like Durga the goddess I would leave terror and destruction wherever I passed.”

Devi made this statement when discussing the initial pressure put on her, by some of her own gang members, about surrendering to the police. Devi clearly had no intention of giving herself up and even mocked the authorities by telling them that she will always be a problem. Furthermore, she notes that her freedom will allow her to continue spreading fear and destruction. She does not need to be rescued from a life in which she holds power. This passage does not reflect a woman who is going to tamely surrender to the police.

Devi the person did not meekly surrender to police. Instead, she continues causing havoc by being a figure who disrupts caste and gender rules. Devi is eventually convinced to surrender. Once she makes that decision, the Bandit Queen does not go quietly or as a woman in need of rescue from a brutal life. She constantly questions every

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step of the process. When Devi got into the vehicle with General Chaturvedi to be taken to prison she did not have her rifle. The lack of weapons made her nervous. On the first stop to the jail, which was at a temple, Devi talks of trying to get any gun back in her possession. She stated: “I asked the guards to give me a rifle. If one of them had done it, I would have killed myself right there, and they knew it.”

She also tried to get her own gun back from the general, but was unsuccessful. Both of these actions reveal a woman who is having doubts about the surrender. It is almost as if she was a wild animal that was lured into a cage for safety and then realizes she made the wrong decision. The woman in the autobiography is nothing like Ganesh’s Devi in this particular panel. If one contextualizes this image of Devi within Riviere’s theory on womanliness and masking, the viewer realizes that Ganesh’s Devi is hyper-femininized to indicate just how beyond order and status quo her actions as a bandit were. Devi surrendering and then having doubts throughout the process reveals that she may want to submit, but cannot do so quietly. She must, during the taming process, constantly question and look for a way out. This contradiction again gives rise to two different women in one. In this instance, by surrendering, it seems like Devi wants to do what is expected of her as a woman. But on the other, the surrender does not feel right. This opposition can also be read in the painting because Devi looks to be both virtuous and the vamp at the same time. Two conflicting ideas are jockeying for space, thus making Devi a difficult figure to interpret.

The mask of womanliness seen in this particular image of Devi may be trying to hide the fact that she, literally, castrated men when she was a bandit. Devi’s reputation as an avenger of women began when she beat and castrated her ex-husband. There are also

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10 Ibid., 468.
points in Devi’s autobiography in which she speaks of castrating men as a form of punishment. Near the end of Devi’s reign, she notes

People of my caste heard all about [the justice she meted out for women who had been raped or molested]. If a mother wanted to protect her daughter, or a father his wife, or his sister, they knew all they had to do was say to the rapist that Phoolan Devi would punish them. Then I did…..I punished the wicked with the same tortures they inflicted on others….I crushed the serpent they used to torture women, I dismembered them. It was my vengence (sic), and the vengence (sic) of all women.”

Devi would castrate any male that harmed a woman through rape or molestation.

According to Riviere, a woman symbolically castrating a man is indicative of her dominating the man. In Devi’s case, she literally castrated men to bring them under her control and to bring justice to the women who suffered at their hands. With Riviere’s metaphorical castrations, the woman is seizing control of the power relationship between men and women by being more intelligent and confident than males. The woman’s display of intelligence forces the male to realize that he is not always the one that holds the power between the sexes. Devi’s literal castrations were done for the same reason. The Bandit Queen wanted men, especially upper-caste men, to realize that they were not always the ones to hold power in relationships with women, and especially lower-caste women. For Devi, an uneducated, lower-caste woman, literal castration became her statement of domination because it is the penis that biologically identifies a male from a female and allowed her own rapists to dominate her. Devi ripped the loci of masculinity and power away from them, leaving them as ineffective and trumped as Riviere’s men who experienced a metaphorical castration.

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11 Ibid. 396-397.
Devi would not have had the power or the license to do this if she had fit into the mould of the lower-caste Indian woman who submits to those from an upper-caste. She also could not have committed the castrations if she was as Ganesh portrays her in this painting: an Indian woman who is dependent on some kind of male figure. If one were to take into consideration that looking and acting overly feminine is a masquerade to hide the “masculine” qualities seen within a woman, this image can be read as Devi disguising her “manliness,” or in this instance, her ability to disrupt patriarchal order. By painting Devi into a seemingly helpless female, the viewer can forget that Devi was a violent figure that dominated men by castration. If the viewer is allowed to interpret Devi as a picture of submissive femininity, one can overlook, or pretend, that this is what Devi is. Riviere’s theory further explains how womanliness can be used to place the viewer into a comfort zone in which women are non-threatening.

The other part of Riviere’s theory notes that the masking of “masculine” qualities by a woman who overacts her femininity is also the woman’s way to appease any males who would disapprove of her behavior. The title of this panel, *General and Bandit Queen*, refers to Devi at her surrender. The general was the one who led her through the steps and ceremonies required of the surrender. While in real life, Devi, as noted earlier, was fighting every step of the surrender in small ways, she was eventually jailed. I interpret the bars in the background of the painting to reflect that this image of Devi is hyper-femininized because she wants to appease the patriarchal society which she upset with her actions as a bandit. The appeasement comes with her allowing herself to be jailed, as understood in the bars in the background. Throughout Devi’s biography, the state, as embodied by the police, represents male authority. Male authority must be
fought against at all times, especially when it was attacking her sexuality with police officers raping her. The rape could be interpreted as an act of control over Devi’s sexuality and her as a woman in general. The jail, because it is associated with the police, could be seen as the ultimate control of Devi’s sexuality. The jailing of the Bandit Queen controls not only her sexuality, but all parts of her life. By being led to prison by a male official associated with the state, she is, in the terms of Riviere’s theory, giving herself sexually to the male state, as a way to appease it after she has run wild and castrated men. Devi’s surrender was her choice, but it was a reluctant one, because she knew that once she was jailed, she would be controlled completely by the state.

Additionally, in this image Devi is shown to be leaning against the general. She looks like she is giving herself to him. The fact that she looks like a heroine in a Bollywood film (read, hyper-feminized female figure), adds to the notion that Devi is giving herself to the general. In Bollywood films, the heroine always ends up giving herself to the hero. Even in films where the women are portrayed as strong, independent and willful, the films usually end in the women surrendering themselves to the hero, whether he be father, brother, husband or husband-to-be. This is explained within Reeta Chowdhri Tremblay’s article in which the scholar discusses male and female vigilante figures from Bollywood films of the 1980s. The women in the films always start off as ordinary females. Because of some injustice (commonly a rape), these women turn into vigilante figures. Throughout each film, the woman is the character in charge, until revenge has been completed. Once revenge has been fulfilled, the female characters allow
themselves to be under the protection and control of a male figure. The fact that the general has his hand atop Devi’s, reinforces the notions of protection/control. The disorderly woman controlled is the type of ending that this painting displays for Devi. The Bandit Queen ends up leaving behind her wild ways through the guidance of the general. He becomes the stand-in for the father, brother, husband or husband-to-be, because the artist has depicted him as a strong hero, who seems to protect the heroine. Having Devi masked as a hyper-feminized woman reinforces that the general is taking her to him to protect her. In Ganesh’s canvas, the general seems to be protecting Devi from herself: the Devi of her autobiography is no longer present. Instead, a hyper-feminized woman, reaching for the protection and support of a male has replaced the feral, independent Bandit Queen.

This canvas has removed any of Devi’s capability as an independent woman, by placing a mask of “womanliness” on her. According to Riviere’s theory, that would mean that Devi felt some anxiety about her actions as a bandit. This painting reveals some of the anxiety the mask is hiding. The way Devi clings to the general seems exaggerated. Her body language shows a woman who is desperate to be protected by a male figure. In Riviere’s observations, she noted that her subject, once she was interacting with her male colleagues on an individual level would become flirtatious, and she would act like she was not the capable, intelligent woman that just gave a stunning presentation on the subject of her field of work. It is almost like the woman is turning on one part herself while she is on stage, and turns it off when she is no longer being prompted, by the setting of the stage, to be her colleagues’ intellectual equal. In the case of Devi, what she

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“turns off” is her wild behavior. The wild woman seems to have been tamed, because she now clings to a man for support and is dressed appropriately for a “civilized” woman with jewelry, make-up and perfect coif. The way Devi clings to the general in this canvas seems exaggerated, as if Devi is trying to prove to the general (and maybe even herself!) that she is filling the role expected of a woman. After all the literal castration, Devi now wants male authority to believe that she is tamed and that the castrations were an anomaly. Being tamed refers to Tremblay’s conclusion of the control of female sexuality by a male authority figure. By being held and controlled by the general, Devi, just as the heroines in the films discussed by Tremblay, also becomes subservient to a male consort.

Throughout Chitra Ganesh’s oeuvre, she is constantly playing with the idea of the junglee or wild woman. Ganesh has stated that the term for her means a “woman perceived as defiant or transgressing convention.” This is understood in the colonial context when the British were in South Asia and considered South Asians to be savages with no sense of refinement, control or sophistication. As noted earlier, Ganesh has an interest in unconventional women (Devi, Jhansi ki Rani). The artist wants to explore what kind of effect a junglee woman has on societal order. In the case of Phoolan Devi, in this panel she seems to be a model of a typical woman, while at the same time defying conventions. The female figure is not easily read because of the contradictions she embodies.

Even though a surface look at the painting reflects that Devi is acting womanly in order to appease patriarchal society, there are parts of the painting that reveal that Devi’s concern about her misdeeds is not the whole story. The disembodied hand and forearm on

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the left side of the canvas may be a reference to Devi’s life as a bandit. The fact that Ganesh has included the gun shows that perhaps Devi was not completely regretful of her unwomanly actions as a bandit. Additionally, the reddish sky looks turbulent, not peaceful. I interpret the red sky to symbolize that Devi, even though she seems like she is trying to be someone other than the woman who castrated men, is not fully tamed to patriarchal expectations of Indian womanhood. The reddish sky and the gun both work to show that Devi may not truly regret her actions as a bandit. Additionally, the gun refers to Phoolan Devi’s life as an outlaw. The way Devi looks out and away from the general is another sign that the she is not fully trying to propitiate patriarchal society. If Devi was trying to fully give herself to the general in this canvas, most likely she would have her face buried in his chest and the rest of her body deliberately pressed against his. Because Ganesh’s Devi is not in that pose, the Bandit Queen is not being fully tamed.

Furthermore, there is reference to Devi’s dangerous nature in the bars in the background. The foreground shows Devi as giving herself to the general, who represents patriarchal society, and being transformed into an acceptable image of Indian womanhood. This may all be a masquerade. Devi was transgressive in the realms of gender and caste. This transgressive nature was not developed because she became a bandit. According to Devi’s autobiography, she had questioned the order of society from a very young age. Whether that questioning was directed at how god could allow her family to live such a miserable existence or how injustice was always the result when a lower-caste person took her issues to be judged by an upper-caste body of justice, Devi was always questioning social order. The questioning was something that was very deeply ingrained in her. The bars in the background of this image reveal that Devi could
never give up that questioning. It is not enough to have Devi in a sari and jewelry and make-up. It is not enough to have her leaning on the general for support. Both the patriarchal state, and Devi herself, realize that there needs to be a physical bondage in which her actions are restricted because she will never truly give up her transgressive nature. The bars act as that cage to physically stop Devi from acting as a junglee woman. The bars also represent that Devi, despite her hyper-feminized appearance in this painting, never truly regrets the castration she committed. The signs within the painting show that Devi is only half-heartedly accepting the control of patriarchal society. She is not like Riviere’s woman who truly fears that reprisals will occur because of her gender transgressions.

I also analyze Judith and the Bandit Queen (Fig 3.2), through the lens of Riviere’s masquerade theory. In this canvas, the artist has depicted an Indian Judith who cuts off the head of an Indian Holofernes. Judith wears a yellow and red dupatta and kameez while the male figure appears nude. In the upper left-hand of the canvas is an image of a woman wearing a blue turban or headwrap. She smiles as she watches two men fighting in the background of the painting.

This image is about literal and metaphorical castration. As noted previously, Devi castrated men while acting as a bandit, to control upper-caste men. The image of beheading has been linked to castration when in the hands of a woman artist. Both of Artemisia Gentileschi’s Judith Beheading Holofernes (Figs 3.8 and 3.9) paintings have
Figure 3.8: Artemisia Gentileschi. *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1614

Figure 3.9: Artemisia Gentileschi. *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, 1620
been connected, by some scholars, to the artist’s biography.\textsuperscript{14} Gentileschi was raped by her teacher. Supposedly, Gentileschi’s beheading paintings are about the artist getting revenge for that act of violation. The Holofernes in the canvases purportedly looks like Gentileschi’s rapist, Agostino Tassi.\footnote{See Mary D. Garrard, “Artemisia and Susanna,” \textit{Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany}, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982, 147-171.} The artist depicted a woman cutting off a man’s head. There is the double entendre with the word head when applied to a male. There is the literal head of the body, but there is also head as reference to a man’s penis.\footnote{Some psychologists have noted this head entendre when discussing Gentileschi’s \textit{Judith Beheading Holofernes}. See Richard E. Spear, “Artemisia Gentileshi: Ten Years of Fact and Fiction,” \textit{Art Bulletin}, 82:(3), Sept 2000, 568-579.} Bringing the two meanings together allowed Gentileschi to create a biblically correct account of the Holofernes’ slaying, while at the same time, allowing the artist license to express her biography through the painting.

Ganesh’s Judith/Devi image depicts the castration that Riviere claims the overly feminine woman is trying to mask. This painting, like Riviere’s theory shows a metaphorical castration. Here Judith/Devi decapitates/castrates a male figure. Even though the metaphor of castration is in plain sight, Ganesh has shown that this figure is still a female one. The figure doing the castrating wears a \textit{dupatta} and \textit{kameez}, not bandit clothing, and her hair is modestly braided. The clothing and hairstyle are both considered appropriate for a femininely imaged Indian girl. The pigtails reinforce that this female figure is young, perhaps even pre-pubescent. In the Biblical story of Judith, she is most definitely an adult female, so it is plausible that she could have had the strength to decapitate a large man. However, this painting shows a contradiction in that the female

figure looks young. The question of how a young female can possess the strength to decapitate the figure becomes problematic. The female figure does have seemingly muscular arms that would be those of an older woman. Therein lies the basis of Riviere’s theory: the female is committing a violent act which threatens manhood, but she is a girl, which in many cultures is seen as a harmless figure. It seems contradictory that a girl could commit this act; by being a girl and decapitating a large man, this figure acts as both Riviere’s woman who bests her male colleagues (the beheading) and her non-threatening coquette (the figure is a supposedly harmless girl). The masking is in plain sight, forcing one to read the image on different levels. Because the painting is not a simple re-telling of Judith’s story, it becomes difficult to place this female figure. Is she supposed to be a threat to patriarchal society, or is she supposed to be harmless? The uneasy interpretation of this girl caused by the noted contradictions creates a space in which the viewer is unsure how to read this female. Is she submissive or subversive? It seems the image gives the viewer an example of a figure that plays both roles simultaneously.

Additionally, instead of echoing Gentileschi’s Judith and Holofernes, Ganesh has chosen Caravaggio’s (Fig 3.10) as inspiration for the composition. I would like to argue
Caravaggio’s image is a more feminine version of Gentileschi’s because of the way the heroine holds her sword and how her body is posed. Mary Garrard has made a connection between Artemisia Gentileschi’s biography and her image of *Susanna and the Elders* (Fig 3.11). Garrard has noted “The painter of *Susanna and the Elders*, then, rejected traditional allusions to Venus and drew on an alternative expressive vocabulary from the Orestes sarcophagus to suggest both the anguish of the heroine and the punitive consequences of the event. Certainly by now, the reader will have anticipated the conclusion that it must have been the female Artemisia Gentileschi, rather than the male Orazio, who made such an artistic decision.”  

\[17\] The implication is that a female artist, 

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\[17\] Garrard, 156.
because she is female and may have suffered similar trials to Susanna’s, would have been able to render this subject more realistically than any male artist who would not fully understand the position in which Susanna was placed. Furthermore, Garrard argues that a female artist could only have painted this because “…another point in favor of Artemisia’s authorship is the figure’s uncompromising naturalism, since as a woman she had access only to female nude models, which male artists in general during the sixteen and seventeenth centuries usually worked from male models.”\(^\text{18}\) Garrard then continues by highlighting the flaws seen in Susanna’s body, which the scholar insists would only

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 157.
have been done by a woman artist looking at a female model. It is Garrard’s analysis which examines the naturalistic nature of the figure that inspired me to see A. Gentileschi’s *Judith Slaying Holofernes* in the same way. While A. Gentileschi’s Judith images show a believable show of strength and effort, Caravaggio’s Judith does not look like she has the strength and leverage to decapitate a man. I argue that Caravaggio, as a male artist who most likely would not have been working with female models, tempered his Judith’s aggression and strength by making her look more feminine. She does not exhibit bulging arms or the strength that is seen in A. Gentileschi’s images. Furthermore, Caravaggio’s Judith does not seem plausible because of how far away she is from Holofernes’ body. A. Gentileschi’s versions seem to take away some of the feminine attributes seen in the Caravaggio painting by depicting Judith with straining muscles and nearly on top of Holofernes as she decapitates him.

I would further argue that by choosing the Caravaggio image as inspiration, Ganesh has again portrayed Judith/Devi as wearing the mask of womanliness. In this image, the mask is not being used to offer herself sexually to a male, but instead is being worn to make the female figure appear less threatening and aggressive. The Caravaggio image which inspired Ganesh’s work reveals a woman who could not possibly have the strength to decapitate anyone, let alone a man the size of Holofernes. Judith’s gesture of castration in the Caravaggio painting, and in Ganesh’s because she appropriates the image, seem ineffective. Because the attempt at castration looks to be contrived, the woman is again, rendered harmless. Yes, the image of Judith/Devi in this painting has her sword cutting through the man’s head. But again, because the pose of the female figure does not seem forceful enough, the Judith/Devi figure is then placed in the category of
harmless woman who will not upset social and gender order. She appears to be the female who, according to Riviere, throws herself at her male colleagues in an attempt to negate the castration she has performed. Her attempt to negate her threat as a woman acting outside of gender boundaries is seen in her little girl pigtailed and that she wears a *dupatta* and *kameez*. But the dangerous female is clearly seen because the figure’s sword appears to be slicing through the man’s head. The image does not give a clear-cut one-to-one reference to Riviere’s theory. Instead, the painting appears to begin with the Riviere theory and then disrupts it by not giving the figure a chance to be feminine without being masculine. The female’s womanliness and her threatening nature are closely tied together. The mask in this image does not shift, but becomes two different masks at the same time, again creating a sense that this female does not neatly fit into any one category.

The mask contradiction in the foreground is also seen in the woman in the background. The woman in the upper left-hand of the canvas appears to be encouraging two men to fight. The men are in the middle ground. The woman is wearing a blue turban, an earring in her right ear and bright red lipstick. Her combination of turban, a male sartorial accessory, and the feminine earring and make-up seem to contradict one another. I argue that this woman is supposed to be the woman who is trying to mask herself, while at the same time hanging on to male attributes such as the turban, and her instigation of fighting. She is not appropriately feminine for an Indian woman and she seems to be encouraging acts of violence. This female takes on more of the attributes seen in the A. Gentileschi version of this painting: the Gentileschi image shows a woman with bulging, strong muscles, like a male’s, and is intently engaged in a decapitation
which would not be a womanly pursuit. The similarities in gender blurring between this woman and A. Gentileschi’s Judith show a blending of the masks. The Ganesh image asks the question why a woman has to be either castrating or subservient to a male. Cannot a female be both simultaneously, or even something altogether? And this further raises the question of what is woman if she is both castrating and subservient concurrently. The painting, while raising the question, does not seem to offer a simple answer. Instead, because Devi’s name is in the title of this painting, the viewer is supposed to make the connection between the image and Devi the person, who was an Indian woman that was not easily classified by gender or caste. The women in the image, just like the Bandit Queen, reveal unstable images of Indian womanhood.

Another aspect which is being hinted at in Ganesh’s work is the idea that a woman’s essential characteristic is her vagina. Women have historically been defined by this one part of their bodies. This image does not allow for that simple analysis. This is seen in the Biblical account of Judith and in the artist’s image of Judith/Devi. Judith was at once in a masculine position, but also in a distinctly feminine position. Judith gives herself to save her nation. This type of self-sacrifice is usually associated with masculine heroics. But unlike a male, she is not simply giving her life. Judith has also volunteered to sacrifice her chastity, a quality highly prized in appropriately feminine Biblical women, yet Judith has her nation at stake, just as a male would. If one also considers gender in the sacrifice, one concludes that she is endangering her chastity. A male figure would never be assumed to be giving up chastity if he were to surrender for his people. He would only be paying with his life. Judith, being in the position of a male and female at the same time, must sacrifice her life and chastity. Judith becomes a figure that seems
to slip between genders, causing a blurred line between the mask and the woman. Riviere
notes that all women possess womanliness, so essentially all women are wearing a mask.
Riviere also observes a slippage between the real woman and the mask of womanliness.
A. Gentileschi’s and the Bible’s Judith show this woman and mask at the same time. In
Judith and the Bandit Queen, the woman in the background, who seems to be dressed as
both man and woman, and acts out a supposedly masculine act in encouraging violence,
reinforces the slippage seen in Judith/Devi. She becomes as difficult to categorize as the
young female figure in the foreground. The contradictions are frustrating for a viewer. It
is this contradiction, because it does not allow for an easy interpretation, that questions
the gender status quo.

The gender slippage seen in Ganesh’s painting (Fig. 3.2) is also seen in Durga, an
avenging consortless Hindu goddess. Durga is seen as a representation of the female
principle in Hinduism. But unlike other goddesses she is not constrained by a male
consort. Durga has the ability to exact revenge through the use of violence. In her chapter
entitled “Hatuyogini Shakti: The Goddess Within,” Geeti Sen explains Durga’s
significance in relation to shaktism, the power inherent in the female goddess in
Hinduism. Sen quotes Pande as saying “The great goddess is mercurial, authoritative and
insubordinate….Movement and freedom are central to all her forms.”19 The goddess,
especially Durga, must have the power to shift in form and break the rules, in order for
her to complete her task as warrior. In Ganesh’s painting it is seen in Judith/Devi
similarly slips between genders.

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19 Quoted in Geeti Sen, Feminine Fables: Imaging the Indian Woman in Painting,
Durga is the only Hindu goddess in which these seeming gender contradictions could work. Durga does not have a consort, but she is still associated with femininity as she goes to battle in a sari (Fig 3.12). This surface femininity masks a fierce warrior. The same occurs within Ganesh’s painting, as the female in the foreground appears to be non-threatening because she appears young and dressed to emphasize those qualities. That womanliness witnessed in the painting is as much a masquerade as the one associated with Durga, because both females are much more than what a patriarchal society would expect of a properly clothed female.

Phoolan Devi herself embodies some of these same ideas. Devi very much saw herself as protecting females, especially lower-caste females, from forms of violence that are usually directed toward women (rape, forced marriage). After castrating her husband, Devi said the following: “I had tasted revenge. I had tasted it for myself!....I swore to
myself I would do the same thing to all the bastards like him. I would crush them! Otherwise there was no justice for girls like me.”20 Also, Devi generally tried to help the lower-castes. Throughout her autobiography she is always returning to the idea that she was trying to protect other females from patriarchal violence. Devi does this through her actions as a bandit: killing and looting. Both killing and looting are not assumed to be qualities found in appropriately feminine Indian women. The fact that Devi refers to herself as Durga and that she tries to protect other women shows that Devi could be associated with femininity as much as masculinity. She can wear the mask of womanliness when necessary and discard it if necessary, just as this painting has shown in the figure of Judith and the other woman in the canvas.

While Ganesh’s series does not illustrate any one particular moment of Phoolan Devi’s life, she seems to have taken some of the Bandit Queen’s biography and incorporated it into the paintings. Because Ganesh is a South Asian American woman, it is not surprising that she chose Phoolan Devi as the inspiration for this series. Judith seems to be a heroic female figure, just like Durga. And Devi associated herself with Durga. This begs the question of why Ganesh did not simply portray a Durga figure in this painting. The reason for this may be because of the many sources which have inspired Chitra Ganesh. The artist does incorporate Indian culture into her works, but she also pulls from a wider body of knowledge: “iconography of…Greek and Buddhist mythology, 19th century European portraiture and fairytales, and contemporary visual culture such as Bollywood posters, anime and comic books.”21 At the heart of all these appropriations and influences, the artist seems concerned with general notions of

20 Devi, 282.
womanhood. Even though an Indian woman has inspired this series, Ganesh’s paintings do not isolate Phoolan Devi as an anomaly of womanhood. Instead, by appropriating an image of Judith and linking it with Phoolan Devi, the work seems to situate Phoolan Devi in a larger picture of *junglee* women. Judith, like Devi could be viewed as stepping outside the bounds of femininity. Even though the two women are associated with different cultures, this painting shows how the *junglee* woman is any woman in any culture who breaks boundaries and challenges notions of womanhood.

*Boys in Masks* (Fig 3.3) shows another strategy of masking that disrupts societal categories. There is an image of a figure in the center. It is difficult to tell the gender of the figure as it wears a turban, but there seems to be the shadow or outline on the chest that suggests breasts. The figure does not wear a mask and stares out at the viewer. The person looks to have blood on his or her face. The blood trickles from his or her nose and possibly the lips. Furthermore, the face looks tired and possibly as if it has suffered some abuse: the left eye looks to be bruised.

Surrounding the central figure are thirteen additional masks or faces that look mask-like. Some of the masks/faces are depicted partially, while others show the whole countenance. Two of these masks are being worn by two other figures. The two figures look to be children. The child to the viewer’s right holds up a blue mask that appears to have a trunk, teeth, and eyes. The child to the viewer’s left holds a mask to its face as well. The mask is squat, green with large eyes, teeth and nose. The masks being held by these figures are the only ones that differ from the other eleven masks/faces. Some of the other eleven masks/faces appear to be attached to bodies, while others seem to be floating without a human component. The children holding masks and surrounded by masks seem
to refer to two ideas; the figures are hiding their true selves, or they are attempting to be something they are not. Following the idea that the children are trying to be something they are not leads one to examine Homi K. Bhabha’s notions of mimicry.

In his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” Bhabha discusses how the colonized’s mimicry of the colonizer can become something that undermines the neat systems of classification and knowledge invented by the colonizer. While Bhabha is speaking specifically of a colonized people, this segment of his work can also be applied to other oppressed populations such as women and children. Bhabha defines mimicry as

the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite.* Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference ….Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers.22

During the colonial period, mimicry started out as a way for the colonizer to create a subject that seemed similar to the colonizer, but was still different. Bhabha cites the infamous example of Lord Macaulay’s “Minute” speech of 1835 in which he suggested creating “‘a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in

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Macaulay talked of wanting to impress a British education and value system upon an elite group of Indians so that the British would have sympathizers that knew both the language and culture of India, but would consider themselves more British than Indian. Mimicry of the British led to troubles for the colonizer. The British educated Indians began questioning why they were still considered beneath the British, since they shared the same language and value systems. Mimicry of the British became a painful reminder that the British educated Indians were not like the British. They were similar, but different; it was the Indians’ skin color and country of origin that made that difference indelible. It is that difference that causes the categories of knowledge of which Bhabha speaks to become undermined. Once the Indians are armed with the knowledge of the colonizer, they can begin to demand equal rights, which would lead to the downfall of the colony. Bhabha cites Sir Edward Cust’s “Reflection on West African affairs…addressed to the Colonial Office,’ in Hatchard, London 1839 to prove the colonizer’s anxiety over the situation. Cust explains that if the British were to allow their constitution to apply to the natives of the colony, the natives would rise up and demand self-governance. However, in a colony, dependence on the colonizer is the goal. To have the colonized start demanding equal rights would cause a breakdown in order, authority and power. The conclusion: mimicry began as a tool for the colonizer to subjugate the colonized, but it shifted into a catalyst which led the colonized to demand the right of self-rule. Bhabha’s point seems to be that mimicry is an effective way for the colonized to demand rights and take power from the colonizer, because it disrupts the


order imposed by the colonizer. Mimicry leads to an emphasis of difference, not
similarity, especially in the context of power relations. Once this power relationship is re-
considered, one can then work to use mimicry to destabilize the status quo power
relationship.

The figure in the center does not wear a mask and seems to have given up on
trying to conceal its true nature. But the following question must be asked: what is the
ture nature of this figure? Is the figure female, male, old, young? It is difficult to discern
any of these qualities concerning this individual. That is most likely the intention of the
image. One issue with which Chitra Ganesh is concerned is normative gender roles. The
artist wants her audience to re-think notions of femininity and masculinity and how both
are arbitrarily constructed ideas. In this image, the figure does not need to wear a mask
because it already has a sense of the hidden about it. The gender ambivalence seen in this
person forces the viewer to re-think gender and come to the conclusion that gender is not
a simplistic term that can be summed up by breasts or sartorial accessories. The
questioning seen in the central individual upsets clearly delineated categories such as
girl/boy, woman/man or even girl/woman.

The gender ambivalence of the central, unmasked figure leads one to reconsider
the gender of the two masked figures. The title of the work, Boys in Masks, would make
one automatically conclude that the figures are boys, but the central figure belies that
easy conclusion. The figures behind the green and blue masks may also be female, not
male. This is further reinforced if the viewer realizes this image is of children. Children,
until a female one develops breasts, can be mistaken for male or female when clothed.
The way the gender of a pre-pubescent child is publicly displayed is through clothing:
girls are commonly seen in dresses and boys are usually dressed in pants or shorts. While societal mores put restrictions on boys in dresses, girls in pants or shorts are acceptable. What this double standard does is blur the line between male and female, especially in children whose bodies appear identical when masked by clothing. This image questions the meaning of girl and boy, but it also asks the question of what happens if a girl child mimics a boy child, or vice versa?

Children are a very vulnerable part of the Indian population (or any population). It is easy for an adult to choose to abuse them and no one may even know it is occurring. Girl children are especially vulnerable because of their sex. To be a girl child, in public, without male supervision, puts them at risk for many abuses. Boys also have the potential to be victimized in this way. Because of the status of females in Indian society, girls are seen as an easier target. In this image, it is possible that the figures behind the green and blue masks are girls. The overall image makes it appear they are in public, without any adult to supervise them because of all the masks/faces that surround them. If these are indeed girls, one can see how they try to mimic little boys by their very public venture. In order to make sure that these girls will not be dragged home, we see them masked. The masking gives them the freedom to roam. By wearing the masks, the figures are able to rebel against the status quo. If no one identifies the masked figures as girls, then they are able to move in places that unmasked girls cannot.

There is a price to pay for gender ambiguity. As noted earlier, the central figure, the one that wears no mask, or has perhaps been unmasked, looks to have been beaten. The figure’s left eye looks bruised and blood drips from its nose onto its lips. The figure may hint at how threatening gender ambiguity can be to the status quo of a heterosexual
patriarchal society. It is in fact so threatening that a person who attempts to be neither boy nor girl while at the same time being both is punished. In this image, the punishment seems to be physical. The order of knowledge being questioned so publicly becomes a threat that could destabilize society, because society, which is based on power relations, and how it understands gender and gender roles, needs to have clearly formed categories in which people must fit. If people begin to move outside or beyond these categories, they reveal the very arbitrary and constructed nature of the status quo order, opening the possibility for this to be questioned and eventually dismantled.

But perhaps these children are boys. In the case of boys, maybe the boys were trying to mask as something more threatening. Could this also be about the boys trying to make themselves more powerful because they are disguised as demons? Maybe the boys are mimicking grown men. Either way, the boys are trying to gain more autonomy over their lives, hence more power. They, because they are also children, also need to mask themselves in an attempt to become more powerful. Because the line of power is temporarily crossed (the boys hold more power when masked), Ganesh’s painting reveals how mimicry can change the status of a person momentarily. The larger picture of mimicry reveals how hierarchal orders are arbitrary. The boys’ mimicry leads to them being more formidable, especially if the goal of the mimicry was to destabilize power.

To reinforce the slippage of mimicry, Ganesh has shown the other two figures, who are holding their masks up to their faces, as having masks distinct from the rest of the figures. Each figure’s mask is a different color and shape from the rest of the masks/faces. Even though the masks are distinct, neither of the individuals behind the masks could be mistaken for monsters or even men. The fact they attempt to do so leads
to showing a change in the order of society. The figures are trying to mask as something that has more power in society than a child. Because they attempt to enact those more powerful figures, they are questioning and attempting to upset the societal status quo.

Furthermore, the figures’ attempt to disrupt the status quo is reflected in the other masks. All the other masks/ faces are similar. They have a similar shape, big lips and eyes and eyebrows. The masks/ faces are all the same color, lavender, or some variation of the hue. If these are masks, it reflects that others in society are striving to support, by blending in, the status quo. If these are faces, the bland repetition reveals it is the lack of difference that is the status quo, and it is a shallowly developed person who acts and looks like everyone else around him. While the children’s’ mimicry is ineffectual in allowing them to become something they are not, the mimicry does serve to intensify their difference, revealing that mimicry can disrupt the power of taxonomic knowledge.

*Girls and Guns* (Fig 3.4) also engages with Bhabha’s theory of mimicry. This painting shows an image of two girls embracing one another. One girl has very dark skin, while the other has lighter skin. The darker skinned girl holds a gun. Both girls look out at the audience and seem to be pre-pubescent. The lighter-skinned girl looks to be more feminine: she appears to have longer hair that is tied back by a floral headband and wears a dangly earring. The dark-skinned girl seems to be more gender ambivalent. Her hair is cut very short, she wears a very small hoop earring in her left ear and appears to be wearing a red, button-up shirt commonly worn by men.

I interpret this painting through Bhabha’s mimicry theory in a few different ways. While the girl who seems to be more femininely dressed does not appear to pose a threat to anything, the girl with the dark skin clearly poses a threat to patriarchy. The dark-
skinned child holds a gun and wears a red, man’s shirt. The combination of red and rifle brings to mind the most iconic images of Phoolan Devi (Figs 2.9 and 2.10). Both of these images were reproduced on the covers of Devi’s autobiography and one of her biographies. Though Devi does not wear a red shirt in either image, the red of her headband creates an association with this girl’s red shirt. Because the red shirt and gun bring Devi to mind, it seems this girl may be trying to mimic Phoolan Devi. If that is the case, this girl could be trying to upset both caste and gender roles. As noted previously, Phoolan Devi was a female figure who moved outside caste and gender boundaries. As a lower-caste woman she refused to be abused and humiliated by upper-caste people. Additionally, as a woman who did not see herself as disgraced because of a failed marriage or the multiple rapes and gang rape she suffered, the Bandit Queen does not conduct herself as a woman in her position is expected to act. Instead of deciding that her life was over after her marriage and the various abuses she suffered, Devi seemed to fight back all the more, constantly challenging conventional ideas on authority and societal roles. This child, because she wears a man’s shirt and holds a gun, seems to be doing the same thing. The girl is not dressed as is expected of a female and she also grasps a weapon that would not seem appropriate for any child and especially not for a female child. She like, Phoolan Devi, is challenging gender roles and does so by appropriating clothing and a weapon usually associated with men. This becomes a strategy in which the girl is upsetting societal order. As noted earlier, Bhabha has stated ‘Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate…and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and
disciplinary powers. In this quote, the scholar is stating that if an oppressed group decides to mimic the dominant group, they appropriate characteristics of that dominant group. As they do this, the oppressed group still retains a sense of its own identity.

Bhabha is referring to colonialism in which South Asians appropriated characteristics of the British (education, dress, language) and then used those qualities to question why Indians were oppressed. Colonial South Asians could never be British. By questioning their supposed inferiority, by using the tools the British used to express the power relationship in which they were the dominant force and South Asians were the subservient component, the oppressed begins to question the simple dichotomy of British superior, South Asian inferior. The knowledge system upon which colonialism was built was being dismantled because of mimicry.

The same occurs in this image. By wearing a man’s shirt and holding a gun, this girl destabilizes gender roles and the expected relationship between the sexes. This girl does not wear women’s clothing and she is armed. Neither of these are qualities found in an appropriately feminine Indian girl. Rather, this child displays a sense of the masculine. Yet, this girl could never be a man. Even if she were to always wear men’s clothing and began killing people with her rifle, she will remain biologically a girl. By appropriating signs of the dominant group, she can challenge the simple dichotomy of male dominant, female subservient. The child’s mimicry of a man demands that the viewer reconsider the meanings of femininity and masculinity. Phoolan Devi did the same thing when she took over a gang and demanded they refer to her as Phool Singh. She took on a masculine name, clothing and position within the gang, thus creating a crisis in representation. The

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Bandit Queen’s gender bending allows the questioning of constructions of masculinity and femininity. Mimicry in both Devi’s life and this child’s image becomes the contradiction that creates a slippage of power because it allows for questioning of the status quo.

The other aspect of this image that reveals the threatening nature of mimicry is that the dark-skinned girl mimics not only a male, but Phoolan Devi. The Bandit Queen is a figure that threatened to dismantle gender and caste norms. In Figures 2.9 and 2.10, it becomes evident that Devi was not a light-skinned Indian. Instead, she had a dark complexion. A darker complexion in Indian society is not considered to be desirable. There is a preference for light-colored skin when imaging ideal Indian beauty. This is commonly seen in Bollywood films in which the heroines have light-colored skin, and sometimes even light-colored eyes. For Devi to be from a low caste and then to have dark skin made her boundary transgressions even more threatening because she was also questioning the position of a woman who does not possess ideal beauty. The girl in Ganesh’s image is also dark-skinned. That she meets the viewer’s gaze without hesitation shows that this girl is not concerned about her lack of ideal beauty. This lack becomes another threat that upsets orders of knowledge; because the girl seems unashamed of her dark skin, she forces the viewer to re-consider ideal Indian beauty and how it is a constructed and arbitrary concept.

Furthermore, as the dark-skinned girl mimics Devi, and not another model of Indian womanhood, her choice reveals yet another threat to order. As discussed in Chapter One, pre-liberalization Indian womanhood was usually defined as women being nurturing, an intelligent companion, even a vengeful goddess (though the vengeful
goddess aspect would disappear as soon as revenge was completed). These ideals from the past are considered to be appropriate role models for girls who are beginning to shape their own identities as women. Instead of any of the accepted role models, this child has chosen to emulate Phoolan Devi, a woman who disrupts classifications and the status quo. By having the girl mimic Devi, the image reveals Devi to now be one of the new role models for Indian womanhood. Devi’s example has inspired this child to break with gender, beauty and, perhaps, even caste norms, thus allowing her to radically break from past concepts of Indian womanhood.

The other girl in this painting initially seems to be a non-threatening figure. She seems to represent an appropriately feminine girl child, but this appropriate look is belied by the fact that the girl embraces the dark-skinned girl like a Bollywood heroine and hero would. In the *Dil To Pagal Hai* poster (Fig 3.13) the three main characters that form a

![Figure 3.13: Dil To Pagal Hai Poster](image)
love triangle demonstrate the image seen in Bollywood where the hero and heroine, in a still shot, embrace or hold on to one another and look at the viewer. One of the women in this image will become the object of the man’s affections, which clearly expresses the heteronormative expectations of romantic relationships. The two girls in *Girls with Guns* appear in a similar pose, suggesting there may be more than a friendship between the girls. The girls may be lesbians who embrace one another in the same way that a Bollywood hero and heroine would. The mimicking of the Bollywood poster pose raises questions on not only gender but sexuality. The normative heterosexual relationship is what is being mimicked in this painting. These girls could never be a heterosexual couple, no matter how many different Bollywood poses they engage in, and no matter if one female is dressed in seemingly masculine attire and the other dressed in more feminine clothing. The mimicking of a heterosexual couple allows the figures to question what is considered to be a normal relationship, thus destabilizing the viewer’s understanding on romantic partnerships.

Ganesh’s *Smoking a Hookah* (Fig 3.5) shows a woman, three men and a hookah. The woman is the largest figure and the artist has depicted most of her body within the frame of the canvas. The woman reclines, with her knees drawn slightly upward, her upper body resting on her left elbow. The woman looks out at the viewer. She makes a vague gesture with her left hand. The woman wears only a mask and knee-high socks.

Two of the men in the canvas are turbaned. The man in the center of the canvas, wearing the blue turban, is smoking the hookah and has a rifle strapped to his back. The man with the green turban is holding up the hookah’s pipe to the man in the blue turban. The man depicted on the far right of the canvas, in the background wears a military or
police uniform of some kind. He also wears sunglasses and his head is turned towards the other two men. This particular panel seems to be a comment on race and power. Ganesh has created the opposite of a woman who is ashamed of her brown-ness. Instead the woman seems to be embracing it. Ganesh’s depiction of race and power can be understood through the work of Frantz Fanon.

In his book, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon discusses how a colonized race views itself in relation to the race that has colonized it, revealing how psychology can be an indication of race and power relations. He is specifically discussing Algeria, as he was a black, Martinique-born, French-Algerian psychologist. In the chapter, “The Woman of Color and the White Man,” Fanon concludes that for colonized women of color, the end goal is to become as white as possible. Fanon explores the question of “to what extant authentic love will remain unattainable before one has purged oneself of that feeling of inferiority or that [Alfred] Alderian exaltation that overcompensation, which seems to be the indices of the black Weltanschauung.”26 To Fanon, authentic love means self-acceptance. He feels that self-acceptance cannot come unless the woman of color stops feeling inferior in relation to white women, and she must stop overcompensating for the fact that she is not white. Overcompensation can take place by the type of schooling, job, or spouse for which a colored woman strives. Fanon does an analysis of *Je suis Martiniquaise*, a memoir written by Mayotte Capécia. Fanon quotes from the book: “I should have liked to be married, but to a white man. But a woman of color is never altogether respectable in a white man’s eyes. Even when he loves her.”27 The author knows that even if she is able to marry a white man that does not make her equal to her

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husband in his or society’s eyes. According to Fanon, all she wants is “a bit of whiteness in her life.”\textsuperscript{28} And this desire for whiteness is there even though the woman realizes she will never truly be white. Fanon also points out this passage because it shows that Capécia wants to be something she is not, and also feels that she is inferior compared to white men and women. Fanon reinforces the inferiority complex when he cites the following passage in which the author has been taken to a white social club. She is excited at first, believing that going to this club will make her like whites. But she states “‘I felt I was wearing too much makeup. That I was not properly dressed, that I was not doing André credit, perhaps simply because of the color of my skin…’”\textsuperscript{29} The author assumes she is less than the white women at the club because she is not white.

Fanon continues his analysis by noting that perhaps ego-restriction may help with the feelings of inadequacy, because it allows the colored individual to try to focus on something positive. This can become dangerous when the person becomes stalled in one way of thinking. In this instance, it is the desire to be in the white world that creates the issue. Fanon concludes: “Ego-withdrawal as a successful defense mechanism (sic) is impossible for the Negro. He requires white approval.”\textsuperscript{30} The colored woman needs the approval of a white man in order for her to feel that she is something.

In Ganesh’s painting the woman appears to be doing quite the opposite of what Fanon observed. Instead of trying to make herself fit into a white society, the woman appears to be wearing blackface. The blackface, in this instance, is not about mocking the black individual. Blackface, here, reveals the woman in the mask is not striving to be

\textsuperscript{28} Fanon, 42.
\textsuperscript{29} Quoted in Fanon, 43.
\textsuperscript{30} Fanon, 51.
white. The black mask could be interpreted as a play on the title of Fanon’s work, *Black Skin, White Masks*. Instead of the person of color trying to don a white mask, this woman chooses to emphasize her Otherness from white society, by wearing a black mask.

Historically, blackface is about a white person painting his or her face black in order to pretend that he or she is black. Blackface is usually donned when a white performer is trying to play a black character. It was extremely common in early twentieth century America. When a white actor played a black person in this period, it was usually to emphasize negative stereotypes associated with African-Americans: lazy or the smiling idiot are two of the most commonly portrayed characters. Blackface, and the negative associations attached to it were very much about racial superiority. Slavery was finally abolished in the United States in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation. Even though slaves were set free, there remained much tension between white and black Americans. That tension carried into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, causing whites to hold fast to negative stereotypes about blacks. It is not surprising that Ganesh would use blackface as a way for the colored woman to parody a white perception of her. Ganesh, as noted earlier, is inspired by various items and ideas from various cultures; the artist does not limit herself to one culture for inspiration. Instead, the artist, who was raised and lives in the diverse city of New York allows the different cultures that form her varied world to come together in her works. It is not contradictory at all that the artist used a symbol of American racism to challenge Orientalist stereotypes.

In the context of Ganesh’s painting, the blackface seems to be donned as way to emphasize that the woman pictured is not white. The artist has shown the Orientalist,

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31 This is still done today. But when it is, the person wearing blackface is heavily criticized and even deemed a racist.
exotic nineteenth century fantasy of those from the east being overly indulgent, sexually available (this especially applied to women), and barbaric. Instead of Ganesh trying to make the figure avoid the stereotypes, her female figure seems to embrace them. It is as if the woman is emphasizing her difference by acting out Orientalist assumptions. These tropes have been seen in Orientalist paintings of the late nineteenth century, specifically Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* (Fig 3.14) and Ingres’ *Turkish Bath* (Fig 3.15). Both

Figure 3.14: Eugène Delacroix, *Women of Algiers*, 1834
paintings are constructions of what a white, male European believed a woman of the east to be. The Delacroix image shows a woman who is gluttonous in her use of opiates, assumed to be in the hookah. Additionally, the woman looks like she has been smoking something that has dulled her senses. Near her another woman reclines. They are supposed to be in a harem, which, according to the white European imagination, was a place where orgies, heterosexual and homosexual, especially lesbian, took place. It allegedly was proof of the base, animal appetites of the non-whites that these women would be kept simply as playthings. Ingres’ works also reveals the orgiastic undertones that were assumed to be part of harem life. Both of these views are European constructions. While Ingres and Delacroix’s works reinforce stereotypes constructed

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33 Ibid.
within the west, Ganesh’s *Smoking a Hookah* challenges these tropes so that colored people of the near east can forge their own identities.

The fact that this woman does not hide behind a white mask shows that she is trying to move past the construction of white superiority which Fanon sees as the pitfall of many colonized peoples. The woman attempts to create a new identity of what a brown woman is. Even though the female figure is challenging stereotypes, her body language reveals it is not an easy task. The woman’s gaze meets the viewer’s and her facial expression seems stoic. Yet, the way her body is twisted looks uncomfortable. While the black mask and her face may show the woman wants to embrace her Otherness, the rest of her body shows how deeply uncomfortable she is with this attempt. The woman in this painting seems to play out some of Fanon’s analysis of Capécia. While Capécia wanted to reject her Otherness, the moment she attempts to do it, she becomes deeply uncomfortable and self-conscious. Ganesh’s woman also appears self-conscious in her nudity and black mask. The image may be showing the contradictions between wanting to be empowered versus acting empowered. It is not an easy path to follow and from the body language of the masked woman, one needs to ask if it is even a path that is possible to follow.

Another aspect of the painting that shows embracing one’s Otherness may be a difficult task is how the woman is situated in relation to the hookah. As noted previously, the hookah, in Orientalist nineteenth-century painting became symbolic of the Other or what the West was not. In Ganesh’s painting, the hookah is smoked by the figure with the
blue turban.\textsuperscript{34} The figure with the blue turban may be a type of self-portrait of the artist. The three paintings discussed in this chapter show that this figure is ambiguous: in some images the figure is gender ambiguous, in others the figure plays an ambiguous role in the narrative of the canvas. While I have been unable to confirm this conjecture, if the blue-turbaned figure is a type of self-portrait, I interpret the blue-turbaned figure to be conjuring the masked woman. The woman appears as if she may be emerging from the bottle, like a genie. The genie is a figure who has the ability to grant wishes. The person making the wishes must be careful in how the wishes are phrased. The turbaned figure/artist may be conjuring the woman to express how she would like to see women of color embrace their otherness. The black mask on brown skin emphasizes this embrace of identity. The distorted layout of the woman’s body, and especially her left fingers, make it seem as if the wish has somehow gone wrong. Fanon’s theory asserts that in order to dismantle the inferiority complex created by interacting with Europeans, the native must embrace what he is, but it is easier said than done. I argue that this painting in Ganesh’s series shows that difficult path. The transformation does not come by simply donning a mask of blackness. The person who wants to break out of the status quo power relations must embrace their identity on a deeper level. Because the woman’s body looks contorted and uncomfortable, the artist shows the possibility of failure. And this failure becomes a critique concerning Orientalism. Edward Said in his book, \textit{Orientalism}, continues reading the west and east as a dichotomy. The purpose of his work was to dismantle the implied

\textsuperscript{34} At this point in my analysis, I am beginning to believe that perhaps the figure with the blue turban may be a type of self-portrait of the artist. As I have been unable to get in touch with Chitra Ganesh to confirm my conjecture, I am hesitant to make this assertion as part of my argument for this chapter. But if the figure in the blue turban is a self-portrait, in \textit{Smoking a Hookah}, I see the artist as placing herself in the image to construct
relationship between the two by revealing the constructed nature of the concept of orientalism. Said wants to give agency to the east in this status quo relationship. Chitra Ganesh’s work seems to dismantle the idea of a neat dichotomy between east and west further by showing how the masked woman’s attempt to confront the dichotomy gives rise to other issues.

This series is not Ganesh’s only one that questions Orientalist notions. In her series, *The Unknowns*, 2009, Ganesh again uses the hookah and nude female imagery (Figs 3.16 and 3.17). In *The Unknowns*, Ganesh is trying to bring to the forefront a

Figure 3.16: Chitra Ganesh, *Untitled* from *The Unknowns*, 2009
subject that has been ignored; the brown female. These paintings evoke the exotic, as the women seem to be from harems. In Fig. 3.16, the woman has a hookah and there is the hint of Islamic architecture in the background to further exoticize her. In Fig. 3.17, the woman’s dark skin, turban and drapery reveal that she is not European. Even though these women seem to possess attributes that would typically be seen in Orientalist harem paintings, the images are also destroying stereotypes of what a non-white woman is. In her essay, “Knowing the Ununknowns,” Svati P. Shah has stated of Ganesh’s body of work:

Like many artists who have made work that sits outside of the main-stream, Ganesh has also been described as “oppositional”–to colonialism, heteronormativity, and patriarchy, for example. Her work has, at times, seemed to serve as an example of art that attempts to rewrite marginalized subjects into the art historical canon or as an example of “substitution
“theory” in action, in which normatively raced and sexed characters are replaced by nonnormative ones.\(^\text{35}\)

Shah notes that Ganesh is interested in examining marginalized subjects in the history of art, such as women imaged in Orientalist paintings otherness, and trying to create a new meaning for them. Ganesh also is interested in imaging marginalized figures in general, hence her interest in Phoolan Devi. *Smoking a Hookah* pulls the two examples of marginality into one image. Ganesh depicts a woman that looks as if she could have been from a nineteenth-century harem painting, but empowers the woman by having her gaze at the viewer. The woman is no longer a passive fantasy waiting to be consumed by a western male audience. Because the woman makes eye contact with the viewer, she has seized control of her representation. The white, male viewer cannot simply construct a fantasy with a passive object. Instead, he has to contend with the gaze of the woman, which allows the woman to now become something beyond the viewer’s fantasy. The woman can construct herself. Shah also notes this about Ganesh’s *Unknonwns*, by pointing out that some of the women in the series may lack eyes, but never lack a gaze. She continues to liken these women to Manet’s *Olympia*, 1863, (Fig 3.18) and Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907, (Fig 3.19) in which the gazes of the women staring out at the audience caused an uproar because the women depicted are no longer passive and because each artist upsets the conventions associated with depictions of marginalized figures (sex workers).\(^\text{36}\) This disruption of convention is carried into Ganesh’s Devi and Unknowns series as she depicts marginalized women and

\(^{35}\) Svati P. Shah, “Knowing the Unknonwns,” *Feminist Studies*, 37:(1), Spring 2011, 112.

\(^{36}\) Ibid., 122.
Figure 3.18: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863

Figure 3.19: Pablo Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907
invents new identities or understandings of non-western women in the images. In the image of *Smoking a Hookah*, Ganesh’s nude reclining female looks out at the viewer from behind a black mask, revealing that she is not caught in the trap described by Fanon. She is a brown woman wearing a black mask, which does not hide her nature, but instead emphasizes her Otherness. By surrounding the woman with turbaned men and a hookah, Ganesh reinforces the playing out of Orientalist stereotypes, but the stereotypes are being used to reveal that the oriental woman can construct her own identity.

Even though I approach the paintings in this series through multiple masking theories, each of the theories has an underlying idea: masking can be a way for those who are not in power to have a voice in a system in which they are ignored. Those marginalized voices come from both colonized, colored people and women. My overall interpretation of these theories of masking becomes a way to reveal how Indian womanhood, in neoliberalized India, is not something stable. The ideals of femininity appear in *Phoolan Devi’s Other Life*, but they are layered with other, less feminine, notions of Indian womanhood. It is the masking that becomes a strategy for Indian women in general, and Phoolan Devi in particular, to question or even subvert a patriarchal hierarchy, thus creating a space in which a new model of Indian womanhood can emerge.
Chapter Four: The Space Between the Two: Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s Goddess of Flowers

According to art critic Shivangi Ambani, “Sandrasegar’s primary motive [is] to encourage viewers to reconsider the issues and read between the lines.” The shadows cast by her works give viewers the cue to read between the lines. What is read between the lines of Goddess of Flowers is that Indian womanhood cannot be understood as either modern or traditional, or even a mix of the two. Instead, the work, as well as the subject of Phoolan Devi, reveals how opposites, in the case of the materials, shadows and paper, and the subject matter work together to represent the complex position of twenty-first-century Indian womanhood. For this chapter, I select some images from Goddess of Flowers (Figs 4.1-4.8) to discuss how the subject matter of the works reveals the coming together of seemingly contrary ideas, thus asserting Phoolan Devi as a new model for Indian womanhood in the twenty-first century.

Figure 4.1: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, Goddess of Flowers: Image 1 (Sati), 2003

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Figure 4.2: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 12 (Krishna and Radha)*, 2003

Figure 4.3: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 19 (Radha Heartbroken)*, 2003
Figure 4.4: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing)*, 2003

Figure 4.5: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 20 (Durga)*, 2003
Figure 4.6: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 7 (Woman with Gun)*, 2003

Figure 4.7: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Goddess of Flowers: Image 26 (Kali)*, 2003
Shadows have become Sandrasegar’s (b. 1977) signature. Goddess of Flowers started her interest in shadows, and this exploration is continued into the artist’s more recent works. In White Picket Fences In the Clear Light of Day Cast Black Lines, 2009 (Fig 4.9) the work is made of clear plastic shaped into the silhouettes of soldiers. The

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2 Other artists have used the medium of shadows as way in which to approach controversial subject matter. Kara Walker in her work Gone: An Historical Romance of Civil War as it Occurred Between the Dusky Thighs of a Young Negress and Her Heart, 1994, examines issues of race and slavery in the United States. The work has a sense of violence and the images are disturbing. See Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, Seeing the Unspeakable: The Art of Kara Walker, Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. Another artist that has used shadows to unpack difficult issues is William Kentridge. The artist is known for creating works that address atrocities in Apartheid South Africa. His works also contain an element of violence in them. See Dan Cameron, William Kentridge, London: Phaidon Press, 1999.
silhouettes stand about one and a half feet tall and have images of various items within them: the Buddha, Krishna, Finder’s Street Station in Melbourne, hennaed hands, police and protesters holding up signs. The artist uses these images to question issues such as

Figure 4.9: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *White Picket Fences In the Clear Light of Day Cast Black Lines*, 2009

the 2009 attack on Indian students in Australia and immigrants’ middle class dreams of an unattainable suburbia.\(^3\) Another of Sandrasegar’s work, *The Shadow-Class – Untitled (Carpet Weaver)*, 2007-2008 (Fig 4.10), takes a different approach and simply is a black felt silhouette. The shadow becomes the object. The work acts as a critique

\(^3\) Ibid.
concerning the lack of voice for those marginalized in society. Even in her recent video work, *Bold Lover, Never, Never, Canst Thou Kiss Though Winning New the Goal*, 2012 (Fig 4.11), the artist is clothed in black and runs through an Australian wilderness landscape. She becomes a moving shadow, something difficult to pin-down or identify.
This particular work was exhibited in the annual Potter Museum of Art’s Basil Sellers Art Prize exhibition. The theme for 2012 was art and sport. With that in mind, Bala Starr discusses how Sandrasegar articulates that the goal of the athlete and the artist are the same: both are on the metaphorical edges of society and are striving to find the divine in the most human of experiences. Starr then notes that the work is similar to the Greek god of wine, Dionysus; he is part god, part mortal (his father was Zeus, king of the Greek gods, and his mother was a mortal woman). He displays a “capacity to represent one thing and its opposite simultaneously.” Sandrasegar’s video reveals the bringing together of disparate concepts as a way in which to challenge notions such as the duality of shadow and substance. As these various works reveal, shadows are a medium that the

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artist uses to examine various ideas by bringing together two seemingly opposite concepts in one work. Sandrasegar in *Goddess of Flowers* does the same by using Phoolan Devi and her life story as the starting point for her analysis of Indian womanhood.

Of Phoolan Devi’s role in her series, *Goddess of Flowers*, Sangeeta Sandrasegar has stated “Phoolan Devi is read as a mythical character, a various inversion of the many incarnations of the Mahadevi (Mother Goddess), while simultaneously representing ‘Modern’ and problematic discourses on womanhood, identity and power.” The artist notes that Phoolan Devi, as a woman, reflects tradition, but at the same time, she reveals modernity. The two are both seen in Devi, but do not always exist together easily. Both Devi and *Goddess of Flowers* act as indexical of Indian identity in the twenty-first century. Some of the works in the series reference Devi’s life and stereotypes of traditional India directly. Others reveal a traditional image, but re-considered to fit into a modern context. When the two aspects are read together, the substance and shadows create a deeper understanding of the issue of Indian womanhood by hinting at a third possibility in the space between the two. It is that third possibility, the space between the shadow and the sculpture that allow for the formation of a new Indian womanhood. Because the work questions why the only possibilities are tradition and modernity, it asks the viewer to consider a third possibility. In the case of neoliberal India, that third possibility is an unstable sign that questions the meaning of twenty-first-century Indian womanhood, hence Indian identity.

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*Goddess of Flowers* is a series of cutout paper sculptures. There are thirty-eight works in the series and each work is either shaped like feet or hands, with the majority of the images shaped like feet. Sandrasegar has noted that she picked the shapes from traditional henna instructive texts:

The henna motif traditionally related to Indian ceremonies was employed as a template for the pieces, (as hands or feet and were directly sourced from diagrams for the application of henna motifs)…. The foot template comes to represent rites of passage: exile journeys and covered landmasses. In this visual form they perform narrative functions; the foot physically and metaphorically represents the passages traversed by Phoolan Devi, whilst the hands offer breaks in the story-points of contemplation.⁶

The foot images represent Devi’s journey from *Mallah* to politician. But in a general sense the foot images symbolize the journey of Indian women as they move from, and between, the traditional to the modern and into a third space. That the artist pulled her inspiration from a book used by women on their wedding days and that her series is made of paper, fabric, glitter and sequins speak of a feminine aesthetic. Because the artist chose a shape closely associated with the biggest change in an Indian woman’s life, her works hint at transition. This transition refers to a change for women, but it is not something as simple as a wedding. Sandrasegar has stated: “Phoolan Devi’s story comes to represent the political and cultural female. Changing and shifting from bandit to politician and simultaneously from victimized third world woman to celebrated third world heroine.”⁷ In addition to this literal transformation for Phoolan Devi, a larger transformation takes place that can be appropriated by any Indian woman. That transformation is one of becoming a woman who may be traditional, modern or even both

⁷ Sandrasegar, 82.
at the same time. By the twenty-first century, Indian women need no longer be locked into one or the other. Indian women could now move between the two spaces that seem to speak of complete opposites and still retain an Indian identity. As Indian women move between these spaces, they may find themselves located in yet a third space. This third space, which in Sandrasegar’s sculptures is the space between the shadow and the work, allows for new possibilities when considering Indian womanhood.

The narrative is not the only part of the work that moves between diametric spaces. The medium does so as well. Sandrasegar has created this series out of paper, glitter and sequins. All of these materials are considered to be craft or folk art material. They are not commonly associated with fine art. It was the artist’s intention to play with ideas on what is fine art and how one can make it. She has stated: “Conscious to the common practice of pairing the concepts of Nation and tradition, I wanted to employ craft techniques and associations to play out the essential antagonisms of such grouping and labeling….This device then serves to refer to the art/craft arguments within visual theory…. “ Sandrasegar’s statement reinforces how her work is trying to reveal two seemingly disparate notions coming together. The materials the artist used bring to mind folk and craft traditions and everyday life; sequins can be associated with textile adornment, paper with advertising and other forms of mass communication and glitter is something associated with children’s or untrained artists’ works. Sandrasegar has used these materials in works intended for gallery spaces, a fine arts institution. She has transformed craft, folk and everyday materials into high art.

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As well as craft versus fine art, the artist was also intrigued by the dual nature of paper as sculpture. She has stated “At the time what I liked (I guess I still do) is what I see as the duality of paper as a material – both gentle and strong. I could cut it out and make these seemingly fragile pieces, which were yet quite sound….“\textsuperscript{10} The statement reveals the artist’s fascination with opposites coming together. Her narrative also reveals how tradition and modernity can come together to create a more complicated picture that allows room for a critique of common dichotomies. The materials of Sandrasegar’s series take a critical approach to issues concerning craft and art.

Other Indian women artists have also wrestled with notions of craft versus fine art in their works created specifically for gallery or museum installation. Anita Dube’s series, \textit{Silence (Blood Wedding)}, 1997 (Fig 4.12), is made of bone, lace, velvet, beads, glass and thread. Gayatri Sinha has noted “It is…important to realize Dube’s fine craftsmanship in which the handiwork of cutting, stitching, and embroidering – all aspects receding in art practice – are privileged.”\textsuperscript{11} The critic identifies that the artist is interested in bringing craft arts to the forefront as a medium and that Dube also explores the idea of craft materials as fine art. Dube has brought two seemingly disparate ideas, fine art and craft, together in one image, allowing her to challenge the hierarchy assumed between the two.

Additionally, Gayatri Sinha has stated “In the work, a human skeleton is taken apart, the bones exquisitely stitched in red velvet, decorated with sequins….In this way Dube acknowledges the twin inheritance from her parents: her father, a medical doctor, her mother’s skill in craft tradition.”\(^{12}\) This quote shows Dube’s general interest in dichotomies. In this instance the contradiction is between professional and domestic, man and woman. She tries to bring the two together into a coherent unit. The tension of the craft material versus a scientific object underneath it creates a friction that provides the viewer with a new way of understanding the two.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
As Dube is interested in an analysis of multiple dichotomies, so, too, is Sandrasegar. The artist has also noted about her work “The themes so eloquently eulogised upon from the Upanishad’s (sic) to the Mahabaratha (sic) are here recovered for a contemporary context: Good and Evil. Revenge and Salvation. Love and Hate. Desire and Belief.”\(^{13}\) The artist’s list of opposites shows her interest in contradictions. *Goddess of Flowers* brings these themes together by examining these ideas from traditional Indian textual sources and applies them to a contemporary context.\(^{14}\)

Sandrasegar’s choice of media also represents another odd pairing: while the images are made of materials that are associated with the domestic, hence the feminine, some of the images do not reveal this assumedly gentle nature. Some of the figures depict violent scenes that become shocking when one absorbs them through the cutout paper with glitter and sequins. For example, *Image 31 (Woman Bound and Abused)* (Fig 4.13) shows a woman who is nude. She is bound and appears to have been assaulted, due to both the position of her body and the blood trickling from her nose. *Image 25 (Man Spewing Blood)* (Fig 4.14) is an image of a man who holds his head and looks to be spewing blood from his mouth. And *Image 18 (Figure with Gun to Head)* (Fig 4.15) illustrates the bust of a gender ambivalent figure. From outside the image’s frame, a hand and forearm hold a gun to the figure’s head. The violent imagery is unexpected of the


\(^{14}\) Other Indian women artists have also challenged the hierarchy between craft and art. Meera Mukherjee uses traditional textile and metal crafts and creates large-scale sculptures.
Figure 4.13: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Image 31 (Woman Bound and Abused)*, 2003

Figure 4.14: Sangeeta Sandrasegar, *Image 25 (Man Spewing Blood)*, 2003
media. By crafting violent images in the seemingly delicate and feminine media, the artist forces the viewer to further reconsider what exactly is craft. Craft art is usually associated with the decorative. These works belie that, questioning whether these objects are craft or art. The works appear to criticize the assumed hierarchy between the two. The tension seen between the subject and materials also acts as another way in which the work needs to be read between the lines. Just like the sculptures and shadows, the subject and materials allow for more possibilities than a dichotomy, hence revealing the complex nature of Indian womanhood.
Throughout *Goddess of Flowers*, the artist has created images of traditional Hindu women and images of modern females. The types of images are interspersed throughout her series; they are not separated into a neat break in which images of the traditional are separated from those of the modern. This strategy reveals tradition and modernity cannot be separated into neat categories in the twenty-first century Indian woman. Instead, it speaks of a complexity that is not easily read.

In her dissertation, Sandrasegar examines Phoolan Devi and Indian womanhood through the lens of four goddesses: Sita, Parvati, Durga and Kali. The references to the goddesses and the fact that these can be linked to the life of a modern Indian woman shows how two assumedly contrasting ideas can come together to create a new Indian womanhood. Just like Anita Dube’s work, Sandrasegar’s also uses the bringing together of two seemingly diametrically opposed concepts for the purpose of critique. In *Goddess of Flowers*, the critique is directed towards outmoded ideas of Indian womanhood.

The very first image in the series reveals an image of Indian womanhood that has crossed borders. *Image 1 (Sati)* (Fig 4.1) shows a woman in the practice of *sati*, or widow burning. The work is made of red paper, sequins and glitter. In the upper left portion of the cut-out there is a temple-like structure. In the foreground, a woman sits, with her hands in a gesture of prayer, in an assumed funeral pyre. She remains calm as the flames engulf her. This type of image is one that has been seen before and been widely distributed. *Goddess of Flowers*’s first image brings to mind both the story, and the images made in its wake, of Roop Kanwar, an eighteen-year old who was burned on her husband’s funeral pyre in the tradition of *sati*. The event took place in Deorala, Rajasthan.
in 1987. The act was both hailed as an act of the assertion of Indian identity, and reviled as an act of patriarchal violence. A result of the death was the creation of images similar to those of bazaar prints. Bazaar prints, as noted in Chapter Two tend to show images of figures to be venerated: gods, goddesses, important political figures. But the two Kanwar images are of a young woman who became the center of a debate on tradition and modernity (Figs 4.16 and 4.17). Both of the images seem to show the act of sati in a positive light. Figure 4.16 shows the bride smiling as she burns on her husband’s funeral pyre and Figure 4.17 shows the young bride calmly burning and praying on her husband’s funeral pyre. Additionally there is the image of a goddess and a temple in the image. Both prints portray Roop Kanwar as a willing participant in the act, and the dutiful Hindu wife that follows her husband everywhere, even into death.

This image is one that has captured the western imagination since the British raised concerns about sati in the nineteenth century. The British had used the practice of sati as proof of the barbaric nature of South Asians. As a result a debate rose on whether sati was a barbaric act or if it was an act of asserting South Asian identity. Sandrasegar’s image of sati contests the bazaar print. In the artist’s image, she has reversed the print, so that the temple is to the left and the bride faces to the right. Sandrasegar has also left out a critical element in her version: there is no longer a divine figure burning the bride. In her book, Gods in the Bazaar, Kajri Jain briefly discusses the Kanwar images, by showing how they heightened the debate on sati. The scholar

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discusses the conversation between activist-filmmaker, Anand Patwardhan, and a woman of the Rajput community. The activist asks the woman if she thinks the images have been manipulated. The woman does not think they have, and by the end of their conversation she posits the following question: “If you couldn’t see god [in the photo], how would people know how she was burned, that it was god’s rays?”

The Rajput woman is comfortable with the sati because she believes it was god’s will. Her reasoning and conclusion remove blame from Kanwar’s in-laws who were of the same Rajput clan.

17 Ibid., 7.
By leaving out the image of the deity, Sandrasegar shows how the woman in the flames, in *Image 1 (Sati)*, is being engulfed by a man-made pyre. The image questions the idea of the destruction of women in order to assert tradition. The *Goddess of Flowers* image does not glorify a Hindu past. Instead, it begs the viewer to ask why is this woman burning and who is sanctioning the burning. The image supports a secularist view of *sati* by revealing that it is not the hand of divinity that has caused this. Sandrasegar’s image is trying to reveal a truth that was being denied in the other images of Roop Kanwar.

But truth is not easy to find in the Kanwar images or even the artist’s work. Asish Nandy in his article, “Sati as Profit Versus Sati as Spectacle: The Public Debate on Roop..."
Kanwar’s Death,” has discussed how some witnesses claim Kanwar went willing to the funeral pyre, while others claimed she was drugged and then taken to the pyre. Nandy notes that there is no easy way to decide what the burning was about.\(^\text{18}\) If Kanwar had gone willingly, the act becomes one of asserting Indian identity by acting out a Rajput Hindu custom. If Kanwar had been drugged, then this would speak of the barbaric and senseless nature of the event.

By considering Sandrasegar’s image in the context of the Roop Kawar controversy, the viewer is forced to contemplate the message the artist is trying to communicate. Does this reflect an image that tries to assert Indian Hindu identity because it involves a woman enacting out a religious tradition that leads to her death? Is this woman understood as the ideal wife because she is willing to commit a form of suicide so that she can join her husband even in death? These connotations can be read in Image 1 (Sati), especially if it is considered within the context of the Roop Kanwar bazaar prints, as those ideas are exactly what the bazaar prints convey.

However, such an easy interpretation is not possible with this image. The woman in Sandrasegar’s image, as I noted previously, is not being burned by a divine figure. By leaving out that element, the image raises the question of who is doing the burning. Without the divine figure present, the answer becomes man. And if it is another human being that has put the woman up to this act, whether she was willing or unwilling, the image becomes read as a brutal, outmoded religious custom which is intended to place controls on women. Sandrasegar’s image of sati questions Indian womanhood because

this image asks whether or not a representation of *sati* is even an appropriate image to associate with late twentieth-century India. The artist’s work requires the viewer to re-think her own stereotypes and assumptions concerning Indian identity as it is communicated through images of Indian women.

This is the first of the objects in the series that references a goddess. Sita in the *Ramayan* is the most famous of *sati*. The myth focuses on Sita being kidnapped by a demon and Ram trying to rescue her. The hero does succeed in freeing Sita, but the expectation of a happy ending is destroyed when Ram tells Sita it was his duty to free her, but because she was living with another man, he was suspicious of her purity. Sita tries to convince Ram, through words, of her purity. When that does not work, she steps into flames.\(^1\) The artist, in her dissertation, describes Sita as “the daughter and loyal wife, who must sacrifice herself as part of the continuous cycle of life. Sita is considered the ideal Hindu wife in her loyalty and self-immolation to an ideal.”\(^2\) Sita is the perfect Hindu wife who is willing to go through extremes in order to not bring shame on her husband. While this quality seems noble, that nobility is misplaced, especially in neoliberalized India. Sita is a stand-in for an archaic ideal of Indian womanhood that Sandrasegar questions in *Image 1 (Sati)*.

The artist plays with the word *sati* in her dissertation. She begins by looking at the root of the word, *sat*. Sandrasegar states: “Sati is representative of theological and philosophical states of being, and this understanding is integral to the communities’ acceptance of it. Deriving from the word *sat*, it describes both a male and female

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\(^2\) Sandrasegar, 86.
concept….it defines a very specific quality in a human being, one of goodness, truth and purity…..”21 Here the artist implies that the practice can refer to men or women. Though today the word is very much associated with widow burning, previously, the term referred to any type of self-immolation. A person, male or female, would take on the act to prove, “goodness, truth, purity.” The artist, in this first image of her series, has depicted what one expects from the word, sati, but examining it in the context of the entire series, it becomes evident that the image wants to remove the widow-burning associations of the root sat.

Sandrasegar reinforces the idea of sati referring to exposing goodness, truth and purity, by examining another word with the same root: satyagraha, a term associated with Mahatma Gandhi. Sandrasegar writes:

> Once again, the knowledge of sat, that frames the context of the sati, and exemplified within the Goddess Sita, gives rise to an alternative mode for understanding and dispensing Truth. For realisation of sat, also implicates a desire and determination to communicate, and this choice in turn requires a development and refinement of the relevant modes of communication. As a structure, sat epitomises mythical function. To attain awareness of sat, is to have recourse to simultaneously ideology and semiotics. The process of socially contextualizing sat, for personal or political purposes, is then explicated two-fold: “by reaffirming the language of continuity and by re-emphasizing the language of self.”22

The artist reveals how the root of sati can be used in a political sense. If one realizes the root of satyagraha and sati are the same, one can begin to see how Sandrasegar’s appropriated and altered image of the Roop Kanwar bazaar print is trying to communicate an ideology. Image 1 (Sati) challenges the idea of sati being a way to glorify Indian women, and by extension India, by forcing the viewer to think about why

21 Ibid., 91.
22 Ibid., 93.
this custom is carried out and who does it. The gains seem manifold for the bride’s in-laws: they rid themselves of a financial burden and gain the respect of the community for following a tradition that clashes with modernity. But there is no gain for the bride. As noted in Chapter Two, she is sometimes venerated as a goddess after her death. But again, this is a benefit to the community who assumes the dead women will answer their prayers. The truth of sati is revealed in this image and it is not one that speaks of a pure tradition. The decision to begin the entire series with Image 1 (Sati), a sensationalist image, sets the stage for reevaluation of Indian womanhood in neoliberal India.

Image 12 (Krishna and Radha) and Image 19 (Heartbroken Radha) (Figs 4.2 and 4.3) make an indirect reference to Parvati, another of the Mahadevis explored in the artist’s dissertation. Sandrasegar has referred to Parvati as “the romantic embodiment, who inspires love.” This statement moves beyond the dutiful wife seen in Sita and towards the woman who has a sexually and emotionally fulfilling relationship with a male. In the case of Parvati, this is with Shiva. The artist notes that Shiva and Parvati’s union is part of traditional Hinduism, because the completion between male and female is seen in the “Linga of Shiva and the Yoni of Parvati, during worship, whereby the devotee offers water or milk over the linga, which rises from the yoni.” The devotee, while pouring water or milk over the linga and yoni is showing devotion and worship for not only Shiva and Parvati as separate entities, but also the unity that comes with the joining of male and female. In her visual series, Sandrasegar reveals this unity, or balance between male and female.

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23 Ibid., 98.
24 Ibid.
Another traditional Hindu tale, to which Sandrasegar refers, that speaks of the happy joining of male and female is the *Gita Govinda*. This story tells of Krishna and Radha’s passionate affair, how Krishna is unfaithful to Radha, and then she forgives him because she longs to be with him. On the surface, this is a love story, but if one examines this in the context of Hinduism, one realizes that Krishna and Radha’s love becomes a metaphor for the devotion and love between a god and his disciple. The story can be read on its surface level or its symbolic level or both. In *Goddess of Flowers*, the story appears in its surface interpretation, especially when it is contextualized within other images of women’s sexuality.

*Image 12 (Krishna and Radha) (Fig 4.2)* is an image from the *Gita Govinda*. To those familiar with historical representations of the *Gita Govinda*, it becomes evident that this particular image was inspired by the 18th century *Gita Govinda* from the Kangra School of painting (Fig 4.18). Both the positions of Krishna and Radha and the landscape
reveal the influence of this painting. In this particular scene, Krishna sits near a reclining Radha and gently supports her neck so that her face is titled towards him. This image seems intimate and tender, and shows the lovers before they begin to make love. The intimacy in the work, as read by how Krishna supports Radha and the way his head is tilted towards her and hers towards him, reveals that the two are both willingly engaging in this embrace. Sandrasegar’s image reminds us that there is a tradition of Indian women having sexual agency. Krishna does not force himself upon Radha; instead the two decide to come together as willing lovers. In Radha and Krishna, one can also see how third world female sexuality is more complex than assumed. That the artist chose to create a work inspired by an older miniature painting shows how much this image is about tradition, but by emphasizing female sexual agency, the work demands that the viewer look at Image 12 (Krishna and Radha) as a piece that questions the notion that open sexuality is a modern phenomena.

Even though Image 12 (Krishna and Radha) seems to neatly meld tradition and modernity, Image 19 (Radha Heartbroken) (Fig 4.3), reveals a negative effect of sexual agency. Image 19 (Radha Heartbroken) shows another vignette from the Gita Govinda. In this image, Radha is alone, with her head bowed as she sits beside a river. Her body language reveals despair, because Krishna has gone away and she has discovered he has been with other women. Common beliefs concerning third world marriages assume that all were arranged, and love came after the marriage, not before. The notion of love before marriage seems to be a very modern concept. Many people do not associate it with traditional India. But the Gita Govinda gives one another understanding of traditional women and sexuality. This image reflects the ancient story, but it also can act as a symbol
of what the modern third world woman experiences in love. She has the freedom to choose her partner, and the freedom to have love before marriage. However, these choices can be fraught with uncertainty and heartache as reflected in this particular image; the ups and downs are part of the modern romance story. By bringing this type of story into play with the Radha and Krishna images, one begins to see how the traditional story can still be relevant to modern women and their sexualities. Krishna and Radha are eventually reunited, though do not marry. It becomes another perspective on love, romance and sexuality in a traditional Indian myth. But it also acts as a reflection of what women in modern India could experience. A woman can have sexual and romantic agency, but the path is not always smooth.

The choice of Krishna and Radha as willing traditional lovers in *Goddess of Flowers* can relate to Phoolan Devi. Image 12 *(Krishna and Radha)* (Fig 4.2) is from a traditional Hindu myth that challenges assumptions about third world women and their sexualities. Radha was married and older than Krishna when the affair began. Radha’s martial status excludes her from being a model of Indian womanhood because the ideal Indian woman remains chaste. Furthermore, Radha’s being an older woman also contests assumed qualities of an appropriate role model for Indian womanhood. These contradictions between modernity and tradition seen within Radha and Krishna’s relationship can also be understood in Phoolan Devi’s life.

In the case of Devi, her first foray into sexuality is when she was married off as a child bride. This experience is what is assumed of third world females, but Sandrasegar’s work tries to take a different approach to the subject. By including images of an unconventional couple from traditional mythology, the series raises questions concerning
female sexual agency as well as the meaning of tradition. Phoolan Devi, once she was freed of her status as a low caste, divorcee, became a woman who also challenges ideas on tradition. She obtains sexual agency because Vikram Mallah lets her choose him. He does not make Devi his property. This idea of a woman having a choice in a sexual relationship disputes stereotypes which assume that third world women do not have any opportunity in choosing their partners. *Goddess of Flowers* shows different possibilities for the modern woman’s sexual and romantic life by contextualizing Radha and Krishna within Parvati and Shiva’s relationship. Moreover, by connecting sexual agency to the *Gita Govinda*, the series reveals that third world women are not simply prisoners of a patriarchal culture. Instead, there is a tradition in which romances like Devi and Vikram Mallah’s is based that becomes as indicative of the meaning of India and Indian women as Sita in *The Ramayana*.

Sandrasegar has noted “In the second reincarnation of Parvati, Phoolan Devi presents a female example, who despite the sexual and physical abuse she has incurred, remains resilient in reconciling male companionship, love and sexuality.” The artist offers Phoolan Devi as a model for Indian womanhood. That model does not enter into an arranged marriage, or allow anyone to make decisions concerning her sexuality. Instead, this image, coupled with Phoolan Devi’s biography asks that women, sexuality and love in Indian culture be reconsidered. Sandrasegar sees Parvati in Phoolan Devi, noting “In finding such a Union, Phoolan Devi completes the essential knowledge of life: within Hindu mythology and theology, she is…sexually recognized….Perhaps even more vital than these social constructions of the self is the individual knowledge that she is also

25 Ibid., 99.
capable of finding and inspiring love.”26 In this statement, Sandrasegar is referring to how Phoolan Devi found love and possibly sexual fulfillment in Vikram Mallah. What this revelation does is allow the modern woman, who challenges notions of traditional Indian womanhood, to find a story of love associated with a traditional Hindu icon. Devi, because of the modern romance between her and Vikram Mallah, then becomes situated as both modern and traditional at the same time. She becomes a representation of Indian woman and sexuality in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries.

The Radha images that stand for tradition can be considered with a more modern image of female sexual agency in Goddess of Flowers. Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) (Fig 4.4) illustrates a freed and fulfilled representation of a woman’s sexuality. In the image there are two heads. One is of a man, the other is of a woman. The male figure pulls the female figure towards him, his hand on the back of her neck. Their lips are very close together as if they are about to kiss. The image can be understood, more broadly, as a positive union between male and female as seen in Parvati and Shiva’s union. It can also be read as the breaking of assumed stereotypes concerning third world gender relationships.

In this image, the woman is on top of the man, who appears to be lying on his back. When men and women are interacting in an intimate manner, the norms of a patriarchal society assume men will be the active agent, while women will remain passive. This dichotomy is most commonly seen when images of men on top of women in intimate contact are understood as the standard in depicting intimate relations between the sexes. The woman is usually on her back, underneath a man. In Image 27 (Woman

26 Ibid.
and Man Kissing) (Fig. 4.4) the image reverses assumptions on which figure is the active agent. The man, by lying on his back, is placed in the passive role. In this image, the woman does the approaching and leading between the two.

**Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing)** brings to mind **Image 12 (Krishna and Radha).** Both images illustrate willing lovers coming together in a moment of intimacy. **Image 12** references a couple out of Hindu Indian tradition while **Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing)** refers to a modern couple. But both are engaged in the same behavior. These images placed together reveal that female sexual agency and mutuality between a couple is not a modern idea in India. **Image 27** has its roots in **Image 12.** But again, the artist has taken a traditional image and made some changes to it. **Image 12 (Krishna and Radha),** as noted earlier, is an appropriation of an 18th century miniature painting. The painting was supposed to be telling the love story between Krishna and Radha, but it was also a metaphor for the devotion between a god and his disciple. Krishna is the god, and Radha is the disciple. Because of this, Krishna is the active agent in both the original miniature painting and in Sandrasegar’s image. He pulls Radha towards him, and she offers no resistance. This image could be read as a typical relationship between the sexes. But the *Gita Govinda*’s true meaning is its metaphorical one. In a god and devotee relationship the god, being a more powerful being than his disciple, is always the active, dominant agent. With this in mind, it does not seem like **Image 12 (Krishna and Radha)** is necessarily scrutinizing gender relationships in traditional India. But once the image is contextualized within Phoolan Devi’s life and **Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing),** the work does become a critique.
Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) shows a similar couple to Radha and Krishna, but in this image the man is now the passive agent, as he lies on his back, and the woman becomes the active agent as she lowers her face to his. The woman is the person that controls the situation in Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing). The man does take a bit of an active role as he places his hand on the woman’s neck to pull her closer. However, the woman being on top and over the male puts her in more control. Radha and Krishna’s roles have now been reversed. Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) becomes a reference to a new Indian womanhood as seen in Phoolan Devi. As noted previously, Devi chose Vikram Mallah. He let her come to him and let her control the pace of their relationship. This same kind of agency is seen in Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing).

However, Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) cannot easily be read as reversed gender roles, or as active versus passive. The image dashes an easy dichotomy by showing the male figure to be active as well. Even though he is in the position of the passive partner, the man grasps the woman’s neck and pulls her towards him. By placing the figures in this position, both of them seem to be willingly and actively engaged in their intimate interaction, just as Krishna and Radha were. The figures create a balance between the two and seem to erase ideas of a power struggle between the sexes. Here in lies the difference between this seemingly modern couple and Krishna and Radha. While Krishna and Radha were both active and willing, there is always the understanding that Krishna is the superior figure between the two, because when the Gita Govinda is read metaphorically, Krishna is a god interacting with his devotee. Also, if one were to read the story as simply a love story, it becomes clear that Krishna is in control. It is Krishna who gallivants with other women, while Radha passively longs for Krishna. Because
Krishna has the power to affect Radha’s emotional stability he holds the power in the relationship. That is what is expected in a patriarchal society; the male holds control in mixed gender relationships. The couple in Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) shows a more equalized relationship between the sexes. According to Sangeeta Sandrasegar, this balance was inspired by Phoolan Devi’s relationship with Vikram Mallah. Sandrasegar’s tender image reveals the unexpected romance in Devi’s life that gave the Bandit Queen the power to decide what she wanted. Devi and Vikram Mallah’s relationship shows the same kind of equality as the couple in Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing).

Devi’s unexpected romance is not what is assumed to be standard for Indian women. In her chapter, “Through Western Eyes” Mohanty discusses how western feminist scholars, when trying to address women and feminism in third world nations, tend to place all the women into one category. That category includes lack of sexual agency. The abuse heaped upon Phoolan Devi is what the West assumes to happen to third world women, but Mohanty notes that is not the case. She calls for contextualization of each situation to fully understand the space in which third world women exist. There is no one idea that can be applied to all women in all third world nations. This is especially true concerning sexuality. Image 27 (Woman and Man Kissing) seems to take the other extreme, assuming that a woman who is able to rebel against a patriarchal order is one who becomes western concerning her sexuality and desire. But, the image is not so easily read when it is contextualized within the myths of Shiva and Parvati and Krishna and Radha. By bringing together the assumption of the sexually victimized third world woman with the image of a woman who seems to possess autonomy concerning her sexuality, the image allows the viewer to understand that there has to be a middle ground.
When thinking of this in the context of Devi’s life, one could read that yes, many women in the so-called third world are sexually abused. However, that abuse need not be the end of the woman’s experience. This particular image, when considered within the entire series *Goddess of Flowers* warns against simplistic notions of third world women, sexuality and autonomy.

Sandrasegar has described Durga as “created out of the flames which issued from the mouths of the male triad: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Born to kill, fully-grown, beautiful with golden-yellow skin, she rides her tiger charge. In each of her ten hands she holds the different god’s [sic] weapons, symbols of their individual divines [sic] powers, now combined in her.”

Three male gods created Durga to destroy a specific demon. She begins life fully-grown and armed with the powers and weapons of each god. In *Image 20 (Durga)* (Fig 4.5) of *Goddess of Flowers*, Sandrasegar has created an iconographically typical image of Durga. The woman in the image kneels on the ground and holds various items in her nine hands. In her left hands, the goddess holds a trident, scepter, a spear, a stick of some kind and the last arm pulls back the string of a bow and arrow. In her right hands she holds an arrow, a bow and a conch shell. The last hand on her right side points towards a hole with rays emitting from it. There is no tiger or lion, but the weapons, multiple arms and feminine profile all suggest that this is Durga. With this paper cut-out, and the other images associated with Durga in *Goddess of Flowers*, Sandrasegar has allowed this image to stand as an interpretation of Phoolan Devi’s life. Phoolan Devi deliberately associated herself with Durga: when she surrendered to police in 1983 she did so in front of an image of Durga and when she became a politician Devi had a shrine

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27 Ibid., 102.
to the goddess in her living room.\textsuperscript{28} Furthermore, the association with Durga began when Vikram Mallah saved Devi. Vikram Mallah insisted that Devi take on the identity of Durga. This was Devi’s initiation into the gang as a functioning member. Vikram Mallah then made her a sign that read “Phoolan Devi, dacoit beauty; beloved of Vikram Mallah, Emperor of Dacoits.”\textsuperscript{29} Devi was now a full-fledged bandit. What becomes interesting is that Devi was not born as a dacoit beauty until Vikram Mallah made the proclamation. He is re-inventing and creating a new Phoolan Devi, just as the triad of gods created Durga. Sandrasegar also comes to this conclusion, as she writes “The incarnation of Durga…is made visible in the period from her [Phoolan Devi’s] escape to the Ravines, and alike the Goddess Durga, is re-born and issues from the body of men that is the Dacoit world.”\textsuperscript{30} Image 20 (Durga) shows a traditional image of Durga. The warrior goddess is poised on the brink of battle and is about to fulfill the reason for her creation.

Sandrasegar balances the more traditional representation seen in Image 20 (Durga) with a modern one. Image 7 (Woman with Gun) (Fig 4.6) shows a young woman wearing a muscle tank top. Her hair is shoulder-length and is held back by a band of some kind. She holds a gun, pointed at the viewer. This is an image of a woman of the twenty-first century. Her clothing, hairstyle and weapon all give clues as to the time period. This woman becomes a present-day Durga. Images of Durga have been updated for the late twentieth century. As noted in Chapter Two, Arpita Singh created a modern-day Durga for the cover of Desh magazine in 1992 (Fig 2.17). The image shows a woman wearing widow’s white, and holding a number of objects. The only weapon in her four

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 102-103.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 101.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 103.
hands is a gun. The image drew much outrage that Durga could be portrayed as a widow and that she was holding a gun, and not the traditional weapons gifted to her by the gods. But Singh’s transformation of Durga parallels what Sandrasegar does in *Image 7 (Woman with Gun)*. Both artists are trying to tie tradition into modernity, by updating an ancient goddess figure.

Other artists have created images of Durga which deviate from expected iconography. They usually do so to challenge ideas of the nation. Tyeb Mehta in his work *Mahishasura*, 1997 (Fig 4.19), images Durga fighting the buffalo demon, but the way he...
has shown Durga wrapped around the demon looks almost like an embrace. It is difficult to tell where one figure starts and another begins. The enemies have become one entity. Mehta’s works tend to question the simplistic notion of India versus Pakistan. He references Partition by painting the background of this canvas in two different shades of brown. Mehta’s works seem to be asking the viewer to remember that India and Pakistan were one nation at one time, even though the two have become bitter enemies. Mahishasura, in particular, questions the divide between the two South Asian nations which used to be one.\(^\text{31}\) I also understand this work in a specifically Indian context: the artist illustrating the merging of enemies and the change in color may also refer to communal issues seen throughout India. If read in this way, the image asks the viewer to remember that India is a secular nation and all her citizens are a part of that, regardless of religion. Mehta’s work also brings together modernity and tradition by envisioning a new relationship between the people of India that allows for the existence of religion, but does not allow it to become the defining factor of the nation.

Other artists have also experimented with the image of a woman and a gun. Perhaps the most well known of these artists is Shirin Neshat. (b. 1957) The Iranian born artist, who now lives in New York City, launched her career with her Women in Black photographs (Figs 4.20 and 4.21), 1994-1996. These were images of the artist dressed

Figure 20: Shirin Neshat, *Speechless*, 1996

Figure 4.21: Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994
as a western audience would assume an Iranian woman would: she wears the *chador*. The parts of the artist’s body that are visible are covered in Farsi script. In many of these photos, a gun is present. According to curator, Igor Zabel, Neshat’s intention was to create an image that was complex and not easily read. The artist plays with western stereotypes concerning the Middle East while at the same time giving the women in the images agency in the form of the gun. Neshat brings together western assumptions concerning Iranian traditional women and then puts the gun in the image as a symbol of modernity, revealing Iran as it is constructed by the west.\textsuperscript{32} The curator compares Neshat’s work with an image of Iranian women soldiers marching in Tehran in 1997 (Fig 4.22). He describes the women in the photograph as “nameless soldiers of the Revolution.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Fig_4.22 Iranian Women Soldiers Marching in Tehran, 1997}
\caption{Iranian Women Soldiers Marching in Tehran, 1997}
\end{figure}

The figure of the ‘woman in black’ functions in the West as a general sign for the Muslim world and its allegedly incomprehensible, irrational, uncertain and threatening nature.\(^{33}\) These same ideas can be applied to Sandrasegar’s image of a woman with a gun: she also becomes threatening and incomprehensible, because in Sandrasegar’s work, tension between the violent imagery and craft materials creates confusion.

*Image 7 (Woman with Gun) (Fig. 4.6)*, like the women in black, becomes a strange image: she is a woman with a gun and there is a direct reference to Phoolan Devi in the woman’s headband. The headband looks similar to the one seen in the iconic image of Devi appropriated in Rekha Rodwittiya’s print (Fig 2.1). But instead of appropriating an image of Devi, Sandrasegar creates an image of a woman who references Devi because she wears a headband and wields a gun. Moreover, the way she is dressed is gender neutral, also referring to Phoolan Devi’s ability to move beyond gender boundaries. The gun pointed at the viewer and the gender ambiguous clothing of the figure reveals a woman who is threatening and incomprehensible, because this is not how Indian women have been previously imagined. This woman is not a passive object, a dutiful wife or even a domesticated consort. She is something else, something more complicated because she creates a new identity that includes a sense of agency that is contextualized within the modern.

In her autobiography, Devi talks of the men in the gang being amused that she was startled by the sounds of gunfire.\(^{34}\) Vikram Mallah decided that in order for Devi to be a true member of the gang, she needed to learn how to use a gun. Once Devi learned how to use a rifle, she was able to come into her own and begin to take revenge for the

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\(^{33}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{34}\) Devi, 284.
wrongs perpetrated against her. One of her first acts as a bandit was cowering her first husband and his second wife. She used the gun to threaten them and beat them and, for the first time in her life, Devi had a sense of control and confidence.\textsuperscript{35} Image 7 (Woman with Gun) is similar to Devi’s transformation from victim to actor. In this case, the woman is dressed in contemporary clothing, but she also, with the gun pointed at the viewer, looks to be a woman who has taken charge of her identity. The level and calm gaze on the woman’s face reinforces her sense of control. While this image is not a literal representation of Durga or Devi, it tries to bring the two females together, just as Devi tried to do during her time as a bandit, and as Singh has done in her Durga image.

Modernity and tradition come together in this image. This melding creates a tension and requires that the viewer think of the space between modernity and tradition.

Sandrasegar’s textual image of Kali, the last of the four Mahadevis, is frightening and fierce. The artist has written that Kali:

\textit{the black earth mother, whose rites include sacrificial killings. As Durga having killed the Demon she was created for, her lust for blind destruction becomes unstoppable. Depicted with hanging tongue dripping blood and streaming hair, in two hands she holds a weapon and the head of a giant, the second pair are raised to bless worshippers. She is naked apart from jewelry of snakes, children skulls (including her sons) and a belt of demon hands. As Kali she is also known as the conqueror of Time, having danced in fury upon her own husband Shiva, who as the inexorable destroyer is equated with time.}\textsuperscript{36}

This description conjures an image of a woman who has run rampant and is beyond any type of control. She is so violent that her hair is unkempt and her tongue messily drips the blood of her victims. She has decapitated a giant, killed her own sons and other children and has slain numerous demons. This is an image of a woman who is fierce and

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 277-282.
\textsuperscript{36} Sandrasegar, 104.
determines her own path. By being able to conquer time, Kali seems to be an unstoppable force. Sandrasegar has taken a straightforward reading of this last Devi; she believes that Kali “embodies the extreme terror and fear of female autonomy; out of control, wrecking havoc and devastation without mediation.” The artist links this ferocity and autonomy with Phoolan Devi when she was out for revenge. This association with a mortal woman reveals that, in this instance, Kali is seen as a goddess who stands as a symbol of the denial of patriarchal oppression. Part of this can be understood in the specific revenge Phoolan Devi takes.

The Bandit Queen had a reputation for punishing rapists. Throughout her autobiography those rapists were usually upper caste men. By making them responsible for the heinous acts committed against lower caste females, Phoolan Devi challenged patriarchal order. The men in power were brought to their knees and left to beg for their lives in front of Devi, just as giants and demons were left to beg in front of Kali. Devi, because she was disrupting patriarchal and caste hierarchies, was seen as a woman who steps beyond and outside these orders.

Two of Sandrasegar’s images in her Goddess of Flowers series speak to the idea of a woman who is beyond control, and hence associated with the goddess Kali. In Image 26 (Kali) (Fig 4.7), The artist has given the viewer a pared down image of Kali. Iconographical clues, such as the figure’s wild hair, protruding tongue and the decapitated head held in two hands blatantly point to Kali, but other more subtle clues also lead the viewer to think of the black earth mother. To the figure’s right are a row of three skulls. These could refer to Kali’s skull necklace. Additionally, the figure has six

37 Ibid., 104-105.
arms. None of the hands grasp weapons or make blessing mudras, but the other noted clues help the viewer to understand this image within the context of Kali.

Sandrasegar does not create an expected representation of Kali. In this image the artist has chosen to emphasize the sex of the figure. The woman’s breasts and vagina seem to be exaggerated in a way that demands the viewer think of this figure as being female. In some historical depictions of Kali, the goddess is shown as near sexless. Her breasts can be depicted as shriveled, to the point of almost being non-existent (Fig 4.23). This is done to reinforce that she is symbolic of destruction, not fertility. Because in these
images she is usually shown as black, it becomes harder to pick out feminine characteristics. Sandrasegar’s image disregards these traditional representations of Kali. Instead, the artist has turned to a more feminized image of Kali that clearly shows she is female (Fig 4.24).

Figure 4.24 Goddess Kali astride her consort Shiva with attendants and corpses, 18th century

I contend that Sandrasegar reinforced these feminine characteristics, because she wanted her viewer to read her Kali as a woman who is defying patriarchal order. By emphasizing the biological differences of women, the image reinforces that this woman is not going to be seen as lesser or be subdued by patriarchal culture. Furthermore, because Sandrasegar’s Kali is not an infertile husk, the image also reveals that a woman in her

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prime of childbearing can be just as fierce and rebellious as a woman who is at the end of her life and has nothing to lose. Again, this notion becomes more strongly reinforced when the image is taken into consideration with Sandrasegar’s words. The artist notes that Phoolan Devi was out for revenge. Phoolan Devi, when she first became a bandit may have been around sixteen years old. She is a female who would have been considered to be fertile. Because Phoolan Devi decided to take revenge on upper caste men for committing acts of sexual violence, she becomes associated with Kali, the goddess that does not follow the rules of femininity. Kali is female, but she is not a woman who will bear children and tend a home. Kali goes so far outside the boundaries of femininity that she even attacks her husband in her blind lust for destruction. She is a woman that is beyond restraint, just as Phoolan Devi was a woman beyond patriarchal control.

The exaggerated feminine characteristics also lead to another interpretation of an unrestrained woman. The artist’s Kali, as in traditional depictions (see Figs 4.23 and 4.24), holds the severed head of a giant. It is assumed that she decapitated the giant. The giant is always shown as male. In this case, the artist has included a beard, which emphasizes the head’s gender. As noted in Chapter Three, a woman with a man’s severed head, or one in the act of severing a man’s head, could refer to a double entendre. This giant’s head is a head, but because it is a male head, it can also be understood to represent a man’s other head, namely his penis. The decapitated head now becomes a symbol of castration. Again, turning to Phoolan Devi’s autobiography, she saw castration as a fitting punishment for a man that had violated a female. Taking Devi’s life into consideration with this image, the decapitated head/castrated penis further becomes symbolic of a
rebellion against patriarchal order. This Kali has attacked that which differentiates a man from a woman, revealing this image is about wrecking the assumed power relation between the sexes.

This notion of the beyond control female who is breaking the bonds of patriarchy is seen, once more, in Image 7 (Woman with Gun) (Fig. 4.6) in which a woman, dressed in contemporary clothing, points a gun at the viewer. As noted in the discussion of the Durga images, this becomes a woman who is threatening the viewer with the gun, but on a more metaphorical level, she becomes a threat to patriarchy. The woman is now armed, and hence has gained power in a society in which women are not supposed to hold this kind of power. Furthermore, again linking the image to Phoolan Devi’s life, it was when the Bandit Queen became a bandit, and used her gun for the first time that she had truly rebelled against patriarchal order. Devi notes that after beating up her ex-husband with her gun, for the first time she feels in control of her own life. The fact that this happens once she assaults the first male figure to have sexually attacked her and by attacking his penis, his marker of masculinity, the Bandit Queen seemed to be attacking patriarchal power. These become embodied in Putti Lal, and then later on in the other men she punished for some of the same crimes. The gun is what gives Devi the ability to disregard patriarchal order and obtain justice for women trampled by that type of society.

Another image of a female challenging and breaking the control of patriarchal society is a woman masturbating. Image 5 (Woman Masturbating) (Fig 4.8) is an image of a woman masturbating. The woman is nude except for a headband, which looks very similar to the type of headband worn by Phoolan Devi when she was a bandit. The woman’s left hand is touching her pudendum. To the lower left of the image is a
woman’s head. This woman also wears a similar headband. The images reveal that a woman’s sexuality is a place of rebellion, because it is about her, not someone to which she must submit.

Historically, in patriarchal societies, women’s sexuality has been seen as something that needs to be controlled. There is the implied threat of the breakdown of society and order if women’s sexuality is left to run free. One of the most threatening of images to a patriarchal society invested in this notion is the image of the woman masturbating.

Another woman artist who has used the image of a masturbating woman as an image of rebellion is Egyptian-born Ghada Amer (b. 1963). In her work, Waiting for J., 1999-2000 (Fig 4.25), she has appropriated images from soft-pornography magazines and stitched them on to a canvas. The stitched women are mingled with abstract drips, washes and splashes of paint. As noted by Olu Oguibe works such as these are a commentary on Abstract Expressionism. Oguibe states “Amer’s engagement with later modernism, especially Abstract Expressionism, is nevertheless more than mere romance or fascination…..At a certain level, it is a formal and psychic tussle between a strong desire for the rustic and earthy – the masculine – which rightly or wrongly Abstract Expressionism has come to represent, and received notions of the limits of feminine venture.”

movement. This is definitely not case, but the major artists of the movement were men: Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Robert Motherwell, Barnett Newman. 39 By daring to take up the same idiom as these male painters, Amer pushes the limits of femininity within the practice of art. Amer’s decision to create art that looks similar to works that are associated with masculinity shows how the artist is breaking gender boundaries in this

39 Some notable and influential women artists of the movement were Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan, Helen Frankenthaler and Elaine de Kooning.
painting. Adding sewing and thread, feminine crafts, as part of the canvas is even more indicative of how Amer feminizes Abstract Expressionism.

The subject matter of the painting also reveals the artist creating an image of rebellion. The women that have been stitched/painted onto the canvas were appropriated from soft-pornography magazines. The original images had been created with the intention of a male gaze that would objectify the pictured women. The artist has repeated the same image: a woman in the act of masturbation. However, the artist has removed the image from its original context. By freeing the masturbating woman from the male gaze, Amer has liberated female sexuality. The woman is no longer masturbating for the pleasure of a male audience. She now engages in the act for her own pleasure. The masturbating woman, who does not need a male to pleasure her and is no longer created for the purpose of male desire, becomes a threatening figure. The woman has slipped out of the control of the male audience and has revealed that she does not need men to experience pleasure. When this image of the masturbating woman is placed within Amer’s drips, washes and splashes of paint, the painting takes on the connotation of female sexual freedom and even more generally the idea that women can break from patriarchal conventions.

Additionally, masturbation is not a reproductive act. Traditionally, it has been thought that women should only have sex or enjoy it if they were engaged in the act of procreation. If a woman is engaging in sex and receiving pleasure from it in her duty of having children, patriarchal societies are more comfortable with the idea of female pleasure. If a woman enjoys masturbation, she reveals a form of female sexuality that is not dominated by societal expectations. Instead, she shows herself to be complete without
a man giving her pleasure and without having the sexual act be something that will lead to reproduction. Since in many patriarchal societies women are expected to have children once they come of age, a woman who engages in a sexual act that does not lead to this end result is one that is assumed to be selfish. She is not interested in creating more members of society. Instead with masturbation, the woman is more interested in pleasing herself, not societal expectations. Furthermore, when a woman is masturbating, she is controlling her own sexuality. She can decide when and how she receives sexual gratification, and this could be seen as threatening to anyone invested in a patriarchal society.

The notion of the masturbating woman being symbolic of sexual freedom can be contextualized within Phoolan Devi’s life. As noted in the introduction, one of the horrors the Bandit Queen endured throughout her life was that of rape. Because she was a woman and from a low caste, her body was not hers to control. Devi had no say in who was to touch her body and control its sexual impulses. Because of this, she became nothing more than an object to be used by men when they felt the urge. Rape has been a form of torture that has been used to control, frighten and break women. Devi, despite the numerous times she was raped and even gang-raped, did not break. She always attempted to fight back when someone attacked her. By fighting back, Devi tried to balance the power dynamics in the act. She knew she was being raped to put her under patriarchal control, but would fight back because she refused to be crushed by a vicious tool of patriarchy.

When Devi was protected from the threat of rape, she was able to gain control of her life. Vikram Mallah insisted that the men in their gang treat her like another member
of the gang, not as a woman to be used when they desired. The arrangement worked until Vikram Mallah was murdered and another gang kidnapped Devi. That gang tried to break her through gang rape, but Devi eventually escaped and formed her own bandit gang. Her gang consisted only of men and she was the sole leader. By escaping the other gang, and then forming her own, Devi took control of her sexuality and of her life in general. She no longer had a man to control or guide her in any decisions she made, revealing a break with patriarchal culture. This transformation can be seen through her sexuality; initially men controlled it. Eventually it becomes something under her control. The image of the woman masturbating becomes symbolic of Devi taking control of not only her own body, but also her life. Devi, in this particular image is understood as a metonymy of the modern Indian woman; she is in charge of her own destiny, and this image can be read as one that is very threatening to patriarchal order.

A woman masturbating, because she is controlling her own pleasure, is a woman who is as beyond control as Kali. This is reinforced when Sandrasegar’s image of Kali is placed into a metaphorical context. The artist’s Kali holds a male giant’s head. As noted previously, this could literally be an image of beheading, but it could also be seen as a metaphorical castration, because of the double entendre behind the idea of a woman removing the head of the man. The penis is no longer needed for a woman to be sexually complete. She can now simply disregard it, and in the case of Phoolan Devi it becomes symbolic of her control over her life and her sexuality. By creating an image of a woman who is receiving pleasure without a penis, Sandrasegar shows how a woman’s sexuality can reflect how much she is controlled by society. In this instance, by tying the image to
the goddess Kali and the idea of castration, the image of a masturbating woman becomes one of women’s agency.

The final image in the *Goddess of Flowers* series is as sensationalist as the image with which it begins. *Image 36 (Murdered Woman)* (Fig 4.26) depicts the head of a dead woman. She has a gunshot wound through her head and blood drips from the wound, her mouth and nose. Her eyes stare sightlessly. Above the woman are three male figures. One holds a Polaroid camera and photographs the body. *Image 36 (Murdered Woman)* brings
the artist to the beginning of her series because of the sensationalist nature of the work, but more importantly, it was Phoolan Devi’s murder that was the inspiration for the series. Sangeeta Sandrasegar, when asked how she first learned of Phoolan Devi, stated:

I first learnt about her at the news of her assassination. There was a small article in The Age or the Australian? which my mother in fact passed me - thinking I would be interested in this amazing story. And so upon looking her up I did indeed become engrossed….So it was that I decided to begin a work around her - she as central to the work and as central to many social, cultural and feminist motifs that were at the forefront of my research and image making 10 years ago. Also as she was no longer alive I personally had this feeling that I could work / intrude / develop / understand her story as opposed to doing it whilst she was alive. That is - in this sense it was more able to be MY understanding of a woman….40

It was the Bandit Queen’s sensational murder and then her life story which inspired the artist to create this series. The artist saw Phoolan Devi as a radical agent that allowed for exploration of the subject of Indian womanhood. Sandrasegar notes that the work has some personal meanings; her understandings of feminism, society and culture are revealed in this work. Furthermore, Sandrasegar realized that because Devi was now deceased, she could construct a narrative of Indian womanhood through Devi without that narrative intruding on Devi’s personal ideals and beliefs. Devi could become the artist’s subject.

Image 36 (Murdered Woman) reveals this appropriation of the Bandit Queen in the man photographing her dead body. Though the man uses a Polaroid camera to capture this moment, the picture can easily be reproduced and redistributed. There is no indication of why this man snaps this photo, or how he feels about it. But if he takes the photo and sells it, then the photo begins a very public circulation in which the image can

40 Personal Correspondance with the Artist, 24 November 2013.
take on multiple meanings. The image could be used to garner sympathy for Phoolan Devi, or it could be used to show that a corrupt politician got what she deserved. The photo as it circulates could never remain a neutral documentation of a woman’s murder.

According to Stephen Farrell of the *Times of London*, there was much speculation on why Devi had been gunned down on 25 July 2001. Some speculated it was a political act to upset upcoming elections. Others believed “that her violent past simply caught up with her. They fear it was long-delayed revenge for her leadership of the low-caste gang that murdered the 22 Behmai Thakurs in the Uttar Pradesh village of Behmai on St. Valentine's Day in 1981.” From the way Sandrasegar has positioned this final image in her series, the image reflects the idea that Devi’s murder was revenge for the supposed murders she committed twenty years earlier. The men in the image are dressed in western-looking clothing: sunglasses on one and a bomber jacket on another of the men. The western clothing can be read as a sign of wealth and the Indian who dwells in a major city. These items most likely were imported and would have been expensive to purchase. If these men are from the upper classes, it is most likely that they could also be from an upper caste, perhaps even the Thakur caste. To have a woman from a lower caste blatantly murder upper caste men in front of the people of their village would have been considered a great mark of shame. Whether Phoolan Devi herself, or her gang members pulled the trigger is a moot point, because all of her gang members were from lower castes. The message they sent was clear: they would not tolerate the upper castes abusing the lower castes, and especially not Phoolan Devi. There is a strong possibility that Devi’s murder was revenge for that act committed twenty years earlier.

The news story then goes on to describe the murder: “A police source said three gunmen waited in a green Maruti 800 car outside her house, telling her security guard that they were waiting to meet her. When the outlaw-turned-MP arrived they shot her three times in the head and twice in the body.”\(^{42}\) The way the murder was described is depicted in Sandrasegar’s work. There are three men, though many of the other accounts of the murder note that the men were masked, looming over the woman’s body. It can be assumed that these may be the murderers because none of the men attempt to stem the flow of blood or assist the victim. Instead, they consume her death by photographing it. These actions speak of a cold-blooded murder. These men were most likely hired to kill Devi. They simply shot her, and in the instance of Sandrasegar’s image, documented their deed and then left her to die.

*Image 36 (Murdered Woman)* (Fig. 4.26) seems to be an image of mourning and loss. The callous treatment of a human being and the lack of respect for the dead are a comment on the treatment of Phoolan Devi; the work is about a fallen hero. Sandrasegar, as noted previously, was riveted by Devi’s story. The artist absorbed the narrative and then placed within it her own feminist critiques and concerns. Because the artist seems to show Devi’s gender and caste transgressions as positive, one arrives at the conclusion that Sandrasegar admired Phoolan Devi, and that this final image in the series acts as a tribute to a fallen hero. And as well as a tribute it acts as a concluding image in the series because the heroine is now dead and the narrative has ended.

In the selected images from Sangeeta Sandrasegar’s *Goddess of Flowers* discussed in this chapter, I have revealed how the images communicate the position of

\(^{42}\) Ibid.
the twenty-first-century Indian woman. That woman can straddle the line between
tradition and modernity. The images in themselves reveal this in-between. But the space
between the shadows and the sculptures reinforce the notion of something in between, or
something more complicated than a two-fold dichotomy. Though the overlap between
modernity and tradition raises problematic questions concerning Indian womanhood, the
images, especially when tied to Phoolan Devi’s biography, try to show that the balance of
modernity and tradition is not the problem. The problem is that the world expects Indian
women to be either traditional or modern and that to be only one or the other is not
feasible.
Chapter 5:
Multiple Mythologies: The Emergence of a New Indian Womanhood

The rise of a new model for Indian womanhood in late twentieth-century India signals yet another way in which the nation is defined. Challenges to the brand symbol, as embodied in the female form, go beyond notions of Indian womanhood. They act as critiques concerning the constructed nature of a singular brand symbol.

As noted in Chapter One, the meaning and understanding of mythology has changed according to societal shifts. Mythology in late twentieth/early twenty-first century India is no exception. Because India became a more global market that was focused on economic reforms, mythology took on the role of branding. India has been branded through the image of Indian woman. Political and cultural situations acted as the defining guide to what this brand was to be. For example, in the late nineteenth century the image of Indian woman as goddess was used to assert the nation’s identity in relation to the British Raj. Directly after Independence, Indian women were used to symbolize Indian culture in relation to the west.

But by the late 1980s some major economic shifts were beginning to occur. These changes fully blossomed by 1991, when a series of economic reforms had been enacted in India that allowed more foreign businesses to take part in the Indian economy. As noted in Chapter One, the influx of foreign businesses and investors as well as the more globalized economic system of the nation led many Indian businesses to attempt to brand the nation as both traditional and modern at the same time so as to show the nation as economically progressive while still retaining its traditional identity. The miracles touted by the supporters of these economic reforms did not come to complete fruition. As discussed in Chapter One, neoliberalism became the dominant mode of economy in India.
The result was not to the benefit of the entire nation, as is discussed in Harvey’s idea of accumulation by dispossession.\(^1\) This kind of disparity would lead to a dispute over the idea that India was better off after the 1991 economic reforms. This challenge led to the emergence of a new Indian womanhood which becomes embodied in Phoolan Devi who moved outside caste and gender boundaries, allowing for critiques, concerning nation as read through brand, to emerge.

![Figure 5.1: Pushpamala N., Navarasa Suite, 2000-3003](image)

Artist, Pushpamala N., just like Rodwittiya, Ganesh and Sandrasegar also used Phoolan Devi as a lens thorough which to challenge notions of Indian womanhood, thus also revealing Devi as a disruption to the brand symbol. Pushpamala N.’s Navarasa Suite, 2000-2003 (Fig 5-1), approaches Indian womanhood from the perspective of the nine rasas: bhibhatsa (aversion), abdhuta (wonder), shringara (attractiveness), bhayanaka (terror), shanta (calmness), raudra (fury), veera (courage), hasya (comedy) and karuna (compassion). Each image is a still photo of the artist acting out the rasas. The title of the series is the combination of the words nava (which can be translated to new or nine) and rasa (feelings evoked by the arts). Pushpamala N. has embodied these emotions, not in nayika (traditional heroines), but in modern women. The artist’s use of women from contemporary society, for example a Mother Theresa figure is used to image compassion, updates these emotions for late twentieth century/early twenty-first-century India and by doing so questions previous representations of womanhood. The question being posed is can the late twentieth/early twenty-first-century Indian woman still evoke traditions that seem to have been left behind. The work answers with a yes, but only because the artist has shown how tradition can change depending on societal shifts.

Pushpamala N. has chosen Phoolan Devi to represent veera (Fig 5.2). In her photograph, the artist has dressed herself like the Bandit Queen: she wears the iconic red headband, a military-type uniform and holds a rifle. The artist’s gaze unflinchingly meets that of the viewer’s. The sense of challenge in the figure’s posture and gaze reveal how the artist has brought together a traditional concept with a decidedly untraditional image.

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2 I would like to thank Catherine Becker for pointing out the double entendre in nava. If the word is translated as new, it can be referring to new rasas. Nava, if it is translated as nine, refers to the number of photographs in the suite.
of a twentieth-century Indian woman. This image embodies the trials to which Phoolan Devi was subjected and her defiance of caste and gender norms. Because the work is situated within a traditional concept related to the arts and shows an unconventional woman to represent it, Pushpamala N.’s work plays some of the same roles as Rodwittiya’s, Ganesh’s and Sandrasegar’s works: it brings up the notion of putting two seemingly conflicting, or opposite, ideas together into one image of a woman. The exploration of the duality seen in all these artists’ works shows how each artist wants to confront the meaning of Indian womanhood, but also that of nation. All the works argue
for a more complex picture that demands the viewer re-consider the tension between the opposing aspects.

That tension between the opposing aspects is where the concept of a new Indian womanhood arises. As noted in Chapter One, brand symbols send a clear message concerning a corporation (or in this case nation) by using an image that has a fixed meaning. Like the works of Rodwittiya, Ganesh and Sandrasegar, Pushpamala N.’s image challenges the idea of a stable symbol. All four of the artists’ works demonstrate how complex Indian womanhood becomes in late twentieth to early twenty-first-century India, thus confronting the idea of a stable brand symbol that stands for nation. Because each artist examines the dualities witnessed in Phoolan Devi, the carefully constructed brand begins to fall apart as Phoolan Devi is imaged as a vamp and heroine, traditional and modern, male and female and violent and passive simultaneously. Devi does not allow an easy, fixed meaning, thus contesting the notion of a stable brand symbol.

The works discussed in this project situate interpretations of Phoolan Devi’s image during a politically and economically turbulent time in India. It is a period in which the nation witnesses the rise of the political right, the introduction (and re-introduction) of foreign businesses and becomes a time in which communal clashes seem to have escalated to a level of horror bordering on The Partition. The changing landscape was being sculpted through violence: communal, political and financial as the nation’s income gap became wider and wider. With this type of backdrop, one can see the need for a symbol that tries to address these issues. That symbol, for Rodwittiya, Ganesh and Sandrasegar, became Phoolan Devi. Her work as the Bandit Queen was one of

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3 I am specifically referring to the 6 December 1992 destruction of the Babri Masjid and later on, to the horrific communal rioting that occurred in Gujarat in February 2002.
challenging caste and gender, and fighting back against all that seemed to be wrong with
the nation in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is no wonder that many artists, especially
women artists, have used Devi as a symbol through which to interpret the meaning of an
unstable India that no longer is defined by one symbol.
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