

Phool Kunwar: Breaking Silence and Shattering Margins

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Abstract

Phool Kunwar by Ajit Jogi and Dr. Renu Jogi narrates the life of an indigenous woman from Chhattisgarh who resists the oppressive forces of patriarchy, superstition, and societal marginalization. After marrying Baratiya, a middle-aged widower, she faces tragedy when an epidemic takes the lives of her stepchildren and husband. Wrongfully accused of being a "tonhi" (witch), she endures brutal torture but refuses to surrender to her oppressors. Phool Kunwar's resistance is marked by her refusal to accept submission, whether through eloping or yielding to societal pressures. Instead, she asserts control over her own body, ultimately choosing her fate. Her story symbolizes the resilience of marginalized women, especially within tribal patriarchal structures, as they silently resist subjugation and claim autonomy. The research questions raised by the text include: How does patriarchy operate within indigenous tribal societies? How does Phool Kunwar's resistance challenge traditional gender roles? How do marginalized women reclaim agency in oppressive societies? Through Phool Kunwar's journey, the answers lie in her ability to fight for her dignity and autonomy, making her story a powerful narrative of resistance and self-determination.

Keywords: Phool Kunwar, tonhi, uncivilized, Savarnas, Avarnas.

The history of India is an antiquity of struggle between two cultures: the ethos of the people who invaded the nation (the Savarnas) and the culture of the people who originally inhabited the country (the Avarnas). When two cultures with different value systems come into conflict with one another, the culture that is more technologically and economically advanced will eventually absorb the other civilization. The dominant culture employs the strategy of marginalizing the indigenous people and labelling them heartlessly as "cultureless," "uncouth," and "uncivilized." This is a practice that is nearly invariably adopted by the dominant culture.

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However, in truth, those who are excluded are the most sophisticated individuals in terms of their humanistic value system and behaviour prototypes. This is because they have not been corrupted by the so-called "modernity." Of all the countries in the world, India is likely the one with the most diversified racial composition. There is a significant number of individuals in India who belong to each of the five main racial categories: Australoid, Mongoloid, Europoid, Caucasian, and Negroid. In the past, it has served as a dwelling for a number of different castes and sub-castes, each of which has its own set of distinctive local customs. In the same way that the Ganga river cannot be conceived of without her tributaries, the marvel that is India can never be grasped without first gaining an understanding of the culture and literature of the people who are indigenous to the country. Community groups that have a historical continuity with pre-colonial cultures and preinvasion societies are referred to as indigenous communities. They reside in geographically isolated regions of the globe and have their own unique culture. The indigenous people of the world may be classified into 5,000 distinct groups, ranging from the people who live in the Amazon rainforest to the rural inhabitants of India.

The present-day state of Chhattisgarh, which is located in the South-Eastern section of India and is regarded as one of the most rearward areas, was a part of earliest dandkaranya and served as a meeting ground for civilizations that were both Aryan and non-Aryan. The indigenous Adivasi people from Chhattisgarh make up a significant portion of the state's total population. After conducting a genealogical investigation, it was discovered that these Adivasis are the ancestors of the Gonds, who rose to importance in the 15th century after the collapse of the Kalchuri kingdom. Their way of life was simple and unpretentious, devoid of any pretence or artificiality, and they lived in the dense woods. The Adivasis of this area have managed to preserve the simplicity and rusticity that was prevalent among the ancient Gonds of Chhattisgarh tribe. A substantial part of the lives of these so-called "unenlightened people," who are still living in the black years, is significantly influenced by black magic activities. According to the local Chhattisgarh dialect, illnesses and disasters are said to be brought on by the spell of a wicked witch, which is referred to as a tonhi. The cure to this spell is the mantric hymns of the village Baiga, who is the local incantator. They have been able to preserve some of the pre-settlement linguistic, cultural, and organizational features of their forefathers because to the natural geographical obstacles that Chhattisgarh has. These barriers have kept the outside effects of the cultivated elegance from reaching these original Adivasis.

Women play a significant part in ensuring that their families are able to provide for themselves and their families within the indigenous communities of Chhattisgarh. Indigenous women still

face many forms of marginalization and triple exclusion, despite the fact that they are huge assets to their communities. This is due to the fact that they are poor, indigenous, and women. Sadly, they are also exposed to violence in both the private and public sectors, as well as acute poverty, violations of human rights, illiteracy, and a lack of approach to land that historically belonged to their ancestors.

A good example of such an indigenous lady is Phool Kunwar. Ajit Jogi, who served as the first Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, is the author of the anthology with the same name, and the narrative that serves as the work's title is Phool Kunwar. When it was first published in the Saptahik Hindustan in 1989, it had not only been written in Hindi but also had a great deal of success. A little hamlet known as Chukti Jhiriya, which is located in the Tarai area of the Maikal mountains and shares a border with both Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, serves as the setting for the narrative. This narrative follows the path of Phool Kunwar, a typical local Adivasi damsel from Chhattisgarh, from infancy to adulthood, and finally to widowhood and death. The name of the story gives away the fact that it is about Phool Kunwar. In doing so, the author not only casts light on the way of life and culture of the indigenous people of Chhattisgarh, but also provides us with a unique perspective on the indigenous women.

Phool Kunwar was a ravishingly beautiful rural settlement, and its untouched allure drew young men from all fourteen of the neighbouring villages. Phool Kunwar was the centre of attention because she was wearing a crimson lugra, which is a flared skirt, and she was decked from head to toe with fulli, mohar, kardhan, bahuta and mundri, which are the decorations that are used in tribal fashion. Throughout her upbringing, Phool Kunwar stood apart from other girls her age. As a result, it did not come as an amazement to her when she made the decision to marry Baratiya, a middle-aged widower who had four children and whose wife had passed away while giving birth. Phool Kunwar had quietly idolized Baratiya, who was the farm executive of Mukhiya, ever since she was a little girl. Baratiya was Phool Kunwar's cousin. He was black, strong, well built, and gorgeous in a way that was reminiscent of the countryside. Phool Kunwar was drawn to Baratiya because of his authoritative nature, which distinguished him from other men and drew him to him. A tradition known as Churi Pehnana makes it exceedingly simple for the people of Chhattisgarh to legally bind themselves to one another in marriage. In accordance with this tradition, the groom will place bangles in the hands of the bride, and then the couple will be considered to be husband and wife. Phool Kunwar, in addition, accepted the bangles that Baratiya had chosen for her, and she became his legally

married wife. A commotion and a sensation were created in the community as a result of the marriage between a young woman and a guy in the middle of his life.

For Phool Kunwar, the day she married Baratiya was the day when tragedy began to tighten its tentacles, despite the fact that it is often believed that poverty and misfortune are associated with one another. In that year, Chukti Jhiriya was attacked by an epidemic, and Baratiya was unable to save his four children. Despite the fact that she was a stepmother, Phool Kunwar did all in her power to rescue them. Baratiya, who had become feeble and weak by this point, was also a victim of the dreadful pandemic and passed away. As if this were not enough, Baratiya had become a victim of the virus. As a result of this unfortunate event, the blame was placed on the blameless Phool Kunwar. It was said that she was a "evil enticer," or a Tonhi in the local Chhattisgarh dialect, who was responsible for the murder and consumption of human people. Torture was the sole acceptable form of punishment for a tonhi on the basis of tribal principles. After Phool Kunwar was brought before the assembly, the village exorcist, known as "Baiga," began torturing her. Phool Kunwar was ultimately brought before the assembly. Suddenly, she became unconscious. As soon as she opened her eyes the next morning, she was taken aback to find her own image in the bathtub mirror. She had been severely beaten, burned, and wounded, yet her spirit remained unbroken despite all of her injuries. Resuming her daily routine as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, she made the decision to fight back and began going toward the fields. In the hamlet, people's responses were all over the place when they saw Phool Kunwar and saw his predicament. The male people had a cruel delight in seeing her suffering to such an extreme degree. There were, however, a few individuals who were really affected and saddened for her. Sudhin was the name of one of them, and he was a plain rural boy. Upon seeing her distressing predicament, he was profoundly moved and summoned all his courage to propose that she elope with him to a distant town, far off from the Mukhiya's influence. What the naïve Sudhin failed to understand was that the only aspect of her being that had sustained injury was her physical form; her ego and pride remained unscathed and whole. Despite the potential consequences of incurring Mukhiya's wrath, the once exquisite Phool Kunwar would never consent to Sudhin as her husband. She would never be able to accept another being. As a result, she reprimanded Sudhin and requested that he never behave in such an audacious manner again.

Phool Kunwar got a message from the old school master on the same night. The old schoolmaster indicated in the message that if she was ready to submit to him, the 'master sahib' (the local schoolmaster) would be inclined to alleviate her pain. She responded with a snarl,

rejecting Master Sahib's suggestion, like to a wounded tigress. She did not realize that this conduct may have potentially negative consequences. An escalation in the intensity and severity of the torture was carried out in order to frighten away the malevolent spirit that was said to have taken hold of her. As a result of her refusal to give up, the group arrived to the conclusion that the evil spirit had been drawn to her because of her attractiveness and voluptuousness. The spirit needed to be expelled from her body, and her beauty had to be sacrificed in order to do this. It was an effort to kill her by setting fire to her cottage, which was set on fire. Phool Kunwar, who was injured, weak, and only partially awake, came to the conclusion that now was the time to take action before it was too late. With the last of her power, she grabbed the few items that were still on her property that was on fire, placed them in a container made of brass, and then leapt over the flames like a rabbit. Phool Kunwar, who was infuriated, began yelling and wailing as she stood in front of her burning house. She continued to do so until her reserves of strength came to an end. During the time that she was only partially awake, she began to consider the many choices that were available to her. Should she accept Sudhin's request and go away with him without him? Is it appropriate for her to give in and submit in front of the Master Sahib? Would it be appropriate for her to resume her job in the fields of the Mukhiya and continue to suffer the tortures until they reach their natural end? Right at that moment, she became aware of the rat poison that she had smuggled with her without her knowledge as she was attempting to flee from her burning cabin. She pondered whether or not it would be appropriate for her to dress up as a bride and take the poison in order to reunite with her beloved Baratiya and never be apart from her again. She hoped that this would be the case. Prior to her falling into a lovely slumber, her whole existence seemed to pass in a flash. Perhaps she was lulled to everlasting sleep by the never-ending torments and excruciating suffering that she endured. Phool Kunwar's resistance against the socio-cultural milieu of the tribal culture is based on the notion that the adopted norms of gender divide and subservience create the pattern. This concept serves as the foundation for the study of the tale. "Resistance" is a phrase that is extensively used in its many different implications, and it is also a way of expression that is widely accepted. A few terms exhibit a larger inclination towards cliché and meaningless words, so, it has been gradually employed as a catch all phrase to illustrate any form of political battle. "Resistance" is a word that adapts itself to a vast variety of conditions, and it is a word that can be used to represent a wide range of political struggles. However, if we consider resistance to be any type of defence that is used to keep an invader out, then the forms of social and cultural resistance that are more subtle and often even unsaid have been considerably more prevalent" (Ashcroft 2001:20). In Phool Kunwar, those who

belong to the tribal patriarchal culture are the ones who oppress the people. Due to this, she is ostracized on two fronts. Within the main culture of Chhattisgarh, there is a subset known as the tribals. Within this category, women are considered to be "subalterns" since they are seen to be gendered outsiders. Her defiance is a direct challenge to the tribal patriarchal culture, which is already excluded from mainstream society. Therefore, it is a resistance that comes from the edges as well as a resistance that occurs inside the margins.

A number of different approaches are used throughout the narrative to illustrate the exploitative character of patriarchy. The power of males in the areas of sociocultural, economic, and moral matters has Phool Kunwar under their control and colonized them. Taking into consideration and presenting the female body as a signifier of the inherent subjection of its owner is the most direct and visible way in which the gendered 'other' is produced, according to the narrative that was analyzed for this article. Because of this, the body becomes a venue where those who colonize and those who are colonized, as well as those who dominate and those who are dominated, compete for ownership and control. This is crucial in Phool Kunwar's context, since the female body represents both the locus and emblem of her owner's social and cultural dependence. Fanon's recognition of the corporeal blackness of his compatriots as tangible manifestations of their 'otherness' and 'denigration' is pertinent in this context. The patriarchy's frantic attempt to subdue and dominate Phool Kunwar is shown by the mutilation of her body. As a distinctive form of resistance, Phool Kunwar is the one who is responsible for annihilating her body, and as a result, she is the one who exercises and demonstrates her power over the site or body. This is an important point to notice since it is not the oppressor who has the final control over the site or body. It is via the process of adorning her body that she expresses the change that she is celebrating. Ultimately, she is the one who rule both her body and her thoughts, and she is the one who frees herself from those who oppress her. Phool Kunwar's activities support Cudjoe and Harlow, who characterize resistance as an act, or a series of acts aimed at liberating oneself from the dominion of oppressors.

The voice of Phool Kunwar, an uneducated and uncultured adivasi woman, represents the underprivileged perspective from the periphery. In spite of the fact that she is aware of her marginalization, Phool Kunwar desires to transcend it. As the narrative progresses, we see a progression from the periphery to the core of the narrative. The fact that she does not get any assistance or support from men in her life is a representation of the unwavering independence that she has as a person. The egotist that she is. She is proud of her beauty and proud of the fact that she is lovely. It is an iconoclast that Phool Kunwar is. She had the audacity to make a

choice that caused many people to raise their eyebrows when she finally made the decision to marry Baratiya, a middle-aged widower and father of four children. Her originality is something that she values and cherishes. The way she fell was as if she were shouting, together with Robert Browning, "I was ever a fighter, so the best and the last! one fight more." She is a representation of the portion of the awakened feminine consciousness that is socially inappropriate and not something that is permitted. She is a representation of the dilemma that a tribal woman faces when she is caught between two opposing poles: self-respect and superstition. One interpretation of her fight is that it is a heroic endeavour that gives honour to the person and lends dignity to the spirit of freedom being fought for. Her whole life, she had been a warrior.

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