

Book Review

Title: *Phoolsunghi: Unveiling the Dignity and Depth of Bhojpuri Culture and Courtesan's Life*
Author: Pandey Kapil
Translated by: Gautam Choubey
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Pandey Kapil's *Phoolsunghi* become the first Bhojpuri novel to be translated into English in 2020. Despite its status as a classic from the regional literary tradition, there is hardly any academic reviews for the translated version. Could this be attributed to a potential apathy toward the Bhojpuri language in general and its regional literature in particular? In fact, Bhojpuri language and cultural expression have been in contention for quite some time. Plethora of Bhojpuri vulgar songs, that is what the so called saner society deems them to be, have been making sensation on internet and social media. It is believed to be making some people from within the region undergo a somewhat cultural humiliation.

Phoolsunghi offers a contrasting perspective highlighting the cultural richness and harmonious nature of Bhojpuri traditions. Therefore, a review of translated version may go a longer way than one would expect a book review to do. This novel is a testimony to the fact that Bhojpuri culture does not glorify sexual misdemeanours as may be believed. It is instead quite humane and sophisticated, with its own codes of honour and chivalry. *Phoolsunghi* is a piece of work that delicately navigates the Bhojpuri cultural landscape with such conflicts and dilemmas.

Set in the colonial times, *Phoolsunghi's* narrative demonstrates cultural assimilation among courtesans, musicians, thugs, robbers, zamindars, and British sahibs against a variety of odds. The novel underscores complex and harsh reality faced by tawaifs (courtesans) in colonial India, revealing the intricate relationship between gender and societal perceptions. The transformation of Dhelabai's name from Gulzaribai to Dhela or 'stone', a result of stones hurled during an admirer-induced turmoil reflects the tumultuous nature of women's identity. Janakibai's renaming as Chappan

Churi, tied to the numerous stabs by her disillusioned admirer (pp. 1-2), further illustrates the perilous consequences of societal perceptions of women. These narrative threads intricately weave together the challenges faced by tawaifs, exposing the vulnerability behind the glamorous facade.

Phoolsunghi's plot initiates with an interesting encounter Dhelabai, the young tawaif in her twenties from Muzaffarpur, with Haliwant Sahay, the middle-aged zamindar from Chapra. Dhelbai's seductive fragrance and Haliwant's passion to devour the pleasures lead them into a conversation marked by her repulsion of his advances. This conversation espouses the complex embedded metaphor of *phoolsunghi*- the flower-pecker. "Babu Sahib! You must have heard of *phoolsunghi*- the follower-pecker- yes? It can never be held captive in a cage. It sucks nectar from a flower and then flies to the next.' Thus does Dhelbai announce it quite unabashedly that her community of tawaifs sucks money from one pocket, and set out to look for another. (P. 3)

As Haliwant brags about the depth of his promising purse that would keep any tawaif- *phoolsunghi*- trapped in a golden cage for life, the narrative swiftly flashes back to another encounter of his, the very source of his riches. The fortunes of Haliwant Sahay had bloomed when he met the English opium agent Revel Sahib who raised him to be a rich zamindar, journey from orphan-hood to prosperity as an opium trader (p. 4-8). This is one of those colonial instances of an English sahib turning native. The ascent of Sahay's fortunes mirrors the colonial Indian landscape's turbulence, where fortunes could shift swiftly.

Concurrently, Dhelabai, a tawaif akin to the *phoolsunghi*, mirrors the transient nature of her community's existence, seeking sustenance wherever it may be found. Sahay has her kidnaped after their brief encounter and constructs a mansion on the Saryu riverbank for her or to cage her. It symbolizes his desire for control, exemplifying his quest for dominance as themes of identity, love, and redemption permeate the narrative. Sahay's pursuit of power contrasts Dhelabai's yearning for freedom, underscoring the tension between desire and constraint.

Yet another series of encounters in the novel is historical and artistic really; Mahendar Misir disciple of Pandit Ramnarayan Misir makes a musical rendition in the mahfil at the mansion. The performance leaves and Guljaribai spellbound and with teary eyes offers Mahendar, her own nose ring. As Mahendar Misir and Gulzaribai confront, their trials and tribulations, they navigate life's complexities, ultimately seeking meaning and

fulfilment (p. 16). As the narrative unfolds, characters grapple with morality and agency, striving to forge their paths. Through rich characterization, the novel explores human relationships and the pursuit of freedom. Gulzaribai and Mahendar confront their choices and actions, realizing the value of love and companionship amidst societal norms. At the climax, Gulzaribai and Mahendar confront consequences, grappling with fleeting life's meaning. As the phoolsunghi flies away hastily, characters confront life's transient nature, seeking fulfilment amidst uncertainty.

Mahendar Misir, a historical figure really among the Bhojpuri literati, was the young man stumbling through the darkness of that night, he has arrived outside the residence of his Guru, Pandit Ramnarayan Misir at dawn; he keeps sitting outside drenched in the morning riyaz— musical practice. As the night blooms into the dawn, Mahendar undergoes a metamorphosis; in a desolate mood he fails to sing and satiate his Guru, but the moment he sings Dhelabai's song which surprisingly is distinctly familiar to Ramnarayan Misir, his Guru; he had heard it from Meenabai and had similar experience as Mahandar. (p. 31-41) This brings the Indian classical music face to face with the fallen music of tawaifs, but reflects on the sentiments of artists are mingled irrespectively.

As Haliwant Sahay's looks back on life with a lifelong friend, Ramnarayan Misir, he is told that whether a harlot or not, Gulzaribai is his woman. Changing his ways of life from sort of licentiousness to spiritual path, Sahay is brooding on the thoughts of renunciation, the journey that is reminiscent of English Ravel Sihib who gives up material life to be a mendicant (p. 63-75). Thus, Haliwant Sahay starts contemplating the legal issues relating to zamindari and opium trade and declared Gulzaribai the heiress of half of his property including the Red Mansion before he leaves the place forever to be a mendicant himself. Thus is the journey of Sahay from depraved man to a mendicant, and Gulzaribai from a tawaif to a dignified woman of Sahay's house, no more a keep but a woman of a man (P. 76-90). In the context of pre-independent times, journeys of both the characters, mirroring the one of the Ravel Sahib, reflect on the life journey of humans that seeks to move towards higher pedestals.

Woman of the house she is, Gulzari takes on the responsibility of the mansion, estate, and the trade at the times her personal life conflict, her feeling for Mahender, come in conflict. She sticks to her dignity as a woman of the household and offended Mahender leaves forever. Gulzaribai, once an ordinary courtesan, is now fighting the lawsuits to protect the estate and trade, a strong woman taking up practical affairs (p. 91-101). Mahen-

dar encounters another tawaif known as Kesaribai who invites him to her place at in the neighbourhood of tawaifs of Banaras to her place as her Guru for classical music. Mahendar becomes a popular accomplished singer getting reputation as well as money. He is attracted to Kesaribai same as he was towards Gulzari but this to ends in a bout of insult and he leaves in a frantic one more time and this time takes a train to Howrah. (p. 102-111). Thus, his journey as a disciple of a renowned and respected classical singer gets muddled as he keeps yearning for love from tawaifs.

Gulzaribai wins the lawsuit and the Red Mansion wears a festive mood, but her discovery that Mahendar is absconding for some days deeply hurts her. She launches a search everywhere but to no avail (p. 112-121). Meanwhile Mahendar is healing the past wounds of unrequited love in his transitory companionship with Manorama in Calcutta. But his life journey keeps draining down the muddled path as he gets lost in counterfeit currency cartel. His shocking encounter with Kesaribai in Calcutta, she is half paralyzed, kindles the light within him as he is determined to get her cured, the expenses are high which he bears from note counterfeiting (p. 122-135). After her shocking end, he returns to his family, cultivates the farms, but continues counterfeiting hundred rupee notes every once a while. His acquaintance called Gopichand, inspector of police in disguise, explodes the counterfeit currency scandal, which is reported in newspapers. It's read out by Ramprasad to Gulzaribai who takes to his rescue with a team of lawyers leaving. On the trial day, Mahindar confesses to his crime and is sentenced to ten years' imprisonment leaving Gulzari heart-torn, but his confession kindles the lights of goodness towards the end of the journey of life (p. 136-147).

Finally, Gulzaribai broods on her past, the choice of the profession she was destined to, her childhood memory of champak tree in the courtyard, and a pair of love birds sucking nectar from the flowers switching from one to another. She looks back on her life with Sahay. He has been the protection that a man is to his wife and she got money, land, property, learned loyalty and got companionship in Sahay (p. 148-162). She got the respect a woman wants, but not the love she yearned for. It's a study of character at the end for Gulzaribai, comparison of Sahay and Mahindar, one strong at every stage and another an absconders of a kind from all situations. Almost as her last wish, she calls for Mahendar who is to be released from jail. On his return, she has a last song of her life from his lips, the pholsunghi that had lived in a tree had flown away hastily into eternity.

Thus, Pholsunghi weaves the narrative of journey of characters with Gulzaribai, a courtesan's tale intersecting with stories of other characters. As all other people, men and women, rightfully evolve towards emancipation through deeds of past and present, she is no exception to a well-deserved life of dignity. She overcomes the tag of a courtesan when allowed to lead the life of a household, but the love for Indian classical music guides her in life through all phases. Thus, the masterpiece of Bhojpuri language, now in translation in English, brings home an idea, that the society may deem it vulgar and licentious, but beneath these superficial tags, there is honour, chivalry, and royalty in Bhojpuri life as reflected in Phoolsunghi. Tawaif, the courtesan, has a royal and loyal life, refusing to be fitting within popular and dogmatic societal restraints, attaining the rightful dignity as a woman.

Sopan Shinde