

# The Shaping of Women Serial Killers: An Analysis of Two Cases

M Haripriya<sup>1</sup>, Dr. K Balakrishnan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>MA Student, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

<sup>2</sup>Research Guide and Associate Professor, Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

**Abstract:** *Every culture regards woman as the linchpin of social structure. It's totally outside the realm of one's imagination that a woman can also be a perpetrator of crime rather than being a victim. But the current state of affairs prove that there has been an offshoot in the rate of violent crimes and that too especially the serial killings or homicides perpetrated by women in the society. On this premise, the paper attempts to identify and analyze the psyche of a woman serial killer. With its prime focus on tracing the psychosexual development of such women, this research paper also tries to recognize the driving forces that trigger such homicides. Also, whether or not their socio-cultural, economic or family backgrounds aid in the escalation of their murder instincts is also examined in this paper.*

**Keywords:** Crime, Psychosexual Development, Serial Killer, Women Perpetrators, Homicide, Psychoanalysis, convict

## 1. Introduction

Although it is a widely acknowledged fact that men indulge in violent crimes like homicides, the statistics indicates that women too are increasingly getting involved in such acts. In the present world there are several instances of female terrorist groups emerging. A country like India, where a woman character is always attributed to the ideal mythical characters like Sita, Radha, Parvathi, Sati, Ganga, Rukmini etc., the thought of having a women offender is something beyond one's imagination. The concept of a woman serial killer is quite unfitting in this tradition. Reality again strikes one really hard when it is known that there are strong evidences against more than ten women serial killers in India, who were convicted under cold blooded homicidal charges.

The image of a man with a brutal stare pops up in our mind whenever we talk about a serial killer. Names such as Jack the Ripper, Ted Bundy, Raman Raghav and Thug Behram plagues our mind. However it is odd for us to think of a woman who has murdered many people quite unflinchingly. Such instances of women turning into serial killers with or without a motive are certainly shocking.

In western countries like USA and U. K, several homicide cases involving woman perpetrators are reported. But countries like India fits nowhere in this picture, given its socio-cultural as well as historical background. The patriarchal concept of an Indian woman is that of a homemaker who manages her family and the household. This persona of an Indian woman is still being harbored in the minds of millions of people. We belong to a land where women are expected to be submissive, polite, and meek. Even today, whenever a homicide case involving a women killer is reported, the first response that crops up in our mind would be an incredulous one-how come a woman act so ruthlessly and takes one's life?

Serial murder is definitely and relatively a rare event constituting less than five percent of all the homicide cases and only less than one percent or so covers the murder

involving a woman. Although the misdemeanor of murder date back to early 1660s, for Indians, the very concept of serial killing seems to be something akin to what we read in thriller novels or watch in Hollywood movies. The FBI describes a serial killing "to include three or more murders committed separately with a cooling off period between them" (Geberth and Turco 49-60).

The alarming question that haunts our consciousness could be-what might have actually transformed herself from being a compassionate and gentle being to become a cold blooded ruthless murderer. On making a thorough search in both internet and other sources it is found that there are about ten women serial killers convicted in India. These ten women have not only unleashed a reign of terror in their particular contexts, but also raised questions regarding many preexisting perceptions of our patriarchal society.

In a country like India where morality surpasses everything, ten cases have been reported where a woman was charged guilty of felony. Starting with India's first petrifying woman serial killer Troilokya Tarini Devi [1880s] to Jolly Joseph [2019], the list extends. From this list, the case of two who had killed multiple victims and substantiate the aforesaid definition of a serial killer, have been chosen for analysis. The paper intends to examine the actions of these women serial killers, primarily focusing on the psychoanalytical personality theory and their psychosexual development. This paper also tries to identify the driving forces – the economic factors, aspects of sexuality, or other fantasies involved in their action.

People sometimes lose full control of their minds while facing serious hardships and end up either inflicting pain on others or taking one's own life. The Austrian neurologist Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory explains in detail various aspects of personality development and functioning. His studies indicate that a person's past experiences of profoundly distressing events that are sexual in nature survive outside of consciousness as a hidden memory and later when exposed to such a situation again, these memories actup. The memories of earlier troublesome sexual

experiences lay dormant until it gets awakened by a more recent sexual encounter. He states that traumatic experiences do play a significant role in shaping the personality of a human being. These assumptions of his turn out to be validated while analyzing the past of the serial killers including the traumatic experiences of sexual encounters during childhood. Bandit Queen aka Phoolan Devi serves as the biggest example. Various researches also support the notion that physical and psychological abuse contributes largely to the growth of a serial killer. In most cases a serial killer's childhood consisted of physical and/or psychological abuse.

Studies on the impact of childhood abuse and exploitation on adults who later became serial killers establish that "adults who were physically, emotionally, and sexually abused during their childhood were three times more likely than non-abused adults to act extremely violently during adulthood" (Dutton and Hart, 130). However, not all abused children grow into a murderer and not all serial killers are victims of traumatic childhood experiences. But still, the interrelation between the two cannot be completely denied.

In Phoolan Devi's case, all her victims were men. She chose murder as a means to satisfy her vengeance against those men who wronged her. Her retribution began with the brutal murder of her ex-husband who married her when she was still a teenager and constantly abused her both emotionally and sexually. From a very young age, she was subjected to such sexual violence that created great scars on her subconscious mind, which lay dormant in her mind. Her old husband mistreated and raped her regularly. Years later she was accused of theft and was sent to jail where she was manhandled and raped apart from being mercilessly beaten up. By this time Phoolan started harboring hatred for men who trivialized and mistreated women. She was also captured and gang-raped by a group of upper-class Thakur men. This awakened the serpent of vengeance in her that she evolved herself to be one of the greatest bandits as well as a serial killer that our country has ever seen. She started killing men as a warning for others who marries little girls and ill-treats them. One night she along with some of her followers rounded up the Thakur men of Behmai village and avenged herself. She not even once wavered while lining them up and opening fire on them, resulting in everyone's death. In this case, the motive that triggered all the murders was purely her quest for vengeance and anger. She retaliated so that no other woman would have to face the same injustice and brutality that she experienced.

Although one can't justify her reasons for committing such a gruesome act, this case definitely serves as an indicator of how traumatic experience shapes one's personality. A docile woman who was thought incapable of rage and violence transformed herself into a tough woman who was feared by men and women irrespectively-the metamorphosis of prey to a hunter who dauntlessly hunted down her sinners is visible here. Furthermore, it indicates the role played by our social institutions in shaping serial killers. When she gave up on her marriage and came back home she was taunted for her failure as a wife. She was also sexually exploited by many upper-classmen indicating the horrors of the caste system that prevailed and still prevails to an extent in the Indian

society. Evidently, social and economic factors do impact a person's life and, in particular, quite intensely, a woman's life.

Apart from experiences of sexual violation, other psychosocial factors such as "childhood humiliation, abuse, loneliness, disownment, and rejection or neglect from parents or one of the parents also aid in forming the violent nature of a human being" (Whitman and Akutagawa, 695). Unstable and unhealthy relationships are reflected in a person's inability of forming emotional attachments. On top of that other Personality disorders such as Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), and Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) also back up in the development of serial killer behavior. Studies connect Borderline Personality Disorder to antisocial behavior (Leichsenring et. al.320). The imagination of a serial killer also plays a vital role in the orchestration of a homicide. The killer must administer the killings again and again in their mind so as to avoid mistakes and execute a perfect crime.

Koodathai serial murder case is an example of flawlessly pre-planned and sharply administered murder. The convict Jolly Joseph had perfectly put to death six of her family members over a span of fourteen years. During interrogation, she admitted that she killed all these people so as to satisfy several of her needs including sexual, financial, and authoritative power. After her first killing of her mother-in-law, Annamma Thomas, she kind of started gaining confidence and began fanaticizing about how the future acts are to be carried out. She admitted to the police that she killed Annamma Thomas so as to gain full control over the finance and thereby enjoy dominance over other family members. The decision-making power concerning life and death provides them an intoxication of feeling zest and omnipotent. When this delusional fantasy reaches its peak, a woman serial killer enjoys her act of murder and her victory over the patriarchal society as identified in the case of Jolly Joseph. When new emotional necessities or compulsions emerge, a serial killer's quest for murder also resurfaces. In the inquisition report of Koodathai murder case, Jolly Joseph's mysogynism was recorded. She never flinched, not even for once a while, in aborting female infanticide and that too twice. She had also killed a toddler. Hence our basic research question is being answered, that a woman can not only grow into a person cherishing motherly affections but also assume herself as a demoness deep inside her. It all depends on one's upbringing, social and psychological factors, and developmental stages of childhood that decide whether to be a mother or an ogre. It was proved in further investigation that what motivated her to commit such a heinous crime was not just to satisfy her financial needs but also sexual. She was sexually involved with her then-husband, Roy Thomas's cousin, Shaju who later married her after his wife's and daughter's alleged natural deaths. But it was later revealed that Jolly executed both Shaju's daughter and wife so as to enjoy her life with him.

Psychoanalytic studies on Jolly Joseph's case suggest that she suffers from Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Belonging to a lower middle-class farmer's family of Idukki, she always yearned for a more prosperous life. Getting

herself married into an affluent family of highly educated in-laws she always felt inferior to them. For her, the palatial house, expensive clothes, cars, and other luxuries were completely brand new. Gradually she started comparing herself to her in-laws and felt uncomfortable about the background from which she came from. So she started cooking up stories regarding her educational qualifications and claimed herself to be a highly qualified teacher at a prestigious college. Jolly began to envy the respect everyone has for her mother-in-law and also the power and authority she wielded in the family. Jolly's craving for authority, respect, decision making power, and influence triggered her to commit her first murder by eliminating Annamma who was the stumbling block for her to achieve all these. Even though this murder might have caused panic and anxiety in Jolly, she must have enjoyed her act of killing. She also poisoned and murdered her father-in-law for acquiring his property. Craze for power and property might have ignited her desire for better sexual pleasure. She considered her husband to be impotent to provide her the pleasure she longed for and started an extramarital affair with her husband's cousin, Shaju. This resulted in the murder of her husband, Shaju's wife, and daughter.

Considering all the precipitating and predisposing factors which might have forced Jolly to a serial killing, we find that Jolly lacks a sense of belonging to her family. She had unstable and unsatisfactory personal relationships. She might have felt that she was unfairly denied of power, education, money, supportive kinship etc. Psychological analysis of Jolly's condition by a psychiatrist reveals that:

Murderous behaviour appears to have heavily concentrated among individuals who seek "pleasure" to eliminate "pain" for power, position, authority, property, money, sex, etc. Ultimately murder is focused on pleasure by an individual who is influenced by values of a society. (Devasia)

Thus we can say that our socio-cultural factors does play a vital role in shaping the mind of a serial killer.

## 2. Conclusion

The criminal mind of a serial killer remains more complicated and grows themselves into more complex human beings. In a nutshell, we cannot state that such and such factors have definitely influenced the mind of a serial killer. However what this paper tries to suggest is that there are many factors that plays a key role in the developmental process of a woman serial killer. It is rather impossible to attribute their behaviour to any particular factor as such. For both the women serial killers mentioned in this paper, their triggering causes and other influencing factors have developed gradually and are in a way interconnected with one another. As discussed above, lack of sense of belonging to family, inadequate social support, traumatic experiences suppressed in the mind, an insatiable thirst for wealth, power and pleasure and obsession to these in varying degrees contribute to the shaping of serial killers. Unable to cope with their life situations, both these female killers might have turned in to the act of murdering as a last resort.

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