

Reimagining Femininity: Rani Jindan's Quest for Power and Self-Determination in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

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Abstract:

In the tapestry of history, women's marginalized status stems from entrenched cultural biases, relegating them to secondary roles while glorifying male dominance. This bias, woven through time, depicted women as submissive beings, subjected to the exercise of power. Patriarchal constructs wielded knowledge and power as instruments of subjugation, erasing even powerful women from historical narratives. Despite these systemic imbalances, pockets of resistance emerged within women's struggles. This research centers on Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's depiction of Rani Jindan in *The Last Queen* (2021). This analysis aims to unravel Rani Jindan's navigation through power dynamics, intertwining her pursuit of power with her physicality and desires. Through a reevaluation of Rani Jindan's life, this paper challenges the perception of women as passive entities, highlighting instances where she protested and gained agency.

Keywords: Agency; Hegemony; Marginalization; Power- dynamics.

1. Introduction

In the intricate tapestry of human history, women frequently discover themselves confined to the margins, a consequence of deep-rooted cultural prejudices that perpetuate their relegation to secondary roles while elevating male dominance. This pervasive bias, interwoven through the fabric of time, has portrayed women as submissive beings subjected to the exertion of power. The patriarchal constructs shaping societal norms wielded knowledge and power as instruments

of subjugation, often erasing even the most influential women from the annals of historical narratives.

Despite the systemic imbalances and historical silencing, pockets of resistance have emerged within the struggles of women. This research centers on the compelling portrayal of Rani Jindan in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, "The Last Queen" (2021). Rani Jindan's narrative serves as a lens through which to explore the intricate dynamics of power, challenging prevailing perceptions of women as passive entities. This analysis delves into Rani Jindan's journey, intricately intertwining her pursuit of power with her physicality and desires, ultimately reevaluating her life to highlight instances where she protested and actively gained agency. Through this exploration, the paper seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of women's historical narratives, shedding light on the nuanced approaches through which they navigated and contested the prevailing power structures of their time.

2. Method

The scholar has thoroughly examined the text, meticulously analyzing individual words, phrases, and literary elements to unveil the hidden meanings, symbols, and intentions woven into the fabric of the text. This careful method, commonly referred to as textual analysis, enables a more profound comprehension of the intricacies and subtleties within the text. In addition to this, the researcher has consulted relevant secondary sources to provide a broader context for the text. By expanding textual analysis beyond the text itself, the goal is to offer a concise analysis of the narrative's nuances, cultural references, and authorial choices. This all-encompassing approach guarantees that the researcher's interpretations are well-founded and perceptive.

3. Results and Discussion

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and her literary oeuvre

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is a highly acclaimed Indian-American author celebrated for her captivating and thought-provoking exploration of themes such as immigrant experiences, cultural identity, and the roles of women in society. Born in Kolkata, India, Divakaruni later moved to the United States, where she has become a prominent voice in contemporary

literature. Divakaruni's literary works often draw from the rich tapestry of Indian history, mythology, and folklore. She is known for her ability to skillfully reimagine and subvert traditional narratives, bringing to light the often overlooked or marginalized perspectives, particularly those of women. Two of her notable novels in this vein are "The Palace of Illusions" (2008) and "The Forest of Enchantments" (2019), where she delves into Indian mythology to offer fresh perspectives on well-known stories. In these works, she adeptly revisits the landscape of Indian mythology, purposefully challenging prevailing stories that tends to marginalize the significant roles played by women. Her latest novel, "The Last Queen" (2021), represents a deliberate endeavor to reposition Rani Jindan Kaur within the liminal space of India's Colonial History. Rani Jindan's historical role is often overlooked by many writers. Divakaruni seeks to transform her from a figure on the periphery to a strong protagonist and Queen who eventually challenges the British forces.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary contributions have earned her widespread recognition and numerous awards. Her words resonate with readers globally, offering them a deeper understanding of cultural complexities, gender dynamics, and the human experience across different landscapes and time periods.

Rani Jindan Kaur

Rani Jindan Kaur was the daughter of a royal dog trainer and the youngest wife of Ranjit Singh. He was also known as the "Lion of Punjab" for his courage and leadership. In an interview, Divakaruni commented on her approach to portraying Jindan: "I have focused on drawing Jindan with a more contemporary approach befitting the story of a person who comes from a solid peasant background." She explains that she wanted to present Jindan as a complex and multifaceted individual. This approach is evident in the novel, which portrays Jindan as a strong, intelligent, and ambitious woman who is also capable of making mistakes. The novel commences with the pivotal event of the Maharaja's demise, which dramatically alters Rani Jindan's circumstances. No longer basking in the freedoms she once enjoyed, she now finds herself perceived as a potential threat. Life takes a challenging turn as she assumes the responsibility of caring for her one-year-old son, Dalip, while navigating a perilous and unpredictable world. Gone are the days of security; instead, she must contend with the demands of protecting herself and her child.

In the face of adversity, Rani Jindan fervently wishes that her late husband's presence would linger, providing them with a sense of security. She prays earnestly, reminiscent of the time when her son suffered from a severe illness known as bloody flux. Through her unwavering prayers to Jhingar Shah, her son experienced a remarkable recovery within twenty-four hours. However, the same thing did not materialize when she yearns for the revival of the Sarkar, highlighting the contrasting fortunes in her life.

Rani Jindan's journey epitomizes resilience, strength, and unwavering determination. Born into humble beginnings in the small village of Gurjanwala, she is raised by a mother who instills in her a deep sense of Sikh values and a love for learning. Despite her father's irresponsible ways, Rani finds solace and inspiration in the teachings of Guru Arjan Dev, whose unwavering faith and sacrifice leave a lasting impression on her. A chance encounter with the charismatic Maharaja Ranjit Singh during a horse ride to Lahore sets Rani's life on a transformative path. She is drawn to his power, aura, and rare charisma, and their connection deepens as they share their thoughts and experiences. Rani's intelligence, honesty, and unwavering loyalty make her a trusted confidante to the Maharaja.

Rani's love for Ranjit Singh is unwavering, and she is willing to do whatever it takes to protect him and his legacy. She uses her political acumen to eliminate his enemies and secure his son's position as Maharaja. However, her devotion to Ranjit Singh also leads to a rift with her son, as she prioritizes her husband's interests over her own child's well-being. Rani Jindan's life is marked by both triumphs and challenges. She faces fierce opposition from the British, who label her as the 'Messalina of Punjab' in an attempt to tarnish her reputation. Yet, she remains undeterred, using her influence to protect her son and the Sikh kingdom from foreign domination.

Rani Jindan's story is a testament to the power of resilience, strength, and unwavering determination. She is a complex and multifaceted individual who leaves an indelible mark on Sikh history. Her legacy continues to inspire generations of women, demonstrating the power of unwavering belief in oneself and the pursuit of justice.

Marginalization and Power Politics

Divakaruni claims: "Searching, I discovered that she had been almost forgotten by history, although her husband and her son are well known – a not uncommon problem with women. I

felt a deep desire to bring her story to present-day readers as there is much for us to learn from it, on both the personal and the political arenas...I hope I have managed to bring out Rani Jindan's feelings and dilemmas, her passion and her pain, in spite of this new balance between

men and women in *The Last Queen*. For me, Jindan-the-lioness (as her son calls her) is still the heart of the novel!"

The comparative analysis of Rani Jindan's historical representation and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's portrayal unveils a dual narrative—one that exposes her marginalization and, simultaneously, serves as a critique of the historical formulation process and its collusion with the powerful. In this exploration, Navtej Sarna's "The Exile: A Novel Based on the Life of Maharaja Duleep Singh" offers a glimpse into the journey of Rani Jindan's son, who endured the loss of the empire at such a young age. Similarly, William Dalrymple and Anita Anand's non-fiction work, "Kohinoor" (2016), briefly touches upon Rani Jindan's life. Although Divakaruni acknowledges the value of these texts in her research, their representation of the protagonist remains marginal.

This scant presence of the protagonist in historical narratives raises questions about a deliberate effort to erase her from collective memory. Milan Kundera refers to this systematic erasure of characters as "organized forgetting" (280), suggesting a purposeful attempt to diminish her significance. This phenomenon exemplifies the influence of power dynamics not only on individuals but also dictates what is remembered and what is forgotten.

In the realm of power dynamics, the control extends beyond individuals to govern the creation of knowledge. Michel Foucault's assertion that "knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (1980: 52) resonates here. The selective inclusion or exclusion of historical figures like Rani Jindan is a manifestation of the ubiquitous and inescapable nature of power, shaping not only individual destinies but also determining what aspects of history are preserved and what is consigned to oblivion. Divakaruni's portrayal of Rani Jindan in "The Last Queen" emerges as a poignant counterpoint to these historical gaps, aiming to restore agency and significance to a figure who has been systematically relegated to the periphery of collective memory.

From a young age, Rani Jindan demonstrated a remarkable spirit of independence and defiance against societal norms. Her willingness to accompany her brother to steal guavas

and her desire to play a significant role in the family's livelihood reflected her rejection of the traditional role expected of women. Throughout the novel, Jindan's resilience and strength shone through, even

in moments of vulnerability. Jindan's move to Lahore exposed her to the dominant power politics within the royal household, particularly the control exerted over women's bodies and their confinement to the zenana. She observed how the queens and concubines were marginalized and excluded from active participation in court affairs, their lives dictated by patriarchal norms. However, Jindan subsequently observed the subtle power plays within the zenana, where women asserted their influence in the absence of men. Rani Jindan's immersion in the royal court unveiled a world of intricate power dynamics, where individuals, regardless of gender, could wield influence and authority. She observed how power was not an inherent trait solely possessed by men but rather a fluid and dynamic concept that could be exercised through various means. Social status, political maneuvering, and even personal relationships served as conduits for power, allowing individuals to navigate the complex landscape of the court. Through her observations, Rani Jindan gained a nuanced understanding of power, recognizing it not as a fixed entity but as a strategic tool that individuals employed to shape their circumstances.

By delving into the intimate dynamics of Rani Jindan's marriage, Divakaruni disrupts the dominant narrative that subjugates the female body and asserts its equal worth and vitality. The traditional gendered power dynamic undergoes a transformation when the protagonist redefines masculinity as a measure of power. The Sarkar's willingness to expose his physical vulnerabilities to Rani Jindan shatters the conventional image of male strength and invulnerability, creating a space for vulnerability, empathy, and a deeper connection between them. The Fakir's insightful perspective echoes the King's reverence for Rani Jindan, extending beyond her physical allure to appreciate her exceptional intellect, a quality he sought in his Queens. Divakaruni portrays Rani Jindan's vulnerability when tempted by Gulloo, her secret admirer, revealing her desire to wield power beyond her royal position. This moment underscores how societal institutions like marriage contribute to sustaining power relations that exert control over the 'female body.' While the Sarkar's polygamous relationships are socially accepted, Rani Jindan's marriage, grounded in love and intelligence, positions her uniquely, not only in the Sarkar's life but also in the annals of history.

Rani Jindan makes her own choices and takes charge of her life. She is an independent thinker who questions the status quo. Rani Jindan's decision to live after the death of the Maharaja stands in stark contrast to the fate of many of his other wives, who chose to end their lives

through sati. Rani Jindan, however, chooses to live, even though it means facing many challenges as a young widow. She is driven by an insatiable curiosity about the world and a desire to immerse herself in its richness and diversity. This decision gives Rani Jindan a feeling of agency, as she herself controls her life. She establishes her identity by resisting these oppressive customs. This decision marks the beginning of Rani Jindan's emancipation. She is

able to put her own needs and desires first, even though it means defying societal expectations. Rani Jindan's relationship with Lal Singh awakens her to a realm of profound physical and emotional intimacy. The love she found with Lal Singh offered a profound level of fulfillment that was absent from her loveless marriage to the Maharaja.

Rani Jindan is a complex and multifaceted character who is not afraid to challenge the status quo. She openly admits: "I value your love and your loyalty more than my pride, so I will speak my mind. I've been a widow since I was twenty-one. The years stretched ahead of me, empty as a desert. Then, miraculously, I found love again. But I cannot marry Lal. If I do, I must give up being regent. I cannot abandon Dalip like that. But should I be sentenced to loneliness just because I wish to protect my son? Many of the nobles have several wives-and mistresses, too. Their liaisons are accepted. Am I a sinner just because I'm a woman. I love only one man, but society will denounce me if it finds out" (241-42).

A careful examination of Divakaruni's literary works reveals her keen insight into the plight of marginalized women in the society. The contemporary peripheral women character finds its origins in historical cultural biases that consistently relegated women to secondary roles. Divakaruni's Rani Jindan's character becomes particularly pertinent in this context, as it unravels the deep-rooted connections between the present and the historical marginalized women.

Divakaruni adeptly deconstructs the idealized image of a queen's life by exposing Rani Jindan's experiences, particularly from the context of motherhood. The portrayal of Jindan's physique, enduring psychological tribulations transforms her from a revered historical figure

to a profoundly pertinent personality of recent times. The author skillfully establishes a connection between past and present by emphasizing their shared bodily experiences. Through this thematic exploration, Divakaruni underscores the enduring impact of historical biases on the present, compelling readers to reconsider and challenge prevailing notions about the roles and suffering of women across time periods.

Rani Jindan confronts a formidable challenge when separated from King Dalip Singh. Dalip and Punjab were kept away from her control, for the Britishers recognized her potential to incite uprising. Rani Jindan's escape from prison, her arduous journey to Nepal, and her subsequent return display her unyielding spirit against imperial powers. After a fourteen-year separation, the British allow Dalip to meet his mother only when assured she poses no threat. Despite appearing powerless, Rani Jindan influences Dalip with her intellect, encouraging her son to raise voice against the British. Her death in London doesn't diminish her impact; she inspires Dalip to transport the remains to India, emphasizing her agency in shaping history. Notably, her absence contributes to India losing the famed Koh-i-Noor diamond, exchanged for refuge by the Sarkar. Despite surrendering to the colonial master, Rani Jindan's historical presence illustrates individual agency in resisting power, as emphasized by Divakaruni.

Divakaruni's exploration of Colonial India's historical narrative, specifically her reexamination of Rani Jindan's character, underscores the significance of granting the marginalized Queen a noteworthy position in India's history—acknowledging her importance overlooked by others. Divakaruni's intention to depict the past authentically, devoid of superficial glorification, and to scrutinize its role in perpetuating contemporary societal inequalities and discriminations, renders this study particularly relevant. Rather than idealizing the past, Divakaruni presents the multifaceted nature, portraying the female protagonist in her novel. Through "The Last Queen," she endeavors to construct an unconventional account of Rani Jindan that empowers and amplifies the voice, inspiring present-day women to resist and defy marginalization.

4. Conclusions

The presentation of Rani Jindan's narrative in Divakaruni's "The Last Queen" (2021) illuminates a profound and resonant story within the broader context of women's historical struggles. As we reflect on the intricate tapestry of human history, it becomes evident that

entrenched cultural biases have persistently marginalized women, relegating them to secondary roles and reinforcing male dominance. The pervasive bias, interwoven through time, has portrayed women as submissive beings, their stories often erased or overshadowed by patriarchal constructs that wielded *scientia potentia est* as tools of subjugation. However, the journey of the protagonist serves as a poignant reminder that within the historical struggles and systemic imbalances, pockets of resistance have emerged. Through a meticulous analysis of her journey in the face of prevailing power dynamics, this research challenges the prevailing perceptions of women as passive entities. Rani Jindan's life unfolds as a testament to resilience and agency, as she not only resisted the oppressive forces around her but actively sought and gained power fighting against patriarchy. This exploration contributes to a broader understanding of women's historical narratives, shedding light on the nuanced ways in which they navigated and contested the prevailing power structures of their time. Rani Jindan's story becomes a metaphor for the untold stories of countless women who, despite historical silencing, have left an indelible mark on the fabric of human history. As we draw inspiration from these narratives, we are compelled to continue unraveling the threads of historical bias, recognizing and celebrating the agency of women who have shaped and continue to shape the course of our shared history.

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