



Artistic Recreation of History in Jaishree Misra's *Rani*

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Jaishree Misra is an Indian author. Her fourth novel, *Rani* is a historical fiction based on the life of Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi. The famous Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi is often celebrated as icon of Indian freedom struggle, symbol of bravery and a beacon light. Indians have idolized her as a goddess – a role model for women, rarely trying to examine and even deliberately ignoring her human aspect. In this fictional tale which is rather well researched by the author, the readers could see the mind of the Rani. The novel traces all the historical events in Rani's life which form the skeletal framework of the manuscript but it goes beyond that to fill in the flesh and blood through the emotional turmoil and experiences of its characters. It is worth reading for people who love to go beyond the presentation of facts and into the realm of human emotions. Jaishree Misra would leave the readers in tears as they would read about the evolution of a simple girl into a “warrior queen” – a fate imposed on her rather than selected by choice.

History is neither about past nor dead. The past mingles with the present in a continuous confluence and the dead infuses life too. This is because the ancient social, cultural, literary and historical traditions spanning several thousand years, sustain the present day India. It is therefore, natural that history is pulsating with life and verve. For this reason writers in all ages have turned to history for inspiration and to draw material for their themes. However, the linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity which comprises the complex socio-cultural fabric of India facilitates viewing the past from various angles. According to the writers' perception and socio-cultural concerns, they have painted Indian history in various hues in their fiction. The interrelationship of history and literature is intricate and deep rooted. Therefore, it is not surprising if different literary works sharing the same historical theme receiving divergent reviews and responses of readers from different regions. It is difficult to define the parameters of historical fiction, and equally baffling to explain and predict the reception a particular work of historical fiction will have among readers, or that the author's vision

will reach the readers in the same light as he perceived it. A reaction substantiating this argument is the row over and the subsequent banning of Jaishree Misra's novel *Rani* in the State of Uttar Pradesh in Central India few years back, whereas other works on the same historical personality have been immensely popular.

Rani is a fictionalized biography of Rani Lakshmibai, who was the Queen of Jhansi, a state situated in the Bundelkhand region of Central India, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The history of the first uprising against foreign rule in 1857 cannot be complete without referring to her contribution. Schools, colleges and institutions are named after her, in honour of her memory and as a tribute to her sacrifice. Over the years, she has become an indispensable part of Indian folklore. The image of a young queen on horseback, dressed in male attire, carrying a small child tied on her back, is unforgettable. Recently a rally was organized to reinforce Indian values and traditions in the modern generation, from Iqbal Maidan in Bhopal. In the present times of cultural shifts and changing values, to serve as a symbol of Indian womanhood, a woman dressed as Rani Lakshmibai, was leading the procession on horseback. She has figured in several poems, dramas and novels, in various Indian regional languages. A poem celebrating the valour of the queen by the famous Hindi poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, can be recalled by almost all school children in India, being a part of school text books.

Mahasweta Devi, a Bangla writer and winner of *Gyanpeeth* award, the highest literary award in India, also wrote a fictional biography of the queen, in 1956. The book is now available in English translation as *The Queen of Jhansi*. A biography in Hindi, also available in English translation, is by Vrindavan Lal Varma, another noted Indian novelist. Another biography in English *the Ranee of Jhansi* was written by D.V. Tahmankar as early as in 1958. Fifty years later, on 13 May, 2008, a play entitled *Jhansi Ki Rani*, based on Varma's biography of the queen was performed at *Bharat Bhawan*, a premier national institution for culture and performing arts, situated at Bhopal. The play was performed by *Rang Saptak*, a Delhi based theatre group. The foregoing list is only indicative, and by no means exhaustive. It is sufficient to show the charisma of the queen's persona in literature and other creative arts. Even authors outside India, interested in British colonial history, could not choose to ignore the queen, as Jaishree Misra also points out in her *Author's Note*, "India's Boudica, whom even her British victors would come to grudgingly describe as an 'Indian Joan of Arc'" (v). More than a hundred years before Jaishree Misra, 1901, Michael White wrote a fictional biography of the queen entitled *Lachmi Bai, The Rani of Jhansi*. In 1986, Joyce Lebra – Chapman published *The Rani of Jhansi, a Study in Female Heroism in India*; in 1988 Antonia Fraser published *Warrior Queens*, which included an account of the queen's life as *The Valiant Rani*; in 2007, Rainer Jerosch published *The Rani of Jhansi, Rebel Against Will*. The publication details and dates signify that Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi has continued to have an aura for more than a hundred and fifty years, which attracts fiction writers and it is not the first time that her life has been fictionalized. Moreover, none of the fictional works have sparked a row as Jaishree Misra's *Rani*. On the contrary they have increased the popularity of this Indian icon.

It is pertinent to ponder why people were piqued, when Misra claims she has researched her facts well. In an interview given to Arathi Menon for *Deccan Herald*, she says,

There is a lot of research material available on Rani of Jhansi. In fact, I got more than half of the material from one single book, *India and its Native Princes: Travels in*

India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal by Louis Rousselet who had visited India in the 1830s. All that was left to me was to use my imagination. I did a lot of traveling to these places I describe in the book to get the details right. (6)

She further claims in the interview: “I referred to many books and visited the places. I referred to Indian sources as well as English ones” (6). If she has her history right, why the hue and cry? Interestingly, the book was banned only in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which includes Jhansi, and not the whole of India. One is therefore forced to mull the mystery over. What is so objectionable in Misra’s portrayal? Is it an inherent defect of the work, or something else that has disrupted the delicate balance between history and fiction? Or literary conditions have changed with the passage of time? In an attempt to seek answers to these questions, the present researcher first examined Misra’s stance and depiction and then he has shown how it is different from other authors preceding her. This exercise explains what happens when history, especially that of the colonial period like the British *Raj*, which is frequently viewed from diametrically opposite angles, enters the realm of fiction.

Jaishree Misra’s *Rani*, like other fictional biographies before her, is a narrative about the transformation of the beautiful and intelligent daughter of Moropant Tambe into the fiery queen of Jhansi, widow of Raja Gangadhar Rao. The book begins with the thirteen year old living in Saturn House at Varanasi, household of the deposed Peshwas, with her father, who was a courtier and advisor there. She has Nana, the Peshwa’s adopted son and Tatyia Tope, an orphan of noble lineage, for playmates. It describes how her ordinary life becomes extraordinary due to her marriage with the ruler of Jhansi, a childless widower, much older than her. Gangadhar Rao trains her in the affairs of the state, which she is quick to grasp. However, she is tragically widowed at the age of twenty four, and thereafter trapped into endless troubles. Jaishree Misra also shows her struggle to survive when Lord Dalhousie, following the famous Doctrine of Lapse, refuses to recognize Damodar Rao, the child adopted by the King, as his successor. Like other narratives on the life of Lakshmi Bai, Misra’s novel also depicts why and how to save her kingdom, she picks up the sword in defiance of the mighty colonial power of the *Raj*. Her portrayal of the queen so far, is the one traditionally accepted and much eulogized by Indians and sometimes also accepted, though grudgingly, by the European writers.

The accession of British East India Company as the paramount Indian power between 1820-1857 and the years of the “Revolution of 1857” depicted by Indian authors as the “First War of Independence” while relegated to the background by the British accounts as “Sepoy Mutiny.” The novel tries to explore the era through the eyes of two main characters – Rani Lakshmi Bai and Major Willis; the Regent of East India Company at Jhansi. It tries to present the human face of the entire conflict; the trepidations and sufferings of individual people often forgotten in the glorified accounts of blood and valour in a war. Jaishree Misra brings out her valour: “She placed a cautionary hand on Nana’s arm to stop his tirade ‘My brothers, Time is at a premium. Let us not argue. We need to prepare for the next Assault before they are upon us’” (388). There are several real historical records in the book, like the mails that passed between the Rani and the British Headquarters quoted to prove the factual authenticity of the book, but there is a lot of fiction as well. The book was in trouble and banned in the state of Uttar Pradesh because the author fictionalized a part of the Rani’s life and showed her as involved in a romance with an Englishman; which was seen as blasphemy. The author has mentioned in an interview that only the name of the Englishman is true, the rest is fiction.

The book sketches the warrior queen's eventful life and says she actually stood for peace and harmony and was not the sword-swinging heroine till she was hunted by the British for something she had not done. The book is long, about 400 plus pages; and it is written in rather heavy vocabulary, which is expected to create an archaic ambience. She is glorified by the foreign rulers but not openly. Jaishree Misra brings out her courage when she says: "Now named 'Warrior Queen' by the British, Lakshmibai made a second surprise. Pre-emptive attack at Gulauli where General Rose and his troops had gathered after the first battle" (388).

Even the sensual elements do not breathe life into the men in her life. The queen is too brilliant a figure for that. In fact, the delayed consummation of her marriage renders the little queen worried and prompts her to make moves atypical for a woman of her dignity. Misra rightly makes the attempted consummation a scene of sanitized sensuality. Still again with Ellis, the man who holds her romantic interest, the queen is rather practical. The readers do not feel the flush of a stormy unusual romance in those scenes. The best vista perhaps is when the Rani collapses for a private weeping after a public stiff lipped final good bye to Ellis.

Jaishree Misra has done her research well. The active presence of the church in Jhansi, the various historical spots brought to life in the course of the novel and the real correspondence between the Rani and the British picked from the archives prove it. She also convincingly settles the doubt of why the Rani waited four years to fight the British in the uprising of 1857 although Jhansi was annexed in 1854. The negotiation between the Rani and the British is proved by what is recorded on her in the archives. Perhaps this element strengthens the fabric of the book more than anything else. The reference of the church is presented by Jaishree Misra: "Oh no, Rani- sahiba, the church building that you saw in the cantonment. Took us more than five years to build" (97). Indians do not ever hear of the Rani aiding the bloody massacre of a group of English women and children but the British records still hold the fact against her. Misra attempts to erase this black mark by attributing the Rani with a character of incomparable integrity and highlighting the circumstances that finally sabotage her good intentions. Does the writer suggest that this is perchance the reality?

There are not many things that take away the readers joy of reading *Rani* at a stretch. In fact, Misra has an adept pen and has used fine imagery throughout. Look how she describes the light that falls on the floor of the room through stained glass as "coloured lozenges of light." The shift of point of view is subtle and unobtrusive, defying all modern rules of story writing. The scene of the King's funeral starts from Ellis's perceptive but the readers find themselves in the queen's thoughts without realizing it. Some critics say, if there are so many hurdles in the path of fictionalizing history, then should an author go for it. The answer is an emphatic YES. This is because if a writer refuses to look at history from his perspective, he denies posterity from knowing immortal works of literature like *Julius Caesar* and all the other historical plays of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and a plethora of such other works.

Rani is rather slow paced especially in the first half which portrays the little girl Manikarnika. But the pace picks up after the tale touches the annexation of Jhansi by the British. Mani (Misra replaces the known pet name 'Manu' perhaps intentionally) makes her presence felt, not as the expected fiery and spontaneous heroine but as a sensible ruler. The novel presents a never explored dimension of the age of the mutiny, seemingly an unbiased account presented through the eyes of both sides to the conflict. But in the backdrop of the issues the soul of the book lays in the exploration of "Rani of Jhansi," a woman who will be remembered by her legend rather the person she was.

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