

The Empress Behind the Veil: A Study of Rani Jindan in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

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Abstract:

*Historical narratives, often constructed through a patriarchal lens, have systematically obscured the agency and power of women, relegating them to the margins. This paper seeks to rectify this erasure by examining Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021), a novel that reclaims the complex life of Rani Jindan. This study analyzes Jindan's strategic deployment of power, alongside her assertion of physical desires, to dismantle the patriarchal construct of women as 'docile bodies.' By meticulously retracing key moments in Jindan's life, the research demonstrates how she not only resisted dominant power structures but also actively acquired and wielded power, thereby offering a nuanced perspective on the interplay between female agency and historical subjugation. This analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how literary representations can reclaim and re-evaluate the historical significance of women who defied societal constraints.*

Keywords:

Margins, Patriarchal, Historical Subjugation, Docile bodies, Power, Female Agency.

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The historiography of women is inextricably linked to the evolution of feminist thought and the broader transformation of historical scholarship. As feminist movements challenged prevailing societal inequities, historical inquiry became a crucial instrument for elucidating the systemic origins of female subjugation and for drawing inspiration from historical precedents of resistance. This endeavor underscored the socially constructed nature of women's roles, demonstrating their mutability across historical contexts, rather than their inherent immutability. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a critical reassessment of mainstream historical narratives by pioneering figures within organized women's movements. Recognizing the conspicuous absence of women, these scholars initiated a project of historical recovery, aiming to foreground the contributions, struggles, and achievements of women systematically marginalized or omitted from canonical texts.

The inherent challenges of historical reconstruction necessitate a rigorous approach to source material and contextual analysis. In this vein, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel, *The Last Queen* (2021), offers a compelling case study in the intersection of historical fidelity and creative interpretation. Divakaruni's work, which provides a narrative of the Sikh Empire's decline through the perspective of Rani Jindan, addresses a critical period marked by political instability following Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death in 1839. The ensuing succession crises and internal power struggles, exacerbated by competing claims to the throne, created a vacuum exploited by British imperial ambitions, culminating in the annexation of Punjab. *The Last Queen* represents a significant contribution to historical fiction, particularly in its nuanced portrayal of Rani Jindan, a figure historically overshadowed by her role as Maharaja Ranjit Singh's youngest wife and the mother of Maharaja Duleep Singh. Divakaruni's narrative effectively reclaims Jindan's agency, highlighting her pivotal role in the Sikh Empire's final years. This act of historical reclamation aligns with a broader imperative to redress gender imbalances in historical records, a necessary step toward achieving a more equitable and comprehensive understanding of the past (Harding, 1992).

By revising historical narratives of women, we can rectify the historical injustice of neglecting or underrepresenting women's contributions. This process not only recognizes these contributions but also serves as a driving force for societal advancement. It also serves three purposes. Firstly, revising women's history necessitates a critical examination of the patriarchal biases that have distorted our understanding of the past. By challenging these biases, we can construct more inclusive and diverse historical narratives. Secondly, a more accurate and comprehensive historical record can be achieved by incorporating the experiences

and achievements of all people, regardless of gender. This ensures a fuller representation of the past. Finally, this process challenges the long-standing notion that men are the sole creators and shapers of history, while women are passive and subordinate. By recognizing the significant contributions of women, we can dismantle gender biases where women's contributions have often been obliterated and disregarded. Moreover, reconstructing women's history can empower contemporary women by providing them with role models and exemplars of women who have defied societal norms and made substantial contributions to society. This can inspire women to perceive themselves as active agents of change and to recognize that their struggles and achievements are integral to a broader historical legacy.

A comparative analysis reveals a disparity between historical representations of Rani Jindan and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's fictional portrayal in *The Last Queen*. Historical accounts often marginalize her agency, suggesting a bias in historical formulation complicit with power structures. Divakaruni's inspiration arose from a Kolkata literary festival encounter during a discussion of Dalrymple's *Koh-i-Noor*. Observing disproportionate attention to Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his son, mirroring a broader tendency to marginalize women in history and mythology, Divakaruni noted the oversight in Jindan's case, a highly influential queen regent. This underscores the necessity to redress the historical imbalance and amplify her narrative, where texts like Sarna's "The Exile" and Dalrymple and Anand's "Kohinoor" offer only cursory treatment. This minimal inclusion intimates an active, if implicit, effort to efface her limited presence from collective memory, a phenomenon Milan Kundera terms "organized forgetting" (280), exemplifying power's multifaceted operation in controlling remembrance and oblivion. Consequently, power manifests ubiquitously, fundamentally determining knowledge and its effects (Foucault 1980: 52).

Structured in four parts—Girl, Bride, Queen, Rebel—and framed by a prologue and epilogue, the novel effectively contextualizes Rani Jindan's life and historical significance. Divakaruni's evocative prose vividly portrays the Sikh Empire's era, tracing Jindan's journey from humble origins to her regency. The narrative also addresses the historical defamation of Rani Jindan's character, particularly the British colonial project's attempt to undermine her reputation. Atwal (2020) explores the dichotomy in her representation, highlighting the colonial strategy of portraying her as both heroine and whore. Conversely, Divakaruni's novel aims to reclaim Jindan's legacy as a rebel queen who valiantly defended her son's inheritance and the Sikh Empire's sovereignty. Divakaruni's portrayal distinguishes itself through its profound humanization of a historical figure often relegated to

simplistic archetypes. Amidst the prevailing grief following Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, Jindan's restraint reflects her adherence to his counsel, prioritizing resilience over despair, a contrast to Guddan's contemplation of *sati*. Her decision to embrace her dual role as both mother and father to her son underscores her strength in widowhood at twenty-one. The narrative details the political machinations following Ranjit Singh's demise, depicting the gradual erosion of Jindan's influence, culminating in her strategic retreat to the Kangra Hills.

Rani Jind Kaur, Maharaja Ranjit Singh's last queen, born Jind Kaur Aulakh in Chachar, Gujranwala (Singh, 2011), was Manna Singh Aulakh's daughter, a royal kennel overseer. Even in her youth, Jindan's inherent agency was evident when she accompanied her brother Jawahar to steal guavas. This early desire to transcend the domestic sphere and become a 'provider like him, not just a mouth to feed' highlighted her divergence from conventional feminine roles (TLQ 10). Throughout the narrative, despite vulnerability, Jindan is consistently portrayed as resilient, never powerless. This is further illustrated when her father Manna hosted a dinner for village men, where women ate last. Her hunger prompted the pivotal question, "Why must we wait until the men are done?" (TLQ 17), leading to defiance as she consumed a *jalebi*. Here, her physical need became a locus of resistance against the notion that the 'female body' and its desires are subordinate to those of men. Jindan's relocation to Lahore offered crucial insight into female power dynamics across social strata. Within the 'zenana', the confinement of queens and concubines and their limited court involvement revealed the female 'body' as a site of control. Jindan observed patriarchal dominance alongside female influence in men's absence. Her exposure to palace power intensified during a pre-marital celebration. Despite physical segregation in the 'marginal' 'zenana', Jindan discerned power hierarchies reflected in seating arrangements near the Maharaja. Individuals strategically manipulated this hierarchy based on their court standing. Thus, the power manifested as a strategic instrument actively deployed.

Jindan's marriage to the Sarkar, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, positioned her within a complex sphere of power dynamics. Initially, her conjugal union with the Sarkar and integration into the palace hierarchy implied acquiescence to established patriarchal norms and the court's power structures. Despite unfamiliar conventions, she outwardly conformed while inwardly retaining critical inquiry regarding cultural and religious practices. A salient example is the Maharaja's absence from his nuptials, resulting in her symbolic bond with the 'sword'. While its significance might have been initially ambiguous, Jindan swiftly recognized it as pivotal, marking her ingress into the Maharaja's world and its inherent power dynamics. Her wedding participation

appeared outwardly passive – devoid of guests and the groom. Yet, even as she acknowledged, “This is the life of a queen” and that she will “...always be second to Punjab” (*TLQ* 87), she began to perceive inherent authority. Upon being denied immediate palace entry post-marriage, Jindan, now the Queen, asserted with nascent authority, “I am Rani Jindan, the maharaja’s new wife. I was married this morning to his sword.... Surely you were informed that I would be arriving today” (*TLQ* 89). This assertive stance catalyzed her rapid ascent to prominence. Demonstrating agency, Rani Jindan actively engaged in discourse with the Sarkar, resisting confinement to a subservient role. Among his seventeen consorts, the Maharaja was particularly captivated by Rani Jindan, not solely due to her physical allure but also her astute political acumen.

Divakaruni’s nuanced depiction of the private sphere within the Sarkar and Rani Jindan’s marriage challenges the conventional narrative that positions the ‘female body’ as inherently inferior to the male. The established gendered power dynamic between the King and Queen undergoes a significant shift when Rani Jindan confronts the traditional definition of masculinity, often equated with power, upon her initial encounter with the Sarkar’s physical form. While the scars adorning the Sarkar’s body narrate tales of his conquests and masculine strength, they simultaneously render him impotent during his first attempt to consummate the marriage with Jindan. His admission, “It’s not your fault. I’m an old man. It doesn’t happen for me every time. Less nowadays, in fact. Let’s not worry about it” (*TLQ* 98), and Jindan’s acceptance of his scarred physique, illustrates a transformed gendered power dynamic at the most intimate level of their marital experience. This suggests a relationship destined to transcend mere ‘bodily experiences’. This observation aligns with the Fakir’s insight that while the Maharaja was initially drawn to Jindan’s beauty, he ultimately valued her intellectual prowess – a quality he had long sought in his queens.

Rani Jindan’s capacity for self-determination in adversity highlights her agency, contrasting with many women of her era who passively conformed. This is evident in her reaction to the Sarkar’s death, when other queens chose ‘*sati*’, a concept negating a ‘female body’s’ value post husband’s demise for celestial reward. Jindan grappled with ‘*sati*’ witnessing Rani Guddan’s resolve. Torn between living for her son and her own desire, she reflected, “For my own sake, too, I want to live. I’ve barely touched the world...I’ll take the bitter with the sweet. I’ll endure the pain” (*TLQ* 170). Divakaruni reveals Jindan’s individuality through her choice to face life’s hardships over presumed heavenly bliss, establishing her agency as the architect of her destiny, from marrying for affection to embracing widowhood. Conversely, Rani Guddan’s embrace of ‘*sati*’

perpetuates disempowerment by not challenging patriarchal constructs of the female body, conditioned to believe life is meaningless without her husband. Jindan's rejection of 'sati' defies its normalization, redefining her identity through resistance, marking her emancipation and agency in shaping her future.

Divakaruni, however, astutely portrays Rani Jindan's moments of vulnerability, humanizing a queen of such historical significance by depicting her susceptibility to bodily desires. In her interview with the Hindustan Times (2021), Divakaruni articulates her intention to present Rani Jindan in all her "complexity and humanness," stating: "I wanted to share with readers the intricacies and private, humanizing moments of Jindan's life (as Mantel does with Cromwell), and I wanted to undo some of the wrongs that the British did to her when they falsely slandered her as a promiscuous woman, calling her 'the Messalina of the Punjab.'" Divakaruni reveals Rani Jindan's human frailties when she is tempted to yield to Gulloo, her clandestine admirer. Despite her elevated position within the royal household and in the Sarkar's affections, Rani Jindan desires to experience the singular power she holds over Gulloo. Her temptation stems "not by Gulloo's looks, but because it's thrilling to be the center of someone's world. The Sarkar loves me [her], but I'll [she'll] never wield this kind of power over him" (TLQ 110). This instance starkly highlights how social institutions like marriage function to sustain and reproduce power imbalances, exerting control over the 'female body.' While the Sarkar maintained multiple wives and numerous concubines, the affections of the royal women were strictly confined to the king. Although alliances and political expediency often dictated marriages within royal families, the Sarkar's union with Rani Jindan was rooted in his genuine admiration for her intellect and beauty. This dimension of Jindan's life firmly establishes her as a pivotal figure, not only in the Sarkar's personal life but also within the annals of history.

Rani Jindan's journey toward emancipation takes a significant turn as she explores her sexuality through her relationship with Lal Singh. Following the King's death, the long-suppressed bodily desires of Rani Jindan begin to re-emerge. However, within her liaison with Lal Singh, Rani Jindan, by virtue of her superior social standing, wields considerable power. Yet, her 'body' also becomes a site of internal conflict as she grapples with the tension between fulfilling her sexual desires and adhering to the prescribed gendered role of a mother. Fearless and defying convention, Rani Jindan chooses to meet her lover, Lal Singh, under the cover of night. In this affair, she explores two crucial facets of her female 'self'. Firstly, she challenges the idealized image of motherhood, and secondly, she utilizes her body to experience the sensual pleasures that the King was unable to provide. When Rani Jindan confides in her

trusted associates about her infatuation with Lal Singh, she exerts a similar influence to that which the Sarkar held over her on their wedding night – the admission of vulnerability from a position of authority. Despite a lifetime of being taught that discussing desire is shameful, she compels herself to be candid, stating:

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 (TLQ 241-242).

While Divakaruni portrays Rani Jindan in moments of profound vulnerability, she also underscores the persistent internal dilemma – her lingering affection for the deceased Sarkar versus her passionate love for Lal Singh, and her maternal duty to her ailing son versus the urgent pull to meet Lal Singh. Frequently, Rani Jindan succumbs to her desire to be with Lal Singh. Her relationship with him reveals a newfound sexual liberty previously unknown to her. She emerges as 'wild and uninhibited' in his presence, capable of articulating a sensuality that had hitherto remained suppressed.

Amidst these trials, Rani Jindan endures an abortion and contracts the same blistering illness, likely smallpox, that afflicted her son Dalip. When news of her abortion circulates within the court, she strategically crafts a narrative to secure the loyalty of her courtiers. Rani Jindan astutely employs her 'ailing body' as a potent tool to mask her perceived failings and regain the trust of her people. She unveils herself, displaying the blisters on her skin to the court. The queen who once leveraged her beauty and intellect to captivate the Sarkar now utilizes her intelligence and her afflicted physical state to manipulate and sway the populace. Reflecting on this, she muses, "The destruction of my beauty has served some purpose, after all... Lying in bed in a stupor of exhaustion, I think of the power of that flimsy cloth, the veil. It helped me win a crucial battle today. I must learn to use this unique weapon to the fullest" (TLQ 250). Thus, Divakaruni meticulously traces Rani Jindan's arduous yet transformative journey from the confines of the Zenana to a position of influence behind the Maharaja, culminating in her public unveiling within the court.

A nuanced reading of Divakaruni's literary works reveals her consistent portrayal of immigrant women and figures from mythology and history as victims of marginalization and masculine dominance. The subordinate position women often

occupy in contemporary society is rooted in historical cultural biases that predominantly cast women as secondary figures. It is this enduring connection between the present and the past that renders Divakaruni's exploration of Rani Jindan's character profoundly relevant today. Divakaruni meticulously deconstructs any romanticized notions of a queen's perfect existence by illustrating the inherent inadequacies in Rani Jindan's life, particularly concerning motherhood. The challenges Jindan confronts resonate with the experiences of ordinary women depicted in Divakaruni's other novels. Rani Jindan's poignant lament, expressed in the following lines, encapsulates this shared human experience:

I have what every woman craves: a handsome and healthy baby, my own haveli, ample wealth, loyal servants, and a doting husband who is, additionally, a great king. Why then does my chest feel weighed down by sorrow when I wake? (TLQ 141).

The body and its attendant suffering, both physical and emotional, transform Jindan from an idealized queen into a relatable figure for the present. Divakaruni effectively connects contemporary women with a powerful queen of the past through their shared experiences of the physical and emotional self.

The novel serves as a potent allegory, emphasizing the enduring maternal bond and Rani Jindan's remarkable 19th-century courage. Her relationship with her son Dalip underscores power dynamics. Following the Sarkar's demise, Jindan strategically withdrew, later orchestrating Dalip's ascension, gaining court trust with a "faithful, beautiful and tragic" persona and addressing court unconventionally, reflecting, "I'm breaking tradition; women, if at all they come to court, should be a shadow behind a screen....But I need to show everyone that Dalip is not alone" (TLQ 225). Jindan's formidable challenge was enforced separation from Dalip. Imprisoned to preclude her influence, her audacious escape to Nepal showcased resilience. Reuniting after fourteen years, she imparted historical truths. Despite British efforts, their bond endured. She passed away in London, inspiring Dalip to repatriate her remains to India, her final counsel urging him to reclaim his heritage. Ultimately, Jindan instilled in Duleep Singh a renewed awareness of his heritage, leading to his assertion of rights. Her final pronouncements affirmed his identity as the 'Lion of Punjab's' son. Her fourteen-year absence contributed to India's loss of the Koh-i-Noor. Divakaruni highlights Jindan's crucial historical presence, exemplifying resistance against power structures.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* represents a significant contribution to the field of feminist historiography. Through its strategic deployment of intertextuality, the novel effectively deconstructs the presumed objectivity of

historical narratives, revealing their inherent subjectivity and thereby enabling a more nuanced and authentic representation of Rani Jindan's life, one that transcends the limitations of conventional historical documentation. This imperative to foreground marginalized female perspectives within historical discourse extends beyond mere corrective action; it constitutes a crucial step toward the construction of a more equitable and inclusive future. By ensuring the integration of women's voices into the historical record, works such as Divakaruni's challenge persistent marginalization and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the past and its ramifications for the present. Divakaruni's return to the historical landscape of Colonial India, with the explicit aim of re-evaluating Rani Jindan's narrative, underscores the enduring significance of this queen, who was historically marginalized by both British and Indian contemporaries. Her objective of presenting the past in its intricate complexity, dispelling simplistic glorifications, and critically assessing its role in perpetuating contemporary inequalities renders this study highly pertinent. Ultimately, *The Last Queen* serves as a powerful example of how the reclamation and dissemination of previously silenced narratives can empower marginalized voices and inspire contemporary resistance against ongoing marginalization, thereby fostering a more just and comprehensive understanding of history and its implications.

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