
PORTRAYAL OF NINETEENTH CENTURY WOMAN IN *THE LAST QUEEN* BY CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI

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Abstract :

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is one of the most exceptional writers of the Indian diaspora. She has experienced the firsthand difference between Indian culture and the life styles in the U.S.A. Her prime focus is on the subject comprising of the stories of the Indians primarily the women who migrate from their motherland to the United States. Chitra Banerjee a consummate artist, a sensitive woman, a visionary with innovative vision. She is a poet, a novelist, a short story writer, a writer of children's fiction and a self-conscious social thinker. Chitra Banerjee through her novels constructs the world of immigrants' experiences of women and their struggles to find and to build their own identities for themselves. Her novels represent women characters and their tireless struggle to establish their identities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the women who keep on struggle to attain their presence and fulfill their desire and life goals. During this process of getting their desires and goals, they break the rules, traditions and old customs and fight bravely.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel The Last Queen is based on the relentless battling of women for their identity and raises women's voices which reinforce the problems that women have to face in life. In this novel, one of the nineteenth century female characters is in search of her identity amidst her sufferings, rules and regulations, politics, struggle to save her Kingdom from the Britishers. Women characters in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Last Queen undergo visible transformations. The Last Queen narrates the true story of Maharani Jindan Kaur, the last queen of the Sikh Empire, who fought bravely against the British. She was the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. After Ranjit Singh's death many unexpected political moves created havoc in her life despite the stern objections of the statesmen of her empire. She has to strive hard for safeguarding her son Dulip and at the age of five she restored him to the throne of Maharaja Dulip Singh. Rani Jindan Kaur was one of the most brave, courageous and iron-willed figures in the Indian history. Maharani Jindan took her new role as regent by the reins. She fought for her son and once she left her city, there happened so many misunderstandings between herself and her son. But after many ups and downs, she succeeds in regaining the relationship between them. The notable thing is that she inspired lots of people to their deeds to be completed in a sacred manner.

The Aim of this research paper is to explore the identity, politics, struggles, alienation, trials, tribulation, dilemma, woman power, courage and willfull sacrifice faced by the female characters in the novel The Last Queen.

Key Words : dilemma, trials, tribulation, alienation, struggle, transform, bravery, Ambition, conflicts, strength, courage, wisdom, passion.

Introduction :

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, one of the most popular Indian Diaspora writers, has carved a niche for herself. She was born in India and migrated to the United States of America. Divakaruni's works are set in India and the United States, and this research paper tries to capture certain experiences of Indian women who are in a relentless search for self-identity and struggle to withstand patriarchal oppression. She has written more than twenty books which are fiction, poetry, children literature and anthologies. She has proclaimed the significance of women's role in her family to lead a perfect life through her novels.

We find the changing face of feminism in Divakaruni's novels. Besides that, she profoundly exhibits themes such as Indianness, immigrant experiences, mysticism, dilemma, trials, tribulation, alienation, struggle, transformation, dislocation, ambition, conflicts, strength, courage, wisdom, passion etc. She highlights the cultural conflicts in the Indian diaspora. She is keenly interested in debating the issues of cultural conflicts, differences, identity, assimilation, negation, oppression, discrimination, gender inequality and patriarchal dominance in her works. Divakaruni's upbringing in a devout Hindu household has influenced her personal values and her writing style, and religious mythologies and stories of spiritual healing recur in her works. She mainly focused on the women character in her writing, how male dominated the world of women in every field not only out of home but in home also. Divakaruni's portrayed women characters in her works, she mentions her women are silent but not weak but the time has been changes and she wants to rebel, raise against to patriarchal world. Divakaruni explore through her work challenges face by immigrants women. She also portrayed women humble beings utilize of power. The patriarchal constructs shaping societal norms wielded knowledge and power as instruments of subjugation.

This research paper analysis of women struggling and face challenges for quest of identity, represents as a new woman who fight against to save her power. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's women Character Rani Jindan Kaur from her most energetic novel *The Last Queen* (2021), represents as most powerful, ambitious women character who to do anything to save her Kingdome and her six year old son Dulip Singh from Britishers. Divakaruni skillfully depicts the inner world of women and their dilemmas in true to life manner. Rani Jindan Kaur, the daughter of the royal kennel keeper goes on to become the favourite queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. And she became youngest wife of Ranjit Singh. Also she was the first queen to resist tradition by stepping out of the zenana,

"I say, 'I am Rani Jindan, the maharaja's new wife.

I was married this morning to his sword". (TLQ: 89)

Divakaruni portrayed Rai Jindan's courage, strength and leader character from this statement. An unforgettable life of Rani Jindan Kaur and the tribulations of her life are depicted

vividly as she is known as Maharani Jindan Kaur, the youngest and last queen of Sarkar (Maharaja Ranjit Singh). Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled over Sikh Empire, which included the ancient city of Lahore. She was also mother of Maharaja Dulip Singh who stands to exemplify the idea that in society a woman is never independent but belongs to her father, husband or son. She is almost always submissive and subservient to the dominant male in the family as well as in society. Fakir advice to her:

‘A wise person allows herself to be used when it suits her purpose. She pretends weakness, then waits for the right moment to take control’. (TLQ: 201)

Jindan allows to hold her but doesn’t allow to take control. She shows her tenderness’, not weakness. Fakir thought about Rani Jindan, she is a woman and not too perfect to rule over Kingdom. She thought that she was unable to keep promise to Chand. Jindan’s life started with Guava. Jindan challenges to her brother Jawahar to prove herself. Here Divakaruni depicts women character is transforming and is to ready to take new challenges not only outside of home but in home also. Jindan said,

“Today, I’ll prove myself.

I run down the dusty path and when it forks-cornfields to the left, orchards to the

Right-choose the orchards, praying to Waheguru that I have chosen correctly.

We run to the Guava groves. High in the branches, we search for the riper fruits.

I’m proud of how I scrambled up the tree, keeping up with Jawahar”. (TLQ: 12)

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni described Jindan’s character as a courageous character and her coolness, a village girl, at just age of nine. In the next chapter ‘Lahor’. Jindan kaur met with Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Sarkar) when Sarkar came with his horse as the description follows:

“From behind the sacking at the window. I watch the man swing down from horse.

Yes, my lovely. I left you alone for a long time, didn’t I? I’m sorry. Anyway, it looks like you had pleasant company. He smiles at me and I see that he has kind, good-humoured eyes. Eye, to accurate, the left one is blind. On another man, it would have looked grotesque, but on him it’s the mark of a warrior. His white beard flows down to his chest, over a long string of pearls. He seems a lot taller than he is, perhaps because he stands so straight. There’s an aura of power around him. This is a man afraid of nothing”. (TLQ: 38)

In the novel *The Last Queen* Chitra Banerjee beautifully presents first person narration. Form the beginning, Divakaruni bound the reader to read story as Jindan’s character is supposed to give spirit to the following story and also unfolds the love story between Jindan and Sarkar (Maharaj Ranjit Singh). The love continuous to spread shiny throughout the story. Divakaruni skilfully depicts real life story along with their bond and affection for each other:

“We ride to the Qila in silence. I’m intensely aware of his arm around my waist, though it doesn’t seem to mean much to him”. (TLQ: 43)

Chitra Banerjee provides extraordinary love story between the daughter of Royal Kennel and the King. She awesomely represents a story of life full of sacrifice. Divakaruni through the characters of Guddan, Pathani, Balbir, Chand and the powerful Mai Nakkain and Jindan portrays women’s natural flaw. In comparison to men, women are considered physically weaker and are expected to conduct themselves keeping this in mind. In Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Last Queen’s* women are totally conscious and she knows the differences from men but she is not losing her confidence and she wants to achieve all things which are generally present and inculcated in men.

After Sarkar’s illness, Rani Jindan kaur worries much more about her son because her mind is in dilemma what to do or not to do. Rani Jindan’s dilemma examines:

“What will happen to us now, child?” (TLQ: 165)

Here Chitra Banerjee masterly presents the twisting of Jindan’s mind. Her heartbeat is going fast because of her son disquiet appearance. The women reach an acceptance and find a sense of belonging over time.

In the chapter “Decision” The Year Begins Auspiciously. Dhian sends messengers to the heads of the clans, asking them to come to Lahore:

“He needs to be in a larger, more public building. Many people will come to pay their respects to him” (TLQ: 164).

Divakaruni portrays challenges knock in the life of Rani Jindan Kaur after the death of Maharaj Ranjit Singh. But Divakaruni’s woman is not ready easily to be defeated, her continuous fight against fate and troubles finds due delineation in this novel. Her women are always brave like Rani Jindan. Divakaruni demonstrates Mai Nikken as a fearless and most powerful woman in the kingdom but she is not paid attention by Sarkar. In spite of, being the queen, Guddan is keenly attached to Sarkar and much more affectionate to Sarkar. On the death of Sarkar she wants to become a sati, to burn with the Sarkar on his pyre. She was called a Devi:

“I promise, devi”, says Dhian.

“I’m startled to hear him refer to Guddan as goddess”. (TLQ: 167)

Chitra Banerjee placed her women into Godlike position. But Jindan is selfish here. Divakaruni states her position about Jindan’s mother caring character for her son Dalit Singh and for the sake of her son she doesn’t want to go as sati. Rani Jindan who thinks horrifying, Chitra Banerjee said she is brave, but Rani Jindan confessed:

“I’m not being brave. Just the opposite. Do you know how hard life is for a widow?” (TLQ: 167)

Divakaruni provides emotion packed description to all reader about Rani Jindan. After the death of Sarkar, she took the decision wants to become a sati but she is in dilemma and she heard the inner voice like:

“I hear another voice, too. Gritty, gruff, displaced. Surely I’ve taught you better than to run away from problems! If its fame you crave, instead of killing yourself, why not in a way that people will remember?”(TLQ: 169).

Chitra Banerjee gave deep thought throughout the novel. Rani Jindan is presented as a bilingual character playing the rolke of mother as well as father. How much Sarkar is so touching to Rani Jindan’s heart is the following lines:

“You must be both father and mother to our son” (TLQ: 169).

Rani Jindan transforms her character from brave to selfish but for her son. Actually its challenge to Rani Jindan how she fights against all entire evil world and worst politics all around:

“I’ll protect you with the last drop of my blood. If I have to, I’ll kill for you”.

“For my own sake, too, I want to live. I’ve bravely touched the world. There’s so much out there to see and feel and taste. I’m greedy for it. I’ll take the bitter with the sweet. I’ll endure the pain” (TLQ: 170).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explores the truth of women character through Rani Jindan. Apparently, she wants to become a sati but on the other hand she thinks about her son and she changes her mind. Meanwhile Divakaruni presents women’s dilemma I.e. what happens inside their minds, some opposite thoughts are hampering their mind set and thought process. Not to fit in her character Divakaruni presents bitter truth throughout her novel *The Last Queen*. Chitra Banerjee depicts brave, fearless, most undaunted, courageous women with various characteristics. Chitra Banerjee provides emotional attachment towards the Sarkar of Rani Jindan Kaur:

“Go in peace, my love, to your next kingdom” (TLQ: 171).

Divakaruni mentions that Rani Jindan’s emotions and feelings of love for her husband Maharaja Ranjit Singh, are now no more appearing as before, The Sarkar scarified his life for his people and kingdom. Rani Jindan Kaur also chooses his path and she lives only for her son and kingdom. After the death of the Sarkar Rani Jindan and her son Dulip exiled from kingdom and are forced to live in isolation. Rani Jindan faces new challenges after the death of the Sarkar, she bravely fights against the Britishers. She continues her struggles against a lot of worst politics, tricks and endless battle for getting power over the kingdom.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni explore miserable journey of Rani Jindan Kaur. She is exiled from her kingdom. She is expelled and jailed in Sheikhpura Zila and then exiled to Benaras Chunur from where she is separated from both her son and loving maid Mangla. Later, she flees to Patna after Britishers takeover Punjab. From this journey she faces more dangerous

serious challenges. Later that Britisher misguides to King Dulip and subsequently he starts hating his mother. But after fourteen years separation they are reunited in Calcutta. King Dulip and Rani Jindan Kaur spend their life together in London. Dulip, who was affectionately referred to as the 'Black Prince'. Rani Jindan's last wish conveyed to Dulip to scatter her ashes next to her husband before she passed away. After the death of Rani Jindan, Dulip had to wait a full year for permission from the British Government to bring her body back to India from England.

Conclusion :

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Last Queen's* Rani Jindan Kaur is based on a real character who overcome every difficult challenge in her life. Rani Jindan Kaur's character inspires to every woman who wants to live with courage, fearlessness, strength, passions. She rebels against patriarchy. She breaks her silence, sometimes she seems selfish, and sometimes she shows her most powerful, energetic and outrageous aspects. She is the voice of every Hindusthani woman who suffers from male dominant society and transforms from simple to fearless. *The Last Queen* a powerful tribute to Maharani Jindan Kaur's enduring legacy. The novel emphasizes Jindan's unwavering courage and the sacrifices she made for her kingdom and her son. Rani Jindan's character stands to be the most powerful reflection of India's most unwavering queen. Every woman has her own different system of beliefs and faiths as per the individualistic approach whether it is enforced or accustomed in the peculiar circumstances. It is quite evident in the novel that when the Sarkar is dead, Guddan readily expresses her will to become a sati. It is the fact that she is well aware of the dire consequences that she will be unable to have enough strength to bear the brutal and harsh future alone as a widow, especially as a member of the royal family. Jindan would have endured the same fate as Guddan if it was not the matter of her own son, Dalip. It is simply because of her sheer motherly instincts that compelled her away from the verge of death which subsequently leads her to the throne and eventually makes her as rebellious one. The same motherly feelings force her to adopt the timely defence mechanism to protect her grandson that keeps Chand going. The gruesome results are too dear for own life in comparison to the amount of the losses that she takes in the end. She readily accepts death when she is gruesomely murdered for standing up for the truth. While being in absolute distress and troubles, Mangla is the only person who stands by Jindan as her guide, coming to her help in every endeavour she undertakes. Mangala, though she renders her services as a maid she does not forget to love and care for Jindan and Dalip who have become her closest ones just like family members in the due course of time. Affirmation and strong will-power are the commonest factors exhibited by all the female characters in Divakaruni's novel. She has selected such women in her novel who are ready to face the ordeals of any kind without much hesitation and accept the existing order of things without any questions. Divakaruni has shown that the nature of women to simply remain silent does not mean that they are weak or fragile but that they understand the importance of maintaining peace and harmony at home as well as in the society. There is no dissent, sudden awakening of the women due to introspection or sense of loss of stability. For Divakaruni's women, sexual inequality and fundamental inferiority which are meant to deter their progress do not pose as obstacles on their path but are rather a part of their lives which only aid in their self-transformation. They embrace the standards that society has set for them and use these standards to emerge victorious in their individual lives as the exponents of nineteenth century woman overall.

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