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## Book Reviews

### *The Last Queen*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni,

Harper Collins, 2021,

372pp, \$22.55 (hard cover) ISBN-13: 978-9390351954;

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest novel *The Last Queen* (2021) depicts the turbulent life of Maharani Jind Kaur (c.1817-1863), Queen Regent of the Sikh Empire (1843-1846). Narrated chronologically, it offers a fictional representation of Rani Jindan's childhood, her courtship and marriage to Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the brief and mercurial reigns of his successors, the wresting of Punjab from the hands of Rani Jindan and then her son, Maharaja Dalip Singh, and her subsequent exile in Nepal and later, Britain. The historical claims of this book and the intervention it makes, according to its author, are made apparent in the epigraph, which consists of a quotation by Chinua Achebe (1930-2013). This quotation speaks about the importance of writing history from the perspective of the lion and not the hunter. A clever play on one of the titles of Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab, the epigraph also gestures towards Rani Jindan's own life, which bequeaths to both history and art a potent example of a relentlessly resistant subjectivity determined to thwart the colonial British power.

Like other novels by Divakaruni, *The Last Queen* offers memorable characters, such as, of course, Rani Jindan and Ranjit Singh, but also the loyal retainers Mangla and Avtar, the kind and friendly Rani Guddan, the wily Wazir Dhian Singh, as well as the devoted and fatherly statesman, Fakir Azizuddin. Little is known of Rani Jindan's life before the birth of her son, allowing the author considerable creative freedom to construct a poetic narrative of her falling in love with the gallant and charismatic Maharaja, who casts his powerful shade over this text. He is portrayed through Jindan's eyes in distinctly hagiographical, larger-than-life tones, which is convincing given her position as his youthful admirer and beloved. Ranjit Singh is also depicted as a man who likes women, daring even the displeasure of the Khalsa when he decides to marry a Muslim courtesan. And yet, the king who united the Sikh clans and rules over a multi-religious court and empire is portrayed as humbly aware of his own mortality, preferring to sit on a chair for he believed the throne

was meant only for the Guru Granth Sahib. Deploying the resources of both history and fiction, such characterization of Rani Jindan and Ranjit Singh makes for convincing and compelling storytelling.

At the same time, the author is at pains to explain or justify tricky or ambiguous aspects of history. Thus, Ranjit Singh finds himself explaining his past actions to a young Jindan, describing how he conquered Lahore “with almost no bloodshed” (54) and exonerating himself for his imprisonment of his mother-in-law and first ally, Sada Kaur. Writing historical fiction always entails interpretation, but the temptation to offer retrospective (over)explanations through the voice of key stakeholders can make historical figures seem simply unconvincing. Readers are sensitive to the enchantment of storytelling, which is why authors take such pains to conceal the craft that goes into creating the story. However, in the case of this book, the craft that was involved in its creation is made apparent through over-explanation.

Similarly, there are aspects of Jindan’s fictional character that fail to persuade, such as the sophisticated political analysis this small-town girl with limited education and opportunities brings to conversations with an experienced statesman like Ranjit Singh. But her subsequent development and growth from girl to woman to matriarch is excellently arced. In the absence of historical information, what a text such as this offers is a fictional but plausible reconstruction of how Jindan would have negotiated new experiences in an unfamiliar context. How polygamy pitches women against each other in a contest for one man’s attention and resources is a case in point. This is depicted vividly in the hostility between the memorable Mai Nakkain, Ranjit Singh’s chief wife, and Rani Jindan, which ends only with the former’s death. And yet, the text resists a reductive binary that celebrates one woman at the expense of another. Mai Nakkain retains her dignity in this portrayal, even as we sympathise with Jindan, the favourite and youngest wife, far less powerful and wealthy, who is often at her dominant co-wife’s mercy.

History has shown that the competitive environment of polygamous marriages did not preclude camaraderie between women. In this vein, Divakaruni’s imagination demonstrates the gamut of relationships that women would have had, from friendships between forgotten wives and new wives to those between mothers of reigning kings and mothers of insignificant princes (who posed no threat). Additionally, this is portrayed as part of a larger solidarity, across communities, regions, and realms. A particularly powerful moment in the text is the fictional confrontation between Rani Jindan – now separated from her son and living in exile – and the King and Prime Minister of Nepal, from whom she demands to know why

safe haven is being denied to Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and her son after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857. While there is no evidence of any such encounter, Divakaruni's choice to insert it in this text demonstrates the specific poignancy of this historical moment when the question of autonomy and succession in many states and kingdoms was endangered and many were, in fact, annexed or otherwise appropriated by the British. In this context, the aptness of one exiled queen and mother standing up for the moral right of another queen and mother who has also been driven out of her realm is not lost on the reader.

Divakaruni vividly depicts the constant turbulence and turmoil of Rani Jindan's life. Readers find themselves experiencing her tireless struggle with the persuasiveness and immediacy that are peculiar to first-person narration. Jindan's sense of agency is shown to be remarkable as she unceasingly makes schemes and plans to be restored to Punjab and her son. The author's imagination of her life in exile offers rich insights into what these corrosive and wearying years would have been like for her. The indignities of being dragged away, searched and confined, the mortification of being deprived of even her dwindling allowance, and her repeated attempts to undermine the British, only to be thwarted by them, evoke the reader's sympathy for Jindan. Furthermore, Divakaruni depicts how the colonial power uses patriarchal smokescreens to invalidate the political agency of a charismatic female ruler and her own text represents an act of disruption and resistance to this influential narrative about Rani Jindan in contemporary British historiography and colonial rhetoric.

A particularly instructive aspect of the text is the author's creative imagining of the voyage Rani Jindan undertakes to Britain with a heavy heart, so that she may live out the rest of her days with her son. Although other contemporary accounts of Britain by Indian royals do exist, these are often narratives faithful to the British Crown that are quite unlike the account Divakaruni spins for Rani Jindan. In this fictional narrative, Rani Jindan remains refreshingly unimpressed with the Victorian court as well as British homes, streets and society. As she shrewdly observes, the staged image of the vigorous and virile coloniser is not mirrored in the tired face of his oppressed working-class compatriot "back home." Furthermore, one of the most moving moments with respect to her exile in Britain consists of the painting of the memorable portrait by George Richmond. Rani Jindan – still beautiful and determined – was painted in 1863, the year of her passing. It is this painting that graces the cover of the book.

The author's astute understanding of narrative tension, irony and timing (both dramatic and comic) are evident in this text, making the reader turn page after page

without experiencing a lag anywhere. However, the very swiftness of narrative pace also poses a problem, especially in the chapters devoted to Ranjit Singh's successors and the duration of Rani Jindan's regency. A dizzying succession of events is rapidly narrated and dealt with – which may be a historically accurate representation of the alarming speed with which Ranjit Singh's successors and courtiers dismantled his empire before a waiting British foe – but makes for decidedly taxing storytelling. This narrative pace prevents the reader from fully appreciating the magnitude of momentous events and adjusting to fast-changing realities in Rani Jindan's world. As a result, the magnitude of the assassination of Wazir Jawahar Singh, which leads Jindan – his sister – to wreak vengeance upon the Khalsa Army by sending it to its death at the hands of a formidable British foe, is somewhat lost. However, the text occasionally offers brief moments of profound insight, such as when Jindan thoughtfully contemplates the nature of her actions and predicament. These leave the reader craving for more such moments of relief and reflection in these hectic chapters.

Divakaruni's language often presents problems. Words in Indian languages thrown casually into otherwise English sentences remain forced and awkward. These words, such as "kudi" and "sohni," inserted to evoke some sort of authentic and exotic Punjabi flavour fall flat, much to the discomfort of the subcontinental reader. Similarly, simplistic translations and equivalents persist of complex cultural phenomena to cater to western Anglophone audiences. Despite this manifest issue, there are also moments in *The Last Queen* when Divakaruni's language is particularly felicitous, offering jewelled, poetic phrases to depict the cultural capital of imperial Punjab and vivid as well as economical expressions to describe the elaborate political culture of the day. Material detail, which constitutes one of the many delights of historical fiction, is also rendered successfully in this well-researched novel. The courts, forts, gurdwaras, zenanas, bazaars and other indoor and outdoor spaces of Ranjit Singh's time as well as those of his successors are evoked. This allows the reader to envisage how sites now empty, dilapidated, or destroyed would have been peopled in their heyday.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* furnishes a meaningful and important fictional contribution to the history and cultural memory of the Sikh Empire. It supplies meaningful glimpses into the trajectory of the early British Raj and situates the annexation of Punjab in the larger context of British ascendancy in India as the nineteenth century wore on. With its nuanced depiction of courtly women's lives, work, relationships and realities, it marks a significant fictional intervention in women's histories. Additionally, it offers a lesson in writing about South Asian

regions with complicated and intertwined histories without resorting to reductive ethnic or communal binaries, while also being true to a proud Sikh tradition. This novel is recommended for lay readers and scholars interested in the Sikh Empire and the colonial presence in nineteenth century India. Its problems are largely those of craft: a broader narrative arc would have eased the compression of events in the middle of the text and a sensitivity towards how fiction operates would have corrected the urge to over-explain and justify historical figures and events.

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