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The Lost World of Rani Jindan: Rewriting Women's History in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's the Last Queen

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Abstract

The paper aims to look at the politics of representation and the importance of historical fiction in renegotiating women's position in history by focusing on the representation of Rani Jindan Kaur in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Last Queen (2021). The book is written from Rani Jindan Kaur's perspective who was the last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the last regent queen of the Sikh Empire to reclaim her lost identity. This analysis begins with a brief description of Sikh empire and its glorious past with a special focus on a woman who equally contributed and shaped it. It then traces how historians have always been partial towards women for not giving them enough space in the annals of history. This underrepresentation was the systematic erasure as not only were they punished for stepping outside the limited roles offered to them but if they achieve great things they were often ignored or forced to submit to the prevailing gender norms of their times. It then focuses on how Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has used the erasure of women representation in history as a winning chance to rewrite the lost world of Rani Jindan that is not much talked about in historical documents. It further points out how this systemic bias has perpetuated a skewed historical narrative that failed to recognize the full extent of women's contributions and resilience throughout history.

Keywords: Historical Fiction, Rani Jindan, Sikh History, Women Writing, Systematic Erasure

[W]hile women were not entirely absent from the historical record, the traces of womanhood that appear have been shaped by men who were self-consciously reverting to the misogynistic images of women.... Moreover, the gender prescriptions of the ancients came to be idealized by male historians, justifying women's exclusion from the public sphere and the sphere of history.

Mary Spongberg

INTRODUCTION

The writing of women's history has been intricately intertwined with contemporary feminist movements and the evolution of historical studies. As women began questioning the inequities in their lives, they turned to history as a tool to uncover the origins of their subjugation and drew inspiration from past struggles. They also demonstrated that a woman's societal role was a product of specific historical circumstances, rather than an inherent and unchanging characteristic.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pioneers within the organized women's movement observed the glaring absence of women in mainstream historical narratives. This absence became a catalyst for them to craft their own accounts of history, spotlighting the contributions, struggles, and achievements of women that had been overlooked or marginalized in traditional texts.

Writing about history is never easy. One cannot change the sequence of events and historical facts. Even with all these limitations Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has not only handled all the historical aspects well but has given life to Queen Jindan's character by blending truth with imagination. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni novel *The Last Queen* (2021) is important for its historicity and traces the final years of Sikh Empire before and after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh from Rani Jindan's point of view. The death of Maharaja in 1839 created problems in the Sikh kingdom. His throne was supposed to pass on to his successors, but there were many heirs claiming

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it. Unfortunately, none of them could navigate the political plots and power struggles in the royal court. As a result, the British took advantage of the chaos and ended up annexing Punjab.

Divakaruni's book *The Last Queen* (2021) is not only one of the best additions to the Historical fiction but this is the best novel by the author till date. Even though Rani Jindan is primarily known as the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of the last Sikh dynast, Maharaja Duleep Singh, she etched her name into the pages of Sikh history, because of her stature and significant role. Rewriting women's history is an important step towards achieving gender equality and recognizing the significant contributions that women have made throughout history. For far too long, women's voices and experiences have been marginalized or erased from the historical records, leading to a distorted understanding of the past (Harding, 1992, p. 437).

By rewriting women's history, we can rediscover the stories of women who have been overlooked or forgotten and give them the recognition they deserve. It also serves three important purposes. First, rewriting women's history also means challenging the patriarchal attitudes and biases that have shaped our understanding of the past. It requires a critical examination of existing narratives and the creation of new ones that are more inclusive and diverse. Secondly, by doing so, we can create a more accurate and comprehensive historical record that reflects the experiences and achievements of all people, regardless of gender and lastly it challenges the notion that men are the primary shapers and creators of history, while women are passive and subordinate. This can help to overcome the gender biases that have been present in academic disciplines like History, literature where women's contributions have often been ignored, erased, or downplayed.

Moreover, rewriting women's history can also help to empower women today by providing them with role models and examples of women who have challenged societal norms and made significant contributions to society. It can help women to see themselves as an active agent of change and to understand that their struggles and achievements are part of a larger historical legacy. It also has an ideological dimension that goes beyond simply filling in the gaps and correcting the record. It involves challenging the dominant narratives that have shaped our understanding of the past and exposing the ways in which gender-based discrimination and oppression have been perpetuated.

The major question is why there are gaps in women's history and why there is a need to fill those gaps with writing. When we look back in the past, throughout history women have been oppressed in multiple ways highlighting the necessity of documentation of complete narratives from their point of view.

Brief History of Sikh Empire

The empire's foundations were laid by the ten Sikh gurus, with Guru Nanak being the founder of Sikhism in the 15th century. The political ascension of Sikhs started in the 18th century with the formation of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh, which advocated the defense of religious freedoms and sovereignty. The seeds of Sikh Empire were sown in with the formation of smaller semi-independent groups known as misls at around 1707 when the Mughal Empire, weakened after Aurangzeb's death, started declining under the guidance of Dal Khalsa formed by Guru Gobind Singh. The Sikh Empire established in its full glory in 1799 when Maharaja Ranjit Singh took control of Lahore, thrived in the Punjab region until its defeat by the British East India Company in 1849 during the Second Anglo-Sikh War. (Duggal, 2015, p. 23)

The Sikh empire emerged from the consolidation of various independent misls under the Khalsa's banner. By the peak of 19th century, the empire spanned from Gilgit and Tibet in the north to Sindh's deserts in the south, and from the Khyber Pass in the west to the Sutlej in the east, extending into Oudh. It comprised four main provinces: Lahore, serving as the Sikh capital, along with Multan, Peshawar, and Kashmir between 1799 and 1849 (Gupta, 1978, p. 201). Culturally diverse, with approximately 4.5 million inhabitants in 1831 (ranking it as the 19th most populous nation then), it stood as the final significant territory in the Indian subcontinent to be annexed by the British Empire (Singh, 2010, p. 34).

Ranjit Singh was born on November 13, 1780, and commonly revered as Sher-e-Punjab or the "Lion of Punjab," held the esteemed position of the inaugural Maharaja of the Sikh Empire, commanding the northwest Indian subcontinent during the early 19th century. Though afflicted by smallpox at a very young age, he

endured, losing vision in his left eye. At the tender age of 10, he engaged in his maiden battle alongside his father. Following his father's demise during Ranjit's adolescence, he waged numerous conflicts aimed at expelling the Afghans. By the time he turned 21, he was hailed as the "Maharaja of Punjab." Throughout his reign, his leadership fostered the expansion of his empire across the Punjab region until 1839. Ranjit Singh's administration was known for its secular policies, which ensured representation of various religious and ethnic groups. His reforms included a centralized administration, modernization of the army, and promotion of trade and commerce.

Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the charismatic leader of the Sikh Empire in the 19th century, had a number of wives who played significant roles in both his personal life and the political landscape of the time. Among them were Mahan Kaur, Mehtab Kaur, Rani Raj Kaur, Rani Ratan Kaur, and Rani Chand Kaur. These unions were often strategic, forging alliances with influential families and consolidating power across the vast Sikh Empire. Ranjit Singh's wives were not mere consorts; they were influential figures, contributing to the administration and diplomacy of the empire. Their roles extended beyond the confines of the royal household, and they became instrumental in shaping the socio-political fabric of the Sikh Empire during a crucial period in South Asian history.

After the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839, internal disputes, weak successors, and external pressures from the British Raj and East India Company led to the empire's decline.

After Maharaja Ranjit Singh his eldest son Kharak Singh became the Maharaja but he also died as he was poisoned to death by the then Prime Minister of Sikh Empire, Raja Dhian Singh. Meanwhile, Jind Kaur and her baby boy Duleep Singh lived a life of obscurity under the care of Raja Dhian Singh in Jammu that a governed by her brother Gulab Singh. Maharaja Kharak Singh was followed by his son Kunwar Nau Nihal Singh but he also died within few days while returning from his father's cremation, which clearly hints towards successful assassination.

Later, Sher Singh, the uncle of Nau Nihal Singh and the elder half-brother of Kharak Singh, besieged Lahore with a strong army and was crowned as the king. In August 1843, the young prince and his mother Jind Kaur were brought to Lahore. In the same year in September, Maharaja Sher Singh and Dhian Singh, the longest-serving Prime Minister of the Sikh empire, were assassinated in a plot by Ajit Singh Sandhanwalia, who is believed to have had an eye on the kingdom(Singh, 2020, n.p.).

But with the army's and chiefs' support, Dhian Singh's son, Raja Hira Singh, wiped out the Sandhanwalia faction and captured the Fort of Lahore. Soon after on 16 September 1843, the Khalsa army declared a five-year prince, Duleep Singh as the sovereign of the State and Raja Hira Singh was appointed the wazir.

Mehtab Kaur and Datar Kaur both held the official title of Maharani (high queen), but it was Datar Kaur who assumed the position of Maharani following Mehtab Kaur's passing in 1813 (Lafont, 2002, p. 56). Known widely as Sarkar Rani during her lifetime, Datar Kaur held the esteemed title until her death. After her, Ranjit's youngest widow, Jind Kaur, succeeded to the title of Maharani. The Anglo-Sikh wars (1845-1849) resulted in the annexation of the Punjab region by the British, marking the end of the Sikh Empire.

Rani Jind Kaur was the last queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. She was born in Chachar, Gujranwala as Jind Kaur Aulakh (Singh, 2011, p. 381). She was the daughter of the overseer of the royal kennels, Manna Singh Aulakh, who praised her qualities to Ranjit Singh, when he was worried about the health of his only son, Kharak Singh. In 1835, Ranjit Singh married Jind Kaur in a unique way by 'sending his arrow and sword to her village' (Nijjar, 1975, p.10). On 6 September 1838, she gave birth to her son Duleep Singh, who later became the last sovereign of the Sikh Empire. Mohamed Sheikh (2020) in his book writes that unlike the queens from the royal backgrounds who were called Maharanis; the women married through chādar andāzī were noted as concubines and were known as the lesser title of Rani (queen) (Sheikh, 2020, p. 52).

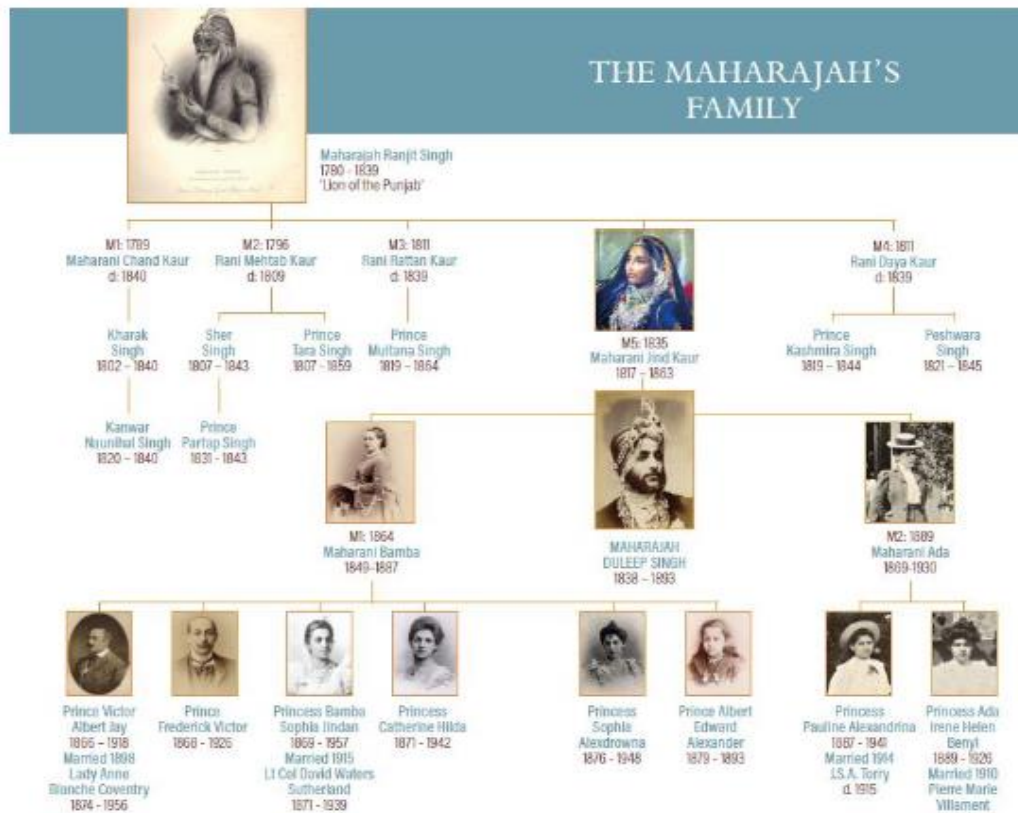


Figure : <https://duleepsingh.com/family-tree/>

Erasure of Women from History

In Margaret Atwood's nonfiction work *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), she delves into the significant responsibility borne by female writers. According to Atwood, writing as a woman or about women entails engaging in a form of negotiation with the female predecessors who have passed away. This responsibility involves reclaiming and retelling the truth about these women, their lives, and the aspects they carried with them into the past. Through the act of rereading and rewriting the collective history, women writers not only pay homage to their female ancestors but also amplify their silenced narratives. Simultaneously, they challenge gender stereotypes, add complexity to these women's identities, and recognize and celebrate their achievements.

For centuries, men have often been the ones portraying women in writing. Atwood suggests that women writers have a responsibility to their female ancestors who were denied the chance to express themselves. To fulfill this obligation, women writers should rewrite our literary history, shifting the viewpoint from male to female. Women shouldn't be confined to stereotypical roles like the mother, daughter, virgin, harlot, angel, or seductress. They are complex individuals capable of a range of emotions and actions—both good and bad. By examining the past through a new female perspective, women writers can honor their predecessors by reshaping and enriching our understanding of who these women truly were, something they couldn't do for themselves.

In the paper, "From Visibility to Analysis: Gender and History" the critic writes, "If we define history as a site of remembrance, it is crucial to see it also as a reflection on power relations: who is remembering what, who is mastering the past and the remembrance of it, what is becoming visible in such a historical canon?" (Peto, 2021, p.1)

Historically, Jind Kaur ascended from a common background to become the final reigning queen of the Sikh Empire in India. She was the youngest queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the mother of the last Maharaja, Duleep Singh. In the annals of history, Rani Jindan is only renowned for her beauty and strength, but the matter of fact is that after the death of Ranjit Singh and the assassination of his first three successors, Duleep Singh came to power but as he was just 5 years old Jind Kaur became the regent on her son's behalf. Jindan, vigilant, determined, fervent, and committed to safeguarding her son's legacy, harbored suspicion toward the British and vehemently resisted their annexation of Punjab. Challenging conventional norms, she boldly emerged from seclusion, discarded the veil, and openly engaged in governing affairs. Following the Sikhs' defeat in the initial Anglo-Sikh conflict, she was supplanted by a Regency council. Even after this when her power and influence continued the British imprisoned her and sent her on exile. Taking charge of her Khalsa troops directly, she rallied and motivated her soldiers in two conflicts against the 'firangs'. Her authority and impact were so immense that the British, fearing potential rebellion, stripped the defiant queen of all her possessions, including her son. For over thirteen years, she was kept apart from her child, who was taken to England during this prolonged separation. Still, there is very little written about Rani Jind Kaur.

This highlights that the erasure of women from historical narratives has been a persistent issue across cultures and epochs. Scholars often examine the historical construction of narratives and the deliberate omission or marginalization of women's experiences. They explore how prevailing social norms, biases of historians, and institutional structures have contributed to this erasure. June Hannam (2008) observes that the writing of women's history has always been intrinsic to the discourse on contemporary feminist politics as well as with changes in the discipline of history itself. When women interrogate inequalities in their own lives, they turn to history to understand the roots of their oppression and to see what changes they can make to transpose the agency and what they could learn from challenges that had been made in the past. Literature highlights efforts to recover and amplify women's voices, contributions, and agency throughout history. This involves re-examining primary sources, reinterpreting existing narratives, and actively seeking out neglected stories. Aparna Basu (1991) in her chapter "Women's History in India: An Historiographical Survey" writes that only those women who found a place in traditional history textbooks were either the ones who had successfully accomplished male roles or the ones whom great men loved.

In one of the interviews Divakaruni also speaks on the similar lines when she highlights how women narratives are relegated to sidelines due to prominent male figures in the narrative. Even iconic characters like Draupadi and Mata Sita suffer this fate as the text focused more often on Pandavas and Lord Ram respectively. This motivates her to present the women centric narrative. In case of Rani Jindan, Britishers tarnished her reputation through a smear campaign, labelling her as the "Messalina of the Punjab" and alleging her numerous affairs. This vilification also deterred historians from delving into her story, further emphasizing the need for simple, narrative to shed light on her true character (Balakrishnan, 2021, n.p.).

Rewriting about Maharani Jind Kaur in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's remarkable novel *The Last Queen* unveils an enchanting love story between a king and a commoner, serving as a cautionary narrative on loyalty and betrayal. It resonates as a potent parable, showcasing the unbreakable connection between a mother and her child, portraying the remarkable courage of a fearless woman from the nineteenth century—an enduring inspiration for our era. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot asserts that the concept of history encompasses both "what happened"—referring to the actual events or facts—and "that which is said to have happened"—the narrative constructed around those events or the way in which these events are interpreted and recounted (Trouillot, 1995, p. 25). The idea of this novel came to Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni when she visited Kolkata literary fest for the launch of her book *The Forest of Enchantment* (2019) and saw a painting of Rani Jindan on screen when Anita Anand and William Dalrymple were discussing about Dalrymple's book *Kob-i-Noor: The History of the World's Most Infamous Diamond* (2017). The author talks about how in all the written history so much has been written about Maharaja Ranjit Singh and his son Maharaja Dalip Singh but how like most of the mythological and historical women characters Rani Jindan was not given enough attention by the historians and biographers. Though as a matter of fact she was one of the most influencing queen regents of her times.

This tragedy talks about the end of two worlds: loss of Sikh empire and the loss of a mother whose child was taken away from her; abducted, stolen away and so extensively manipulated in the foreign land that he completely lost the trace of his roots. The amalgamation of history with fiction results in postmodern realism where the author engages in the dual process of writing and righting history. While deconstructing the numerous omissions within historical records and narratives, Divakaruni engaged in researching the marginalized stories absent from conventional historical archives to reconstruct a fictional archive.

Divakaruni says in an interview about the character of Jindan " I wanted to present her to my readers in all her complexity and humanness — her courage but also her stubbornness, her devotion to Punjab and her son, but also her desires and longing for love, which led her into an amorous relationship, her strength in adversity but also her determination for revenge" (Bhasin, 2021, n. p.). Divakaruni brings this story to unfold the grand saga of Sikh empire and more importantly of the brave queen who was never been given much space in history and academia. Isha Varshini and John Sungaya (2022) in their paper "Deconstructed Feminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's The Last Queen" explored the challenges faced by women, whether they were of royal descent or in destitution, and highlighted their efforts towards emancipation without necessarily needing to break free from the constraints that bound them. Like upon the Sarkar's demise, Guddan reveals her wish to undergo sati, fully aware that she lacks the resilience to withstand the daunting future ahead as a widowed royal (Varshini and Sungaya, 2022, p. 95).

The author sets the tone of this historical retelling with the quote of Chinua Achebe, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (Achebe, 1994. n.p.). The book traces the forgotten history of struggles and tribulation of small kingly states of India during freedom movement. It highlights many such stories of struggle, sacrifice and valor. The novel voices the concerns related to the cultural misappropriation of Rani Jindan as the Messalina of Punjab to create a gap between the regent queen and the followers and also of the little boy who was separated from his empire, his people and most importantly his mother to forget about his essence so much so that he converts to Christianity and never realises his true worth. Through this Divakaruni tragically depicts the colonisation of Indian Maharaja who has been psychologically conditioned to believe and trust only Queen Victorian and who respects Queen Victoria as his queen but forgets that he is also a king.

Aravind Ganachari talks about disciplining the Indian mind and writes, "The colonial subjects were expected to derive an idea of the humanness and justness of their rulers, and an attempt was made to convince them of the superiority of English ideals"(Ganachari, 2008, p.77). The very fact that Maharaja Dalip Singh in historical documents has been registered as Victoria's "Black Prince" clearly depicts the oriental gaze and subversion of Sikh Monarchy.

As a child, Dalip was sent away from Punjab then he was put in the care of an Englishman John Login and his wife. Slowly most of Dalip's supporters and attendants were sent away. They dressed him in English clothes, served him bland food and taught him their language. They took him to church and found him Christian playmates. With time he grew to be ashamed of Hindustani things and even the part of himself that was Hindustani. The Logins cut off his sacred hair and turned him away from his own religion. When he turned sixteen he was removed from his homeland so that the loyal Punjabis would not have their king around for the uprising. Divakaruni writes, "And all the while, they told him stories of England, painting it as a magical land" (Divakaruni, 2021, p.291)

The novel is well researched, and the narrative not only engages but also forces us to relook at the lost glory from Divakaruni's perspective. In its intricate narrative is woven not just the saga of mother and son but also India's War of Independence. It names so many warriors who were completely forgotten in the history of freedom struggle. Like Raja Nahar Singh of Ballabgarh who was martyred while fighting with British army, "The British hanged him, like a common criminal, in Chandni Chowk" (Divakaruni, 2021, p.292).

Rani Jindan was turned alive through powerful narrative. K Vimala Devi and A Vijayanand in their paper "Detailed Study of The Narrative Technique in the Selected Works Of

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni- *The Last Queen*” (2022) highlights how in Jindan, Divakaruni combines the qualities of a neighborly girl with those of a benevolent queen who is rooted, intelligent, beautiful, and feisty. (Devi & Vijayanand, 2023, p.234) She does not bow to external forces, but her passionate love for her once-loved Punjab was great. The circumstances under which she became a regent when her son unexpectedly inherited the throne help us to understand the real strength of Rani Jindan. Defying all traditions, the way she stepped out of her Zenana and cast her veil aside to take charge of Punjab during difficult times and to save the monarchy for his son clearly portrays the power and dynamism of Rani Jindan. The youngest queen of Sarkar who was controlled and appropriated by the agency of Zenana politics seem to take over this agency to control and empower herself. In another situation when she had to give proof of chastity, she unveiled herself in front of courtiers and she concluded, “I think of the power of that flimsy cloth, the veil. It helped me win a crucial battle today. I must learn how to use this unique weapon to its fullest.” All her ordeals like how she fought hard with Britishers to keep them from annexing Punjab. How she herself addressed Khalsa troops to reinstate their faith on the Monarchy make her stand apart from other powerful women in history.

Divakaruni’s novels work to reinstate women within the realm of history and mythology, and she reevaluate these narratives as sites of collective memory. In this novel she focused on various women leaders who shaped the history of Sikh empire through their grit and determination sometimes openly appearing as a leader or sometimes influencing from zenana. Few names that dominated this feminist discourse starts with Sada Kaur, Mai Nakkain, Malika Mukaddas Chand Kaur, Rani Jindan.

The author in this moving narrative shares the struggles Rani Jindan faced due to her caste, class and her rags to riches story that made her popular in her times. The book is also a wonderful narrative that skillfully complicates and tries to clear circumstances that led to estrangement of Dalip Singh from his own people and country.

The book is divided into four parts: Girl, Bride, Queen, Rebel along with the prologue that creates the context and epilogue that sums up all the loose ends together. The novel begins with the sullen moment when Maharaja Ranjit Singh is on his death bed and moves to part one where the exquisite love story of daughter of royal kennel keeper and Maharaja Ranjit Singh is told from the beginning of Rani Jindan’s trying life in Gujranwala village. From the deprived life of a village girl to the last queen of Maharaja to the last regent of Sikh empire.

Through beautiful weaving of words Divakaruni creates vivid imagery and recreates the timeless era in the reader’s mind. Rani Jindan’s fate drifted her from Gujrawala to Lahore when her father Manna Singh Aulakh took Jindan and her brother Jawahar to Lahore, “a magical city”.

Jindan first encountered Maharaja Ranjit Singh while she had given jaggery to the special horse, Laila and was tending her. Gradually they started meeting after Maharaja took her for a ride and banquet. The Lion of Punjab told her intriguing stories of wars, adventures and very soon realized that Jindan was not only beautiful but was extremely brave and intelligent and loved Punjab as fiercely as he did. Though Jindan was not of royal birth but not only did Maharaja marry her but also gave her equal respect and equal share. When Jindan gave birth to Dalip, the king gifted her the haveli named after her.

It was believed that Rani Jindan had such a power and influence that the British feared uprising which led to the tragic end of the queen regent and her son. While they were robbed of their empire. Rani Jindan was imprisoned and kept away from her son as Britishers believed she had a negative influence on him. Even Atwal in her book *Royals and Rebels: The Rise and Fall of the Sikh Empire* (2020) explored the dichotomy in representation of Jind Kaur as heroine/whore among chroniclers and biographers. How on the orders of Henry Montgomery Lawrence succeed in weakening her reputation as much as he could by exploiting her unpopularity amongst several of the key male Punjabi figures in Lahore Court. She was accused of treason and debauchery; she was declared as unfit mother. (Atwal, 2020, p. 5)

Jindan fought back this treason and while in house arrest at Sheikhpura Fort she plotted an anti-British rebellion which is subsequently known as Second Anglo Sikh War. Due to which even today is discreetly remembered and valorized as a rebel queen, who fought to save her husband’s and son’s empire.

Divakaruni portrayed Rani Jindan with a profound sense of humanity. Amidst the mourning cries and anguish of other queens and concubines over the Sarkar's body, she abstains, recognizing that such behavior wouldn't align with the Sarkar's wishes. His guidance encourages her to confront challenges rather than contemplate suicide, unlike Guddan. She decides to live for her son. "You must be both father and mother to our son" (Divakaruni, 2021, p.152). The depiction of widowhood at the age of twenty-one and the fear of undergoing sati seem to represent a real dilemma for a person who lived life to the fullest.

Following Sarkar's demise, significant changes were enforced in the lives of those out of favor with Mai Nakkian. Gradually, Rani Jindan's guards were dismissed, and access to the treasury was prohibited. In a bid to protect herself and her son, she sought refuge in the Kangra Hills with Dhain Singh's aid, within the domain of Suchet Singh, Dhian's brother. Remaining in the qila was no longer secure. Reluctantly leaving behind all her possessions, including Sarkar's cherished gift—Haveli Mai Jindan in Lahore, the city of her aspirations—became an imperative step for her safety.

The author does not create an illusion to glorify Rani Jindan but recreated her with all humanly attributes that can fit in with all psychological appropriateness in history that can't be changed now. The openness towards her desire and finding love once again in Lal Singh makes her question the whole edifice and proclaim her actions as just, "Many of the nobles have several wives — and mistresses, too. Their liaisons are accepted. Am I sinner, just because I'm a woman?"

Later Rani Jindan was imprisoned in Sheikapura Zila and then in Chunur Fort in Banaras. The atrocities of British empire do not stop here and Divakaruni excelled in bringing this biggest tragedy of kingdom of Punjab which was snatched away by British empire while the regent queen was separated from her son and loyal maid, Mangla. To escape further subjugation, Rani Jindan first escaped to Patna and finally took refuge in Kathmandu under the king of Nepal, Jung Bahadur. Not just physical banishment the British meanwhile spread lies about Rani Jindan and named her as 'Messalina of Punjab'.

The novel's last section "Rebel" talks about the reunion of Rani Jindan with her son Dalip first in Calcutta. How they were never allowed to exchange their whereabouts. Dalip says, "Once I learned that you were in Kathmandu, I sent you many letters. I even paid envoys to visit you. Finally realized that you weren't receiving anything, and that envoys weren't allowed to see you. That's when I pretended that I was longing to go on a tiger hunt—and here I am!" (Divakaruni, 2021, p.303) and then they moved to London. For a woman who lost everything due to Britishers she forced herself spending her last years of her in Britain has just been decided only for the sake of Dalip. She even shared some of the hidden facts with him to make him understand how he has been appropriated by the British government. She confronted how the British broke their words; even after signing the treaty of establishing Punjab as a protectorate they didn't abide to the agreement and annex Punjab out of greet.

"The Black Prince" Dalip was shown to have neither the strength of character nor the stubborn focus that his father Maharaja Ranjit Singh possessed. He is depicted as a confused prince; unaware of the glorious past of his father and forefathers and does not have much loyalty to India. Before her death Rani Jindan reminded Dalip to explore and take pride in his heritage, asking him to conduct her last rites in her homeland and place her ashes next to her husband's but unfortunately it took Dalip one whole year to seek permission from British empire to perform the last rites of Rani Jindan in Nasik.

Even in this tragedy Rani Jindan comes as a winner in the end by becoming the transformative force in disoriented Dalip and by reinstalling the faith in Dalip to recognize who he is and how he is been manipulated by the British government as he says, "I will write to Lord Login tonight, asking him to bring me the Punjab Blue Book when we meet next. I'll mention the treaty which promised me forty thousand pounds. I'll bring up the subject of the Koh-i-Noor as well and see what comes of it. At the very least, the British will know that I'm no longer ignorant of my rights—and for that, I have you to thank, Biji." (Divakaruni, 2021, p.327) Before dying for the last time Mai Jindan tried to remind Dalip his individuality that definitely helped him envision his true self, "The first is this: remember that the blood of the greatest king of Punjab flows in you. You are the only living son of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab. He once said to me, what better way to die than in battle with my loyal men around me? I would much rather go like that than be stuck in a stinking sickbed."

That is your heritage” (Divakaruni, 2021, p.345) The epilogue of the novel shifts the setting from Britain to Nasik where the Jindan was cremated and Dalip I will not forget you, Biji,’ he says. I will not forget what you taught me. I will return to my roots and my religion.” (Divakaruni, 2021, p.351)

Writing Style

Divakaruni's writing style is known for its unique blend of tradition and modernity, creating a bridge between the past and present. Her prose is often poetic, vividly descriptive, and emotionally resonant. She has an ability to create multidimensional characters with complex personalities, and her stories often explore themes of identity, cultural conflict, and the immigrant experience. Rani Jindan's life is a testament to the courage and strength of women in a time when they had little power in society. Her story is an important part of India's history and continues to inspire people today.

Divakaruni's writing style in this novel is engaging, thought-provoking, and often emotionally charged, exploring the human experience in a way that is both universal and unique to her own cultural perspective. The novel is a powerful narrative that sets the imagination in the historical context that remained imbalanced and due to lack of documented evidence the author gets more space to trace the missing links by conceptualizing it with their creative endeavours and thus engages in the formation of writing as an effective political tool of historiography. This genre of historical novels works as a productive site for renegotiating women's historical agency. The genre is a vital continuation of women's literary tradition and as Diana Wallace rightly says it is “a discourse within which women can be made central” (Wallace, 2003, p. ix), despite their traditional exclusion from official ‘history’ in patriarchal society.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her powerful female characters who are often challenged by societal norms and expectations. Her women protagonists are complex, multi-dimensional characters who struggle with issues such as identity, love, loss, and empowerment. Her women protagonists are strong, resilient, and relatable characters who challenge societal norms and expectations. They are a testament to the power and agency of women, and their ability to transcend the limitations that society places upon them. One of her most iconic women protagonists is Draupadi, from *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), a retelling of Mahabharata. Draupadi is portrayed as a strong-willed and independent woman who defies the patriarchal norms of her time, and fights for her own agency and independence. Draupadi's story is an empowering one that resonates with modern-day readers.

The characterization of Rani Jindan in the novel is a complex and nuanced one. She portrays Rani Jindan as a strong-willed, passionate, and intelligent woman who is deeply devoted to her son, Duleep Singh, and to her people. Throughout the novel, Rani Jindan is shown as a courageous figure who is willing to fight for her kingdom and her people's freedom, even in the face of overwhelming odds. She is also depicted as a shrewd politician who is adept at navigating the complex and treacherous political landscape of the time. At the same time, however, Rani Jindan is also portrayed as a flawed and imperfect human being who makes mistakes and is sometimes driven by her emotions. Her love for her son, for example, often causes her to act impulsively and without regard for the consequences.

Overall, Divakaruni's characterization of Rani Jindan is both sympathetic and critical. She presents Rani Jindan as a complex and fully realized character, with both strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately as a woman who faced tremendous challenges and obstacles in a male dominated world. This retelling not only honours Rani Jindan's legacy but also invites us to reconsider and celebrate the often-overlooked narratives of powerful women in history.

CONCLUSION

Intertextuality plays a very significant role in the writing of this novel, *The Last Queen* (2021) as Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, draws the content from various sources by process of negotiations between past and present, history and fiction. By doing so Divakaruni enables to provide an authentic tale of love and betrayal by shifting between historical documents and fictionalized narration thereby highlighting the subjectivism of historical narratives and questioning the concept of authenticity, and ultimately undermining history's authority.

As Goodman states in his article that history is primarily shaped by men but current readership is mostly of women, who like to read about other women so contemporary writers must explore the topics that include women or empower historical women to narrate their own stories authentically, free from the purported 'misrepresentation' of traditional historical accounts (Goodman, 2005 n.p.).

Contemporary women novelists recreate and rewrite the past from a perspective that has been historically denied to women. The novel also questions the exclusion, subordination, agency and autonomy of women by highlighting the life and exceptional deeds of Rani Jindan and many like her who were neglected by the politics of patriarchy.

While it's pertinent to view historical narratives within the scaffolding of their social, political and cultural contexts, they also serve as a bridge connecting the past to the present. This paper also delved into feminist perspectives on historiography. Much like women refuse to remain on the periphery of history, historians and scholars focusing on women's history are re-examining historical approaches to better meet the needs of women. Historical novels like Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*, possess a subversive potential as these stories feed women's lives and allow them to find new ways of seeing the world—the past and the present. Also, retelling about the characters who lived in a different timeline and setting also adds to the complexity of the narrative. By allowing readers to see how people were living in any specific historical period, such works enable readers to better relate to and understand history as well as gain a sense of their own society within a historical framework (de Groot, 2010, p. 4). Moreover, if women do not tell and re-tell stories based on women's experiences, the female perspective will remain marginalized, history will remain lopsided, and the future for women much less promising. By merging women's voices and experiences in historical discourse, we pave the way for a more inclusive and empowering future for all. It is only through the acknowledgment and amplification of women's narratives that a more equitable and promising future for women can be actualized.

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