

THE LOCATION OF POWER: AN ALTERNATIVE RETELLING OF RANI JINDAN'S LIFE IN
CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE LAST QUEEN*

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ABSTRACT

The marginal position that women occupy in the present has its roots in the cultural prejudice that comes down from history where women were dominantly projected as secondary. Very often, only fleeting mention of a woman's existence surfaces, while a conscious attempt is made to valorize male hegemony. Women were presented as submissive and meek on whom power could be exercised. Knowledge and power were watchwords of patriarchy, considered tools for subjugation and marginalization of women. In fact, unequal power relations have always, subjected even the powerful women to patriarchal orientations of history, often erasing their very existence. It is true that complexities related to power relations have been damaging to the status of women but at times resistance grows out of situations against which they struggle. It is in this context that I would locate Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021).

Through this paper, my attempt is to evaluate Rani Jindan's initiation and exploration within the realms of power, alongside her physicality and bodily desires to state how deployment of power can also co-exist with physical emotions and desires. This paper in myriad ways tries to deflate the notion that women are 'docile bodies' who passively submit to their fate by retracing multiple instances from Rani Jindan's life where she has demonstrated not just resistance to power but has also gained power from it.

Keywords: marginalization, power, body, alternative narrative, hegemony, Women's studies

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an Indian-American author, renowned for her works on the immigrant experiences, has also to her credit novels like *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) in which she revisits the Indian mythological past to subvert the dominant narratives that either erase or marginalize the powerful roles that women have played. Her recently published novel, *The Last Queen* (2021) is an attempt to shift Rani Jindan Kaur's liminal position within India's Colonial History as the consort of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and mother of Maharaja Dalip Singh of the Sikh Kingdom, to the powerful last queen to have surrendered to the British.

A comparison of the historical representation and Divakaruni's projection of Rani Jindan on the one hand demonstrates how she is marginalized while on the other, is an indictment on the process in which history is formulated, and its complicity with the powerful. For instance, Navtej Sarna's *The Exile: A Novel Based on the Life of Maharaja Duleep Singh* traces the life of her son who lost his kingdom at just eight. And one of the few non-fictions to briefly cover Rani Jindan has been William Dalrymple and Anita Anand's work *Kohinoor* (2016). Although Divakaruni cites both these texts as invaluable resources in the acknowledgements, Rani Jindan's representation in these texts is minuscule. The fleeting mention of Rani Jindan within historical narratives is suggestive of the effort to erase the least bit of position that she occupies within the memories of the collective. Milan Kundera calls these kinds of methodical erasure of characters from memories as "organized forgetting" (280). This aspect exemplifies the fact that power operates at various levels to establish control not just over individuals but also over what is to be 'remembered' and what is to be 'forgotten'. Hence, power is both ubiquitous and inescapable, determining what knowledge is to be created and how this "knowledge constantly induces effects of power" (Foucault 1980: 52).

Divakaruni's rewriting of Rani Jindan's persona into being acts as a response to the unequal power relations that have subjected important women like Rani Jindan to patriarchal orientation of History. This paper therefore primarily aims to explore Divakaruni's attempt at understanding the complexities associated with power relations and how Rani Jindan's resistance grows out of the situations against which she struggles (Foucault 142). While analysing *The Last Queen* this paper will also try to ascertain how the deployments of power are directly connected to the body- bodies, function, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures. More importantly this paper aims to debunk the dominant narrative that presents women within the realms of history as passive and 'docile bodies' on whom power can be exercised.

The segregation of the novel *The Last Queen* into four sections based on the different phases of Rani Jindan's life – Girl, Bride, Queen and Rebel- primarily aid in tracing Jindan's gradual exposure to various forms of power that mould her personality into an influential queen. As Shilling rightly observes, it is the experiences from "birth and infancy, through puberty and adolescence, and into middle and old age, [it] provides individuals with contrasting foundations on which to interact with others" (18). Divakaruni's linear depiction of Jindan's life from her youth to her old age facilitates this paper's attempt to comprehend Rani Jindan's initiation and exploration within the realms of power.

Even as a young girl in her village, Gujranwala, Jindan demonstrates her physicality when she decides to accompany her brother Jawahar to steal guavas. Jindan's desire to move out of the house and be a 'provider like him, not just a mouth to feed' illustrates her othering from convenient womanhood of the period (TLQ 10). Throughout the novel, there are numerous instances where Jindan has been presented in all her vulnerability, but has never been projected as a powerless or helpless individual. This aspect of her personality is also perceived when her father Manna hosts dinner for his village men, and the women of the house are expected to eat after the guests, who were predominantly men. The hunger that she experiences at that moment forces Jindan to question, "Why must we wait until the men are done?" (TLQ 17) and as an act of dissent she gulps down a jilebi. Her hungry body acts a site of resistance to the thought that the 'female body' and its desires are secondary in comparison to men.

Jindan's shift from Gujranwala to Lahore, provides her with an opportunity to understand how women from lower strata of the society enjoyed more power when compared to the elite women of the palace. The location of the queens and the King's concubines behind a 'zenana' and their passive participation in the proceedings of the court expose Jindan to the fact that the female 'body' becomes a site of control through which power is exercised. Whereas, Jindan also experiences the patriarchal forces that emphasize male coercion within the cloistered walls of the zenana, where women too exercise power in the absence of the men. Jindan is exposed to the power politics within the King's palace when she is invited as a guest to a celebration at the palace before her marriage. Although the queens and concubines are removed from the crowd and are installed in a separate 'marginal' space called the 'zenana', Jindan experiences the strong undercurrents of power and hierarchy within the zenana as well. The order in which the queens and concubines sit, determine the level of closeness and power that they have over the Maharaja. Consequently, everybody has vested interests in

maintaining and managing hierarchy depending upon their power in the court or Sarkar's life. Power, therefore becomes a strategy that individuals exercise rather than possess.

Jindan's marriage with the Sarkar- King Ranjit Singh- plants her in a position where she experiences power in all its complexities. To begin with, the manner in which she is married to the Sarkar and her entry into the palace is suggestive of her submission to the sterner patriarchal practices and power hierarchy within the court. Despite her inability to decipher certain practices, she yields to them but also withholds her power to question these cultural and religious practices. For instance, the absence of the King for his own wedding and her marriage to the 'sword' that symbolizes the King. Although Rani Jindan is not able to construe her marriage with the 'sword' symbolizing the King, she is quick to realize that this is the period of transition that marks her entry into the world of the King and the power dynamics associated with the same. She appears to be a passive participant in her own wedding ceremony where there are no guests and the King, the groom himself is absent. Although she realizes that, "This is the life of a queen" and she will "...always be second to Punjab" (TLQ 87), she also tastes the power that comes along with this position. When she is denied entry into the palace soon after her marriage, Jindan who is now the Queen, asserts, "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). Rani Jindan's assertion at the gates of the palace becomes the footing from which she very soon rises to prominence in the Maharaja's life. Rani Jindan emphasizes her power by being actively involved in discussions with the Sarkar and defying all attempts of being subjected to the position of a passive queen of low birth. Among the seventeen queens that the Sarkar had, he was more impressed with Rani Jindan not only for her beauty but also for her inclination towards politics.

Divakaruni's delineation of the private realm of the Sarkar's and Rani Jindan's marriage subverts the dominant narrative of legitimizing the 'female body' as inferior to that of its male counterpart. The gendered power relation that is shared between the King and the Queen stands altered when Rani Jindan questions the definition of masculinity, that becomes a measuring rod of power, when she sees the Sarkar's body for the very first time. Although the scars and marks on the Sarkar's body speak volumes about his conquests and masculinity, it has made him weak to consummate his marriage with Jindan the first time. He states, "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). The Sarkar's admission of his weakness and Jindan's acceptance of his scarred male body illustrates not just the altered gendered power relation between the king and queen at the most intimate levels of experience in the institution of marriage, but also that their relationship is set to be beyond 'bodily experiences'. This validates the Fakir's remarks, that though the King had married Jindan for her beauty he had married her more for her intelligence, a quality that he had been looking for in his Queens for a long time.

Divakaruni, however, portrays Rani Jindan in her vulnerable moments too, to depict how a queen as significant as Rani Jindan could yield to her bodily desires. In her interview with the *Hindustan Times* (2021), Divakaruni avers her desire to present Rani Jindan in all her "complexity and humanness" when she says,

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 wrong that the British did to her when they falsely slandered her as a promiscuous woman, calling her 'the Messalina of the Punjab.

Divakaruni presents Rani Jindan in all her susceptibility when she is tempted to yield to Gulloo, her secret admirer. Despite occupying an important position in the royal household and in the Sarkar's life, Rani Jindan wishes to enjoy the power that she can have over Gulloo. She is tempted "not by Gulloo's looks, but because it's thrilling to be the centre 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 also highlights how social institutions like marriage play a role in sustaining and reproducing power relations to exercise control over the 'female body.' While, the Sarkar is married to more than one queen and has numerous concubines, the affections of the women of the royal household were to be restricted only towards the king. Although marriage within royal families take place more often for political benefits and to build strong allies, Sarkar's marriage with Rani Jindan was based on his love

for her intelligence and beauty. This aspect of Jindan's life places her in a very important position not just in the Sarkar's life but also within the pages of history.

Rani Jindan's ability to make choices in difficult situations, determines her capacity to take charge over her own life. She does not blindly submit to all the norms, cultural and religious practices like most women of her time would. This is evident in Rani Jindan's response to the Sarkar's death, when many of his queens and concubines decide on becoming a 'sati'. The concept of 'sati' basically nullifies the existence of a 'female body' after the death of the husband and promises the women a place in heaven with their husbands. Rani Jindan figures the complexities associated with 'sati' when Rani Guddan, another wife of the Sarkar, decides to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband. There ensues a dilemma in Jindan's mind whether she too should be a sati. Although Jindan initially states that she has to live for her son, she also thinks, "For my own sake, too, I want to live. I've barely 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). Divakaruni brings out the individuality of Rani Jindan when she chooses to live and face the adversities while alive than enjoy heavenly bliss with the Sarkar. Thus, giving Jindan a sense of agency- for the most part as she is the master of her own decisions. From choosing to marry the Sarkar because she is in love with him and not because her father wants her to do so, to choosing to live as a young widow, Rani Jindan exerts power over her own life.

Rani Guddan's willing acceptance to become a 'sati' promotes larger disempowerment as it moves away from challenging the patriarchal construction of the female body. Guddan fails to view 'sati' as an oppressive custom as she is conditioned to believe that her physical existence makes no sense in the absence of her husband, as she derives her identity and purpose from him. When she subjects herself to sati, she is also rationalizing the power that these hegemonic practices have over individuals. Rani Jindan's dilemma and decision against 'sati' depicts the struggle against normalizing such practices. Jindan chooses to rewrite her identity by fixing it to the object or power of resistance. This decision becomes the vantage point from which Rani Jindan's emancipation in the absence of her husband begins.

Rani Jindan experiences emancipation when she begins to explore her sexuality through her relationship with Lal Singh. With the King's death, the bodily desires that Rani Jindan had suppressed for a long time begin to resurface. However, in her relationship with Lal Singh, Rani Jindan by virtue of the higher social position, enjoys more power than him. But her 'body' also becomes a site of conflict when she is torn apart between meeting her sexual desires and playing the gendered role of a mother. Fearless and unconventional, Rani Jindan chooses to meet her lover Lal Singh at nights. In her love affair with Lal Singh, she explores two important aspects of her female 'self'. On the one hand, she negates the stereotypical image where motherhood is glorified and on the other, she uses her body to experience the pleasures of sensual love that the King was unable to give her.

When Rani Jindan confides in her close associates about her infatuation with Lal Singh, she is wielding the same influence that the Sarkar had on her during their wedding night i.e., the admission of weakness from a position of power. Although all her life she's taught that it is shameful to talk about desire, she forces herself to be frank when saying:

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 expounds Rani Jindan in her most vulnerable moments, she also highlights the dilemma that persists in her mind- her love for the dead Sarkar versus her passionate love for Lal Singh and her maternal desire to attend to her ailing son versus the urgency to meet Lal Singh. Most often Rani Jindan yields to her desire of meeting Lal Singh. Her relationship with Lal Singh shows how she experiences liberty in sex that she had not experienced before. She turns out to be 'wild and uninhibited' with him capable of vocalising her sensuality which hitherto she was not able to.

It is in between these ordeals that Rani Jindan braves an abortion and is infected with the blisters or pox that her son Dalip suffered from. When the news of her abortion spreads throughout the court, she creates a narrative to win over the trust of her courtiers. Rani Jindan, her 'ailing body' as power to camouflage her failings and to win the trust of her people. She unveils herself and shows the blisters on her body to the court. The queen who had once used her beauty and intelligence to win the Sarkar over, uses her intelligence and her ailing body to manipulate and win over the people. She thinks to herself, "The destruction of my beauty has served some purpose, after all.... Lying in bed in a stupor 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 traces Rani Jindan's impossible yet impactful journey from behind the Zenana to behind the Maharaja to unveiling herself in the court.

Rani Jindan's sexual stint with Lal Singh begins when she initiates the relationship and it comes to an end when she chooses to rule over the Sikh Kingdom and protect it from the British. Her choice of participating in the complex power struggle with the British and her male counterparts in India over her Kingdom, places her on a pivotal position.

A close reading of Divakaruni's works, throws light on how she identifies immigrant women and women from mythologies and history as victims of marginalization and masculine hegemony. The peripheral position that women occupy in the present have its roots in the cultural bias that comes down from history where women were dominantly projected as secondary. It is this rootedness of the present in the past that makes Divakaruni's exploration of Rani Jindan's character very relevant to the present. Divakaruni breaks down all the nuances with regard to the perfect life of a queen when she portrays the inadequacies in the life of Rani Jindan especially with regard to motherhood. The difficulties that Jindan experiences are not very different from the experiences that ordinary women in the other novels authored by Divakaruni go through. Rani Jindan's woes as expressed in the following lines:

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 suffering, both physical and emotional, makes Jindan the great queen into a very relevant character in the present. Divakaruni ties the women of the present with a powerful queen of the past through their bodily experiences.

An analysis of Rani Jindan's relationship with her son Dalip Singh confirms that it is impossible to evade the influence of power. Rani Jindan's choice to stay away from the politics in the Kingdom of Lahore after the Sarkar's death, shows how quick she was in assessing the foreboding danger, that she manipulates Dhian Singh to help her flee to Jammu with Dalip, her infant son, and Mangla, her trusted maid. But when she returns to Lahore, she is also pulled into the vortex of intrigues, murders and betrayals. She works intelligently to place her son Dalip on the King's throne and wins over the court's trust by creating a persona that evokes whispers in the bazaars of Lahore on how, "faithful, beautiful and tragic" the queen looked with her "only ornament a string of pearls" (TLQ) that formerly belonged to the Sarkar. She breaks the tradition when she addresses the court from behind the throne, rather than behind the zenana. She contemplates, "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). Rani Jindan's journey from her insignificant space in the zenana to an important position behind the new Maharaja shows her promising trajectory ahead too.

The biggest challenge that Rani Jindan fights odds with is her separation from her son, the King Dalip Singh. The British imprisons Rani Jindan to keep her from influencing her son against them as she did when she asked Dalip to refuse honouring Tej with the tika as the Raja of Sialkot. The British feared that Rani Jindan's active presence in the Kingdom could create a possibility of an uprising among the Punjabi people. The British identifies Dalip and Punjab as the weak links of her life and they separate her from both by imprisoning her. Rani Jindan's escape from the prison and the long journey on foot to Nepal to seek asylum and take rest before she strikes the Britishers again, show her indomitable spirit and strength of mind and body to not surrender to the

Imperial Powers. The Britishers allow Dalip Singh to meet his mother after a long gap of fourteen years only when they are convinced that she is not going to be a threat to them. The exiled Queen is overjoyed to meet her dethroned son and also agrees to travel to England with him.

The Queen who looked powerless to the British was capable of influencing her son Dalip with the strength of her mind. She encourages him to question the British over various decisions that they had taken without his consent. The concerned British planned strategies to separate the mother and son. However, their efforts were in vain as Rani Jindan died in their London home at the age of 46. Rani Jindan was such a powerful character that despite her death she was able to inspire her son to convince the British to move her body to India where she was cremated as per the Indian rituals.

Significantly, besides being the last queen to surrender to the British, Rani Jindan's absence for fourteen years from Dalip's life costed India, the very famous Koh-i-Noor- a rare diamond that the Sarkar demanded from the Afghan King Shah Shuja in return for refuge. The Sarkar bequeaths Dalip with the Koh-i-Noor as he believes that Dalip may never become the King. Dalip in turn gifts the Koh-i-Noor to Queen Victoria. Rani Jindan's presence in History as Divakaruni intends to cite is very crucial as she demonstrates that although individuals are shaped by power, they also have the agency to resist the same.

Divakaruni's revisitation to Colonial India's historical past with the aim of rewriting Rani Jindan's character, shows that the Queen who was marginalized by both the British and her counterparts deserves a significant position within India's History. Divakaruni's aim of presenting the past in all its complexity by dismissing its hollow glorification and by assessing how the past plays a role in reinforcing inequalities and discriminations at various levels in the society today, makes the current study very important. Divakaruni revisits the past not to valorize it, rather, to present its plurality by presenting Rani Jindan in all her capacities. Her attempt to create an alternative narrative in *The Last Queen* gives voice and power to Rani Jindan and inspires the women of the present offer resistance and evade marginalization.

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Abbreviations Used

TLQ- *The Last Queen*.