Deconstructed Feminism in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Last Queen

Isha Varshini G 1*, Dr. M. John Suganya 2

1*, 2 Department of English
1*, 2 PSG College of Arts & Science, Coimbatore
1* ishababoon@gmail.com
2 suganyajohn@gmail.com +91 9994924381

Abstract

This article examines how women in history had a chance to redeem themselves if they chose to do so. In a society totally governed by men, women remained subservient yet satisfied. The aim of the article is to bring to light the plight of women - both royal and destitute - and how they worked towards their emancipation without really having to break out of the shackles that held them down. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s bestselling historical novel The Last Queen is a portrayal of imperfect, submissive women who through their untiring trials and tribulations realise the power of their formidable strength. It is this power within every individual woman that is the source of her happiness. Divakaruni’s novel seeks to establish that a woman is her own master irrespective of her place in society.

Keywords

Feminism, rebellious, faith, submissive, dreams, societal norms

Introduction

Indian writing in English reflects Indian tradition, culture and history through the simple depiction of life in India. Women novelists play a vital role in enhancing the quality of Indian English fiction. These women novelists add feministic perspectives and dimensions contributing to the widening of the spectrum of issues considered in their novels. Indian women writers look to explore feminine subjectivity with their themes ranging from childhood to complete womanhood.

While recent Indian English fiction has been trying to give expression to the Indian experience of modern predicaments, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through her works brings to light the forgotten past. The author’s works resonate with Indian thoughts and ideas. Feminism means putting an end to women’s silent suffering and not simply standing up against the opposite sex. This idea of feminism is immensely articulated in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Last Queen.

Divakaruni throws light on the psychological as well as the physical transformation of Rani Jindan Kaur by dividing the novel into four parts namely Girl, Bride, Queen, and Rebel while also keeping the social background in view. The inner world of women and their dilemmas are depicted in a true to life manner. Divakaruni’s portrayal of the historical figure of Rani Jindan Kaur inspires the reader to fight one’s circumstances and emerge a winner.

Jindan Kaur, the daughter of the royal kennel keeper goes on to become the favourite queen of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and eventually the queen regent when her son Dalip inherits the throne at six. A dedicated mother, Jindan Kaur in her attempts to protect her empire of Punjab, distrusts the British and fights hard against them. She becomes the first queen to defy tradition by stepping out of the zenana, casting aside her
veil and holding state discussions in public. She addresses her Khalsa troops directly and leads them to two wars against the British. Fearing a revolt, the British deprive the rebel queen of her rights and even separate her from her son. Even after being imprisoned and exiled, her formidable influence and indomitable will do not die out.

Being a submissive and obedient wife does not prevent Rani Jindan Kaur from being a headstrong and rebellious queen when she needs to be one. Surrounded by both men and women who look for the slightest opportunity to disgrace her, Rani Jindan Kaur, stands up for what is right and learns a lot about the royal way of life through silent observation.

Divakaruni’s women in *The Last Queen*

Divakaruni in *The Last Queen* challenges the essentialist conceptions of feminism by deconstructing the basic idea of women fostered by society. The author looks closely at the conventional norms defining a woman to reveal several inconsistencies and paradoxes which underpin it. Every female character in the novel is fighting a battle; for whom and against whom it is unclear.

Rani Jindan Kaur, wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and mother of Maharaja Dalip Singh is a respectable lady 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. She acts according to the Fakir’s advice, ‘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’ (Divakaruni 201). Jindan allows the societal structure to hold her down but doesn’t allow it to control her. She does not give up her commitment to religion and ritual which are her guiding forces at all times. Jindan is but a normal human being and so cannot be perfect all the time. Unable to keep her promise to Chand, she is grief-stricken but forgives herself when wrapping the dead Chand in a towel saying “I’ve failed you in every other way, but at least I can save you from this indignity. No man should see a queen in her nakedness” (Divakaruni 207).

Divakaruni through the characters of Guddan, Pathani, Balbir, Chand and to a certain extent even the powerful Mai Nakkain and Jindan portrays women’s natural frailty. In comparison to men, women are considered physically weaker and are expected to conduct themselves keeping this in mind. The women in *The Last Queen* are fully conscious and aware of their natural differences from men throughout their lives. The women reach an acceptance and find a sense of belonging over time.

Mai Nakkain is the most powerful woman in the kingdom but that doesn’t prevent her from worrying and longing for the Sarkar’s attention. All her schemes against Jindan are not out of hatred but a consequence of her anguish at having lost her position as the Sarkar’s favourite. As it is natural for an individual to seek companionship, none question the Sarkar’s numerous marriages and instead embrace them as political alliances. Even when he marries for his whims, no objections are raised. In contrast, when Rani Jindan, the widow, wants to marry her lover, Lal Singh, she is chastised and forced to abort her child which she accepts as her fate without a second thought. Divakaruni showcases the stark differences that existed between men and women in Indian history.

Every woman is different with an individual system of beliefs and faiths, be it enforced or accustomed. When the Sarkar dies, Guddan expresses her desire to become a sati as she knows very well that she will not have the strength to endure the harsh future alone as a widow, especially as a royal one.

‘I’m not being brave. Just the opposite. Do you know how hard life is for a widow? Even—or maybe especially—for those who were queens? We’ll be powerless—shunned, perhaps even murdered, so that our valuables can be confiscated by the treasury. But as a sati, I’ll follow my husband to heaven, while on earth, a temple will be built in my name’ (Divakaruni 167,168).

If not for her son Dalip, Jindan would have endured the same fate as Guddan. It is her motherly instinct that pulls her away from the verge of death, leads her to the throne and eventually labels her as a rebel. It is the same motherly defence mechanism to protect her grandson that keeps Chand going. Life
amounts to the loss of all that she holds dear and in the end is gruesomely murdered for standing up for the truth.

In the face of distress and troubles, it is Mangla who stands by Jindan as her guide, aiding her in every endeavour. Being a maid does not prevent her from loving and caring for Jindan and Dalip who have become her family in the course of life.

Conclusion

The subjugation of women initially began as the subjection of women to special treatment keeping their physical differences, needs and security in mind. Over time, men began exploiting women pointing to their biology while simultaneously women began accepting themselves for their differences. The women became accustomed to being submissive at home and in society too. However every woman had her own set of ideals and dreams in life. Divakaruni’s *The Last Queen* presents a variety of women each living and fighting their battles. All of them succeed in their dreams while it may not seem so to the readers who judge these women based on their individual ideas and experiences. The women in *The Last Queen* manage to seek happiness and redemption each in their own separate ways.

One common factor among all the female characters is affirmation. Divakaruni chooses to present women who accept the existing order of things without question. This 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.

References