



Feminine Sensibility in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

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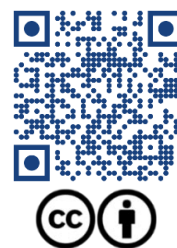
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Abstract— *The paper offers insight into the inner lives of female characters that underscores feminine sensibility. The diverse experiences of those characters serve as a canvas for the expression of feminine sensibility. It also examines the theme of motherhood, highlighting Jindan's maternal instincts as well as concern for the kingdom. Despite belonging to a marginalized community, she seeks power and creates a heroic charisma that the British cannot ignore. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni appropriately segregates four stages of Jindan's life: Girl, Bride, Queen, and Rebel which earned her the title of 'the last queen'. Women in history suffered a lot due to profuse complexities. The portrayal of female relationships authentically exemplifies the inherent bond of sisterhood, emphasizing the importance of women standing in solidarity.*



Keywords— *Feminine sensibility, motherhood, marginalized, sisterhood, solidarity.*

Feminism in contemporary times has changed form. It no longer echoes women's helplessness but rather focuses on power. Kamla Bhasin, in *Understanding Gender*, posits that "It is both simplistic and incorrect to think that the fight for gender equality is a fight between women and men" (79). Therefore, Divakaruni deflates the idea of the projection of females as submissive and secondary figures. Her recent novels like *The Palace of Illusions*, *The Forest of Enchantments*, *The Last Queen*, and *Independence* present bold, highly vocalized, and courageous women in myriad ways. Divakaruni has extreme frankness in its nature of writing about feminine sensibility. History books frequently omit the tales and contributions of extraordinary women. Divakaruni has incredibly crafted a story that gives long-lost identity to women characters in history whose narratives were not discussed or vocalized. These characters get acknowledgement and justice through the novels. She beautifully captures the complexity of female emotions and offers poignant insights into their agony and feelings in a way that resonates with feminine sensibility.

The Last Queen is a novel written by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni that discovers the riveting saga of Jindan's life and traces an inspiring narrative of devotion to family, faith and nation. The book is divided into four sections-

Girl, Bride, Queen, and Rebel that narrate the phases in the life of Jindan. It unveils many clandestine episodes of history that are unknown to society. Indian actress Shabana Azmi reviews *The Last Queen* as, "An unforgettable story about fearless, much- feared queen whom history seem to have forgotten" (review). The book also portrays different a side of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He is depicted as more than just a warrior, emerging as a figure with profound emotional depth and sensitivity.

During the 'Girl' phase, Jindan has a poor yet, happy life in the village. Being the daughter of Manna Singh, a kennel keeper, she was brought up in an orthodox Punjabi household where Biji has a belief that 'too much book learning made a girl uppity' (22). Her father treats her no less than a dog and doesn't even hesitate to project Jindan as a concubine in front king for his benefit. That's why she confessed, "Manna Singh, somehow I can't think him as Father" (14). Some stereotypes are culturally fixed. In this regard, Kamla Bhasin states, "Each society slowly transforms a male or female into a man or a woman, into masculine and feminine, with different qualities, behavior patterns, roles, responsibilities, rights and expectations. Unlike sex, which is biological, the gender identities of women and men are psychologically and socially – which

means historically and culturally determined" (2). The conditioning that Jindan experiences as a child reinforces the notion that girls are destined for reproduction, household chores, and the maintenance of beauty standards. That's why Manna Singh leaves his unattractive daughter Balbir behind and chooses Jindan for the Lahore expedition.

The new adventure of Lahore is welcoming Jindan with open arms. Here, she gets her first glimpse of Raja Ranjit Singh also known as Sarkar. She falls in love with his chivalry, aura, and exquisite personality. Sarkar's favourite horse Laila plays the role of Cupid. Their journey to Shalimar on Laila is the first event where they find solace and attraction for each other. Jindan has an abundance of admirable beauty that captivates attention. She navigates and deals with complex situations with charm which solidifies her embodiment of beauty with brains. Even the king couldn't keep himself from falling in love with her valiant nature and beauty. He expressed, "There aren't too many people who would have dared to disagree with me. You are brave. I like that" (45). Her adamant and passionate love melts King in Gurudwara. Therefore, by breaking all barriers of age and class, Raja Ranjit Singh marries her.

There is something exceptional in Jindan's character that people can like or dislike but cannot ignore. Rani Jindan remains unchained from societal conventions and exposes her feminine sensitivity transparently. She remains unwelcome in an unacquainted royal palace. Mai Nakkain's enmity is a constant hurdle for her to fit in the royalty. She escapes from Mai's conspiracy and court politics by using her strong wit. Her passionate expedition commences with the bride phase. No precious gifts can make her as happy as Sarkar's presence can. She feels jealous like a normal woman at the thought of sharing her husband with other queens. Sarkar finds a true confidant in Jindan and their devotion to Punjab strengthens their bond. He discusses political matters with Jindan which he never did with any other queen. His experience recognizes Jindan's intellect and great learning ability. She only asks for a smart and trustworthy maid rather than a necklace, pearls, and haveli as a wedding present. But she longs for affinity and a sense of belonging at the palace. Her haveli finally gives her the feeling of acceptance and home. Her constant urge is to make Sarkar proud. Looking at these qualities, Sarkar opines, "I love that you aren't greedy and grasping like most other queens. Well, my dearest, you aren't my first wife, but I promise you this: you will be my last. The one who has filled my heart totally" (124). The key to fulfilling Jindan's need lies in emotional understanding and love, depicting the sentiments of women universally.

Some people at the palace are constant companions to Jindan who make many hardships easy for her. Rani Guddan is one of them and the humblest queen of all. From giving her outfit to Jindan to wear and eating in the same thali, without caring about class and position, she proves that humanity is her greatest ornament. Like a sister, Rani Guddan saves her from the envious trap of Mai. She loves Sarkar, yet, accepts that the king doesn't belong to one queen. That's why she shared with Jindan, the plight and agony of being a queen. She exercises her right to become sati after the king's death as Indian society treated sati as goddesses. Widows were socially excluded. Rani Guddan emphasizes highlighting the agony of widows. Referring to widows She opines, "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" (167). The last shot in the movie *Padmavat* portrays women as supremely powerful through their collective decision to perform jauhar, a Rajput practice of mass self-immolation after their husbands' death and defeat (2:29:17- 2:37:48). These kinds of practices were appreciated and respected. Divakaruni sheds light on this practice to show the hardships endured by women in history.

Jindan is a keen observer and a fast learner. She completely understands that she has to be prepared for the obstacles coming with the death of Sarkar. She comprehends this convoluted circumstance silently. Then, she plans to shield herself from treacherous people in the palace. She is also well aware of the promise to Sarkar to safeguard their son. She is unhesitant and strong-willed while admitting her desire to live for herself. She confesses, "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" (170). She suggests women be open about their wants and should start giving preference to what they want to choose for themselves not according to societal norms. She advises women to prioritize their desires and aspirations.

True friendships are nurtured through understanding, kindness, and the simple yet profound act of being there for one another. Women characters in the narrative admire and honour each other, exemplifying the essence of sisterhood. Mangla is not just a maid for Jindan, but also a genuine and responsible friend. She has seen all the ups and downs with Jindan and stayed like an unbreakable rock. She safeguards and guides her to tackle the mean politics of the Palace. They both come from impoverished backgrounds. So, the basic understanding is already constructed. From taking care of Jindan during pregnancy

to bearing banishment together, she never escapes her duty as a friend. Her days and nights are only for her queen. That's why she pleads with the British, "I will not leave! Send me with my queen, wherever you're taking her- even to death" (277). Rani Lakshmi Bai and Jhalkari's story also highlights the importance of friendship as they discard their title of queen and maid to nurture the profound connection of sisterhood. Yogesh Vajpeyi in his article 'Jhansi's Maid Finds Place of Pride' reveals Rani came out of Fort to fight the British and Jhalkari dressed as the Rani to confuse the British about true identity. So, history offers many anecdotes that showcase the celebration of solidarity and mutual respect irrespective of caste and class distinction.

Mai Nakkain is a powerful character who makes necessary decisions at the palace. Nobody except Sarkar could dare question her because of her indomitable attitude. Still, she is insecure about Jindan becoming the favourite queen of Sarkar. The dearth of love and attention is the reason for this behaviour. To satisfy her ego, she plots against Jindan. Her conspiracies make Jindan well-fortified and prepared for future challenges. Women in history suffered a lot due to polygamy. Arshia Sattar in her article "King's Wife, but not Queen of his heart" discusses Kunti's plight and agony as Pandu decides to marry Madri and chooses to sleep with her, leaving Kunti with five sons. Divakaruni gives due importance to portraying every female character skillfully. She makes obvious mention of Sada Kaur, a woman warrior who dressed up as a male to shame enemies on the battlefield. She is also the reason that Raja Ranjit Singh became King. Sarkar has a special place for her in his heart. Sarkar's heart aches with the loss of Sada Kaur, a maternal figure. So, he spends an entire day in Gurudwara to ease his pain.

Jindan balances her tender-heartedness with a decisive and strict approach when the need arises. Jawahar is not only her brother but also her earliest and dearest friend. Despite the familial ties, she ensures her brother is not exempt from punishment for his actions. Her underprivileged background is never a hindrance to her governance skills. Circumstances try to make her weak many times, but she refuses to succumb. According to Rigveda, women are worshipped as goddesses, symbolizing the divine energy of 'Shakti'. Like Goddess Kali, women have an innate capacity to rise up to confront injustice with immense strength and tenacity. She stands boldly against the British and challenges their authority, "You put me in a cage and locked me up. You surrounded me with sentries. You thought you could keep Rani Jindan imprisoned. But look, I got out by magic from under your nose!" (283). She emerges as a lone warrior, despite facing numerous problems in her journey from Patna to Nepal. Her

resilience and strength defy gender norms, she proves women are not delicate or over-sensitive but can be tough as a rock whenever the situation demands. She acknowledges and praises freedom fighters and expresses:

I thrilled to hear of bravery on Nana Saheb, Tantia Tope, Kunwar Singh, Bakht Khan, Liyakat Ali-and Mangal Pandey, the soldier who sacrificed himself to light the first flame. And the magnificent women! Rani Lakshambai of Jhansi and Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh, who fought not only for their people but also for their dispossessed sons. How I wished I could have joined them! (294)

The novel throws light on the experience of motherhood in a woman's life. It is a journey where a woman discovers boundless strength and a symphony of selflessness. The longing for her son echoed in Jindan's heart. She desires her husband's vestige that would live on after him. Jindan and Dalip have a profound emotional connection between mother and child. Sarkar's death shattered her a lot but she promises her son that "I'll live for you, my heart. I'll protect you with the last drop of my blood. If I have to, I'll kill for you" (169). She plays a crucial role in his upbringing and education, striving to prepare him for future responsibilities that came with being a ruler of the Sikh Empire.

A mother is considered the epitome of sacrifice and so is Jindan. At the same time, she condemns male chauvinistic society which never lets women be liberated. She gives up her passionate love for Lal for the sake of her son. However, she does not suppress her thoughts on feminine sexual feelings. She expresses, "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" (242). This discourse advocates Jindan's unhesitant attitude towards feminine passion. Still, she is stuck between societal expectations and personal identity. In *When We Dead Awaken*, Adrienne Rich opines that "The choice still seemed to be between "love"-- womanly, maternal love, altruistic love-- a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism-- a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of her, but justifiably so. For weren't they men, and wasn't that their destiny as womanly, selfless love was ours?" (46-47). The dilemma of Jindan being a responsible mother and sexually liberated woman has also been accentuated in the book. Women often find themselves grappling with the daunting choice between

embracing motherhood or pursuing their individual dreams.

The British snatched away her son and kingdom. Because of prolonged banishment, she meets her son after fourteen years, 'I run my fingers hungrily over his face, his shoulders, his arms, trying to comprehend that it's really my Dalip, so tall and handsome' (300). Reunion is the utmost heart-wrenching moment in the book. In the embrace of a mother's love, a child finds comfort, warmth, and the foundation of lifetime cherished memories. Dalip was deprived of a real sense of belonging and love which he finally found in the lap of his mother. He desires, "I want to hear you breathing in the night, the way I used to when I was a child" (303). She is broken from the inside, watching her son as an English man and the loss of Koh-i-noor which was the prestige of Punjab and a token of love from Maharaja Ranjit Singh. She feels immense pride in being called as 'Mother of the Sikhs'. She reciprocates her affection and respect for the country by requesting Dalip to conduct her last rites in India and placing her ashes next to her beloved husband. She never enjoyed a stable life. Her life is marked by political intrigue, conflict, and devoid of support. Despite the political challenges and migration to Nepal and England, She never gives up her religious commitment to Sikhism. Jindan emerges as a lioness that fights against the British and her treacherous courtiers yet, continued with an indefatigable spirit.

CONCLUSION

The Last Queen is a novel with fierce feminine energy. Divakaruni demonstrates a deep commitment by tracing the mental, physical and intensive emotional journey of Jindan. The book has a profound aroma of feminine feelings. All the female characters have distinct qualities and flaws. But those flaws never overshadow them. They imbibe all humanistic traits that are love, devotion, mutual respect, kindness, jealousy, anger and most importantly strength which makes them larger-than-life characters. There is a flow of sense and sensibility. Women characters go through dilemmas and make difficult choices. The women in the book are not silent spectators but question the patriarchy. Divakaruni is giving recognition to every female character by providing insights into their experiences. The last queen of Punjab, Jindan Kaur leaves unforgettable imprints of bravery, courage, and devotion. Her story is emblematic of resilience and struggles. Jindan's life lacks stability, yet her positivity and gratitude towards life influence women to be strong in chaos. Divakaruni weaves Jindan's feminist lifestyle and undefeated attitude which inspires women even today.

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