



Rewriting Mastani: A Gender Perspective

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Abstract— Peshwa¹ Bajirao I was an early 18th century general of the Maratha Empire of India. Bajirao I is remembered today as an invincible general. However, he is remembered more prominently for his romance with his second wife Mastani, a figure whose identity in history remains largely unrecorded. Over the past few decades, the love story of Bajirao and Mastani has been the subject of several textual and visual mediums but this study will focus a 2012 novel by Kusum Chopra and will look at Mastani to see how the female who remained mysteriously buried in history finds her space in 21st century exotic historical writing. From being a footnote in most histories, described as the mistress, or the court-dancer, to being the protagonist of Chopra's novel *Mastani*, depicted as a fierce princess trained in politics, martial arts and intellectual diplomacy and a true companion to the peshwa, Mastani has come a long way. The paper will try to see, in light of feminism and the self-other dichotomy, how such authorial strategies of recording and recreating the historical female help the narrative thrive in the modern Indian marketplace.



Keywords— gender equality; reduced inequalities; peace, justice and strong institutions; feminism, historical fiction

I. INTRODUCTION

Before delving into the subject of historical fiction based on Mastani, it is important to establish the fact that women's fiction, both that which is written by women and that which is written about women, is undergoing a massive expansion in India, in English as well as other Indian languages. This expansion has led to an explosion in the number of texts written by women circulating in the country. This transition from a male-dominated sphere to an inclusive literary space for both men and women has resulted in writings which open up newer dialogues on the topic of gender.

Although most women's writing in India started as writings of frustrated homemakers, today the scene has transformed drastically from the traditional style. In fiction, the roles of women are no longer those of self-sacrificing, submissive, passive, victimized beings. It is also true that while history and mythology remains largely patriarchal and unchanged, there are more and more attempts made to

rewrite histories and retell myths and allow more visibility and agency to the female gender. Whether it is the retelling of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspective by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni or retellings of the stories of Hindu goddesses like Kali through poetry by Facebook bloggers like Megha Rao, there are definitely voices of dissent that beat down the historical depictions of women as weak and vulnerable. As such, Kusum Chopra's fictional account titled *Mastani*, the text in focus for this paper, is just another attempt at giving voice to the invisible female from Maratha history.

II. MASTANI- THE WARRIOR PRINCESS

Histories are essentially histories of men. According to Joyce Delaney, "There is a noticeable imbalance in the importance given to women as opposed to men's roles." M. K. Tetreal further elaborates the same by stating that a "study of history textbooks revealed that in one that contains 819 pages, the text allotted to references

¹ Peshwa – A title used for the Prime Minister of the Maratha Empire.

to women added up to less than one page. A closer look at another publisher's offering showed that in more than 1,000 pages, there were four illustrations of men for every one of women, and that less than three percent of the text was about women." It is no surprise then that Mastani, the princess of Bundelkhand, daughter of Maharaja Chhatrasal, got dismissed in history as a mere 'dancing girl'.

Most histories which do mention some account of Mastani have details in common. Mastani was born to Maharaja Chhatrasal of Bundelkhand from his Persian Muslim wife called Ruhaani Bai. In the late 1720s, the Bundelkhand army was attacked by Bangash's Dallel Khan and sought help from the Maratha army which was led by Peshwa Bajirao I. Bajirao I came to their aid and defeated Bangash. In gratitude, the Maharaja of Bundelkhand gave him his daughter Mastani as a token of his appreciation. Whether or not Mastani was married off to the peshwa however remains a topic of much debate. Such commodification of women was not uncommon in history. Upon arrival in Pune, Mastani initially lived in Bajirao I's house at Shanivarwada but soon moved to another house that Bajirao I built for her (owing to several disputes within the family on account of Mastani's Muslim lineage) at Kothrud, Pune.

Mastani's status as a court dancer and mistress is highlighted in most histories and art. Keeping in mind the fact that women in the 18th century were far more oppressed than present times, it is quite natural that the history of the time also stayed true to the secondariness of the female. Historian William Irvine in *Later Mughals* states, "Mastani a Kanchani or dancing girl, followed Baji Rao on all his expeditions and never left his side." In a book titled *Peshwanchi Bakhar*, Dr. Bhimrao Kulkarni states clearly that Shahu Maharaj (King Shahu) under whom Bajirao Peshwa I was a prime minister, considered Mastani a kanchani – literally, someone who trades their body for material profit of some kind.

Another aspect of Mastani's life that is highlighted extensively in all records and has become part of Maharashtrian legends is her unparalleled beauty. Mastani is often described as qubool-surat which means someone with an alluring face. She was half Persian which explains her fair skin which is exotic to Indians. In the state of Maharashtra, legend has it that she had a complexion so fair that one could see red betel juice running down her throat when she chewed *paan*². Although this is clearly an exaggeration as such a thing would be anatomically

improbable, it is clearly an indication of how stunningly exotic she appeared to the dusky women of the Deccan plateau. This charm of the exotic beauty is perhaps also the reason why everything else about Mastani was forgotten. Women are often reduced to their physical form and appearance and Mastani was no exception. Over the years, her identity has been solidified into immanence rather than transcendence³.

Kusum Choppra's account however is different. She uses the base of historical records to recreate the love story of Bajirao and Mastani in a new light, but more importantly, to portray Mastani in the garb of the 21st century's idea of an empowered woman. Her Mastani is far from being docile and rides a horse instead of sitting in a *palki*. She is shrewd, even manipulative, and extremely tactful. She is the one with "that sparkling intelligence which amazes everyone with her grasp of not only routine household matters, but also state policy and its issues." (*Mastani*, pp.50)

While these depictions of Mastani are unconventional in themselves, the most remarkable translation of this historical figure occurs when Choppra presents Mastani not as a Muslim court-dancer but rather a princess of Pranami faith which the Maharaja of Bundelkhand practiced. Many historical records state that a young dancer girl named Miskin Mastan Kalavant danced at the wedding of Balaji, the eldest son of Peshwa Bajirao in 1730. This Miskin was paid 233 rupees and given clothes as rewards (Feldhaus, 1998). However, how this Miskin Mastan Kalavant later emerged as Mastani and came to be known as the mother of one of Peshwa Bajirao I's son remains unexplained. Choppra offers an explanation. She boldly states that Mastani is not the same figure as the court-dancer Mastan. Bajirao I was already married to Mastani at the time of his first son's wedding. However, Mastani did not attend this wedding due to opposition from Bajirao's family. Her absence and the presence of Mastan "was the seed for one of the many notorious stories depicting Mastani as a dancing girl."⁴

Mastani's mother was a Persian Muslim called Ruhaani Bai and she was the second wife of Maharaja Chhatrasal. Her father Maharaja Chhatrasal, however, was of Pranami faith. The Pranami faith was started by a saintly leader called Shri Devchandra ji Maharaj. He tried to awaken all people, irrespective of their societal class and religion differences, to their real and true Self through 'Tartam' which means divine knowledge. If Maharaja Chhatrasal was a pranami, then it is most likely that Ruhaani

² A preparation which combines betel leaf with areca nut and often katha paste (catechu) which results in a red colour when chewed.

³ Beauvoir's concepts of the immanent female and the transcendent male from *The Second Sex*.

⁴ Choppra, Kusum, (2012). *Mastani*. Rupa Publications, India. pp 45

Bai also converted to Pranami after her marriage as is common in the Indian society, especially back in the 18th century. Even if one were to believe she escaped conversion, it is highly unlikely that her daughter Mastani was raised as a Muslim. Choppra's Mastani is a pranami who rejects religious distinctions and worships both Krishna and Allah. Her dance is her *aradhana* or form of worship. As Choppra states, "She would be so lost in prayer and bhakti, she would break into dance, lost to the world." This led her father to warn her against being *mast*⁵ like that and he eventually, along with everyone else, called her Mastani."

Mastani is always identified as a Muslim in historical records. In fact, some accounts go so far as to accuse Mastani of having taught Bajirao I to drink alcohol and to eat meat- immoral acts which they believed could only be taught by a Muslim. Choppra's novel notes that the pranami faith precluded both meat and wine consumption. As such, Mastani could not have been the one to encourage the peshwa into the consumption of either.

If Mastani was a princess of Pranami faith trained in swordsmanship and martial arts then why was it that Mastani was dismissed in history as a Muslim court-dancer and the mistress of Bajirao I? One possible explanation could be that Mastani was the 'other' to the self which was the Maratha Chitpavan Brahmin society of Peshwa Bajirao I. Ideas of similarity and difference are central to the way in which we achieve a sense of identity and social belonging (Jenkins, 1996). Identities are necessarily constructed in terms of dichotomies. As Bauman explains, "Woman is the other of man, animal is the other of human, stranger is the other of native..." (Bauman, 1991). As such, Muslim is the other of Brahmin Hindu, court-dancer is the other of respectable princess, mistress is the other of wife, Persian beauty is the other threatening the Indian self, passive object is the other of active subject. Mastani's identity in history is constructed in an effort to prove her the 'other', and thereby prove that she doesn't deserve a place in history; that her history is one that does not deserve to be noted as part of the Maratha history. Not only does this reduce Mastani to the status of a dancer (a depiction which is especially highlighted in a lot of paintings of Mastani) and a temptress, but also dismisses any romantic relationship between Bajirao I and Mastani and reduces their relationship to a sexual negotiation.

Attempts at erasing Mastani's identity from history seem to have been successful. The Mastani Mahal which was constructed for Mastani at Kothrud, Pune by Peshwa Bajirao suffered utter neglect and lay forlorn in the

wilderness of Kothrud until it was found by Mr. Kelkar in the 20th century and dismantled and restored partly at Raja Dinkar Kelkar Museum in Pune. A Marathi historical record titled *Peshwe Sharanyacha Itihas* by Pramod Oak states that most chronicles and other historical documents about Mastani have been destroyed. In 1812, Peshwa Baji Rao II ordered the demolition of the Mastani Mahal in Shaniwarwada and Mastani's house from the village of Pabal. This led to the destruction of several other records of Mastani.

It is also true that Mastani's history was erased not only to remove any blemish from the history of the Brahmins (for any interaction, especially matrimonial relation between a Brahmin and a supposed Muslim would blemish their reputation) but also because she was a woman, and women's histories are often neglected on account of the inferior position offered to the gender in patriarchal societies. This is what probed Choppra to write in the garb of historical romantic fiction an account of Mastani's life. The blurb of her book reads:

"Until recently, history had relegated Mastani to forgotten pages as a 'dancing girl' ... a myth kept alive by lack of evidence about her true place in the Peshwa household. Daughter of Maharaj Chhatrasal of Bundelkhand, Mastani married Peshwa Bajirao I when he was in power, but she was obscured almost to anonymity by several forces. Her life as a strategist, both on the field and at home was veiled with intrigue due to the jealousies of women in zenanas and power-hungry relatives in the peshwai. What was Mastani's story? Was being a true companion to the Peshwa as well as his most loved wife a threat large enough to snuff her out in the pages of history?"

Kusum Choppra's depiction of Mastani as a strong, bold and shrewd companion to the peshwa is in accordance with the 21st century idea of an empowered woman. With the advent of social media, dialogues on gender are not only louder than ever but also travel across spaces faster. In India, the idea of what constitutes an "ideal woman" (if there even exists such a thing) is fast changing. Women in urban setups especially, are vocal about their identities and rights and openly resist patriarchy. As such, there is more openness among modern readers of Mastani to embrace the empowered princess and reject the submissive dancer-girl.

Choppra's work is rated 3.9 and 4.1 out of 5 on Goodreads and Amazon India respectively, a clear

⁵ word originates from the Sufi term mast-Allah meaning "intoxicated with God."

testimony of the popularity of the work. Her retelling of Mastani and Bajirao I's love story from a feminist perspective allows the story to survive in the 21st century. It gives women the history that has been denied to them for centuries. Presenting history in the form of a romance allows the exotic recreation of Mastani's identity which translates itself in a million dollar blockbuster film by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, one of India's leading filmmakers. Mastani is only one among many princesses whose histories have been buried by patriarchy. Historical scholarship has always lacked universality and objectivity because it was "based on male experience, placed men at the centre and as a measure of all things human, thereby leaving out half of humankind." (Bock, 1991.) Chopra's writing of Mastani's history is a voice of dissent which rejects patriarchy and finds its way into mainstream Indian women's writing in English. As Nietzsche says in the Use and Abuse of History, "You can explain the past only by what's most powerful in the present." Perhaps the 21st century idea of an empowered female allows Mastani's history to be recreated in newer ways.

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