



TRADITION, SUBJUGATION, AND RESISTANCE: RANI JINDAN'S RELATIONAL AGENCY AND FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE LAST QUEEN*

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Abstract

*The present paper examines the representation of female agency in the novel *The Last Queen* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni through the lens of feminist historical criticism. Drawing on the theoretical conceptions of feminist thinkers, like Peta Bowden and, Jane Mummery, the study explores the multifaceted ways through which patriarchal subjugation, colonial exploitation, and cultural norms restricted women in the 19th century Punjab. While Jindan emerges as a resilient figure who strategically resists and negotiates these restrictions. Despite the historical importance, the journey of Jindan's strength and resilience has not been studied enough either in history or literature. The paper therefore reimagines Jindan as a symbol of resistance and women's empowerment, highlighting her relational autonomy based on notions of care, responsibility, and commitment, which contrasts the Western ideology of autonomous and individual agency. By centring a female character at the epicentre of feminist historiography, the study challenges the dominant male-centred historical narrative that pushed women to the peripheries of power and erased their contribution in shaping our history.*

Keywords

Female Agency, Historiography, Patriarchy, Resilience, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The suppression of women has long been one of the persistent concerns in literature, serving as a recurring theme across different historical periods and cultural contexts. From Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) to Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Hold No Terrors* (1980), canonical literature has consistently depicted women's struggle against patriarchal subjugation. The oppression dates back to centuries when male-oriented societies and their misogynist socio-political structures discarded female autonomy, voice, agency, and limited her participation in social affairs. Historically, women have been denied equal access to education, employment and reproductive rights. They were strictly restricted behind walls of domesticity, obliged to perform traditional gender roles as mothers or caretakers without any privilege to make choices of their own. Various religious doctrines, legal frameworks, and societal norms, all male-centred not only reinforced systemic marginalization but also erased women's contribution towards society and mankind. With extended access to education and increased sense of consciousness, early feminists gradually began to question the conservative gender roles and challenged the injustices endured on women from centuries. Their initial apprehension of layered dominance and sustained suppression decoded oppression as neither innate nor individual, but a structured conditioning that degraded



women—a conceptual recognition that catalysed emergence of a formal feminist literary movement aimed at interrogating oppression and precipitating a call for agency.

Feminism is a social, political, and intellectual movement that advocates equality of the sexes by challenging systemic oppression of women. As an intellectual movement, it seeks to bring an end to sexism, sexist exploitation, and gendered oppression, ultimately achieving radical gender equality in both law and practice. Feminist thinkers highlighted that how male-oriented institutions have historically glorified men and masculinity while relegating women to inferior realms. Feminist literary scholarship has thus played a crucial role in scrutinizing the concealed ways in which women have been silenced, marginalized, and denied autonomy. The movement exposes both visible and invisible forms of oppression and has also empowered them to question conservative traditional roles, discard the cult of domesticity, resist subjugation, and reclaim agency to make their own decisions. While feminist movements began mainly in Western countries during late 19th or early 20th centuries, women in colonized countries like Indian subcontinent faced double oppression, firstly under indigenous patriarchy, and secondly under British Colonial rule. Though, Jindan life history takes place in 19th century Punjab, her struggles connect to the debates of women's freedom in Indian subcontinent even today. Issues like women's struggle for political participation, control over their own bodies, and conflict between tradition and personal freedom are still being fought over by women in India. This makes Jindan's life journey relevant to today's feminist discussions. Her life shows that women in colonized nations were resisting gender oppression long before feminist movement officially came to the region.

The first wave feminism, roughly emerging around late 19th or early 20th century, foregrounds women's structural oppression by exposing legal, political, and social inequalities. Building on the foundations of first wave, second wave feminist scholarship further criticized oppression by situating it within broader social structures and called for a collective action aimed at structural change, legal advancement, as well as political equality. This phase highlighted that women's individual struggles are interconnected and rooted in patriarchal structures, advocating active resistance and self-determined agency in order to become fully autonomous individuals capable of shaping their own destinies. As conceptualised by mainstream feminist theorists, female agency refers to ability of women to make independent decisions, exercise control over her life, and act with purpose and autonomy across the society. It signifies the freedom and capacity to make choices that shapes their destinies, free from coercive societal pressures, cultural norms, or patriarchal authority. This involves pursuing education, careers, lifestyles, or relationships, domains where women have historically been denied full freedom of choice. Female agency asserts a woman's right to define her own identity (deciding where and how to live) and other aspects of life. At its core, female agency embodies freedom to act and the power to resist, challenging the systemic barriers such as gender stereotypes, discrimination, and institutionalised patriarchy while promoting self-determination, independence, and liberation.

Echoing this context, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021) offers a compelling narrative where theoretical articulations of oppression and agency find early historical representation. The novel delineates the multi-layered oppression imposed on women in conservative 19th century Punjab, where patriarchal authority, colonial exploitation, and culturally sanctioned gender norms deprived them of autonomy and subjectivity. In contrast to the other female characters caught in constraints of patriarchy, Jindan emerges as a resilient figure embodying a form of resistance and agency long before formal waves of feminism in India. Her life narrative anticipates the dynamics of resistance and self-assertion later conceptualized by feminist theory. The paper carefully reads the novel and uses feminist historical criticism to explore the way Divakaruni's fiction challenges the historical narratives written from a male



perspective. By applying Peta Bowden conception of relational agency, and Jane Mummary's ideas on listening to the marginalized voices, the study shows how historical novel can create feminist awareness by revisiting historical accounts that have formally being erased. The paper further explicates that women in colonized nations were not merely passive victims of patriarchal exploitation but active agents of socio-cultural transformation, ultimately contributing to postcolonial and feminist literary discourse.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an American poet, professor, and distinguished author of Indian descent whose fiction consistently foregrounds the inner lives of South Asian women. Her works spanning across short stories, poetry, children literature, and novels often blend realism with mythology and history, unveiling the deep rooted oppression women undergo due to patriarchal traditions, displacement, and familial expectations. Many of her works like *Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *Palace of Illusions: A Novel* (2008), and *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) present strong women characters who navigate complex social roles, struggles, and cultural boundaries, exhibiting a sense of agency. Through their resilience and self-determination, these characters embody agency, making Divakaruni's fiction a significant contribution to feminist and Diasporic literature. This focus resonates with Margaret Atwood's claims in *Negotiating with Dead: A Writer on Writing* (2002), that women writers bear significant responsibility to reclaim and amplify their silenced narratives. Building on this idea, Divakaruni's feminist reinterpretation of history not only recounts the contribution of women in history but pays homage to the saga of unsung warriorresses from the glorious past.

Through her works Divakaruni recovers the overshadowed female perspectives while shaping the way in which history and mythologies are understood. This approach makes space for the alternative voices of strength, resistance, and identity. Furthering this perspective, Rashmi Luthra, Associate Professor, University of Michigan, and active researcher in field of Gender and Media Studies, in her research article "Clearing the Sacred Grounds: Women Centred Interpretation of Indian Epics" published in *Feminist Formations* (2014), opines that while reimagining the great Indian epic Mahabharata from a feminist perspective, Divakaruni shuns or discards the traditional phallogocentric narratives of recounting history through glorifying men and warfare. She instead brings the subjugated women like Panchali, and Kunti, at the nuclei of her attention. Rashmi Luthra further contends that by bringing oppressed women at the epicentre of history and myths, the author vindicates a sense of resistance and defiance that female characters actually embodied in historical fiction. Drawing on such narrative explorations, the paper explores similar patterns of oppression imposed on women and further identifies resembling resistance and courage in Jindan, reflecting the ways she navigates adversities in orthodox society.

The Last Queen (2021) is a historical narrative that delves into the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, last wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh (Sarkar), regent queen of Punjab and mother of the last Sikh ruler Maharaja Dalip Singh. The novel is bifurcated into four sections entitled 'Girl' (1826-1834), 'Bride' (1835-1839), 'Queen' (1840), and 'Rebel' (1860-1863), that chronicle Jindan's journey from childhood in Gujranwala to marriage with Sarkar in Lahore, her reign as regent queen of the Sikh Empire, and her struggles in exile. The novel opens in Gujranwala, Pakistan, where Jindan is born to Manna Singh Aulakh, royal kennel keeper in the court of Sarkar. Raised on the outskirts of a small village, she shares a close bond with her mother Biji and her brother Jawahar, who sows the seeds of resilience and defiance in her from childhood. However, Jindan's life takes a dramatic turn when her father forces her to move to Lahore, where she catches the eyes of Sarkar and eventually marries him. From a modest background, Jindan initially enjoys the period of relative happiness and stability as being Sarkar's youngest wife and favourite queen. But, gradually she is introduced to the treacherous world of Lahore's Royal court recognizing its complexities and rivalries. Following Sarkar's demise in 1839, both the royal court and Jindan's life descend into



upheaval, she experiences a series of violent murders, bloody struggles in pursuit of throne and familial betrayals. In the concluding sections of novel, Jindan undergoes a perilous journey, from being held captive in Chunar Fort, to taking asylum in forts of Dogra Empire, escaping to Nepal, and finally reaching England, where she dies a tragic death.

The novel begins with Jindan narrating her early life as a feisty nine-year old girl, and audacious sister who joins her brother Jawahar in his expeditions stealing fruits from orchards and often defends him in his brawls which contrasts the disciplined and rigid behaviour expected of her. Though spirited and valiant, her childhood is marked by forced discipline and behavioural expectations imposed within their father's modest household. Jindan watches her elder sister Balbir being trained to follow a tedious routine of cooking, cleaning and serving the household without complaint. As soon as Balbir reaches marriageable age, her education is deemed unnecessary, forcing her to withdraw her formal schooling. This withdrawal from education is never voluntary but enforced by gendered expectations exerted on women under the guise of tradition. Being submissive, Balbir prioritizes her father's expectations, and begins to prepare herself for a forced marriage and domestic responsibilities over her intellectual or personal growth. She is indoctrinated to become a subservient wife and daughter who accepts the man chosen for her without any complaint, with her silence, submission, and emotional endurance praised as feminine traits.

For centuries, cultural norms have been construed on the notion that women's primary role is within the homes, as caretaker, wife, and mother, therefore opportunities like education and employment were considered unnecessary for these roles. Such beliefs not only confined women to a cult of domesticity, where patriarchal authorities (fathers and male guardians) made decisions about marriages, but also objectified them as property to be exchanged for the benefit the family, ultimately pushing them into servitude at the stake of their own careers. As Peta Bowden and Jane Mummery posits:

Think for instance, of how girls may be socialized to expect that they will get married ("every" girl dreams of marriage), have children ("every" girl want babies), and play a significant role in servicing the needs of their husbands and households. Such expectations mean that girls-even if they have a chance-may not commit to developing or furthering their own careers (seeing life in the public domain not as intrinsically fulfilling but only as instrumentally valuable), instead often encouraged by their families and culture, focusing on preparing themselves for finding a suitable marriage partner (Bowden, 126).

Such indoctrination underscores the domestic sphere as inextricably tied to women, echoing conservative ways in which they are constantly moulded to fit as ideal daughters, wives, and mothers at the stake of their own choices and careers. The training of Balbir to embrace cultural expectations resonates that sex goes beyond biological differences; instead, it is a social construct that teaches, shapes, and trains a girl to behave in a specific way.

Unlike Balbir, Jindan shares a complex relationship with her father. Throughout the novel, their bond juxtaposes deep affection with significant conflict. Paralleling Balbir's routine as ideal daughter, Manna restrains Jindan from attending school and expects her to marry whomever he decides. Disrupted formal education, however, does not halt her intellectual or personal development, as she shifts her learning from institutional spaces to experiential ones. When he forces her to move to Lahore to find a suitor, she resists saying "you'll have to drag me to Lahore, every step" (Divakaruni, 24), and compels him to take Jawahar with them. Manna not only disapproves her relationship with Sarkar, but also arranges a suitor, which she refuses to concede



and plans to elope with Sarkar, demonstrating a commitment to her desires. Despite societal pressure and familial constraints, she discards feminine obligation of passively accepting male head's decision, instead puts her own choices before patriarchal responsibilities. Jindan recognizes her desire for autonomy and emotional fulfilment, asserting her right to act upon it. She elopes with Sarkar, culminating in their marriage; this demonstrates that her spirit is not merely rebellious but grounded in conscious, intentional decision-making that drives her life in the deliberate direction. Noting her ideas on the moral expectation and agent responsibility, Peta Bowden in *Understanding Feminism* (2009), describes Action-based commitment to reassert her identity. Peta Bowden remarks that:

The agent not only has to be able to make sense of and rank her own needs and desire, but also have the self-esteem to recognize that she can rightfully have and pursue her own needs and desires. In addition she has to be able to couple her needs and desires to possible actions and, more generally, see the possibility for action, as well as weighing up pros and cons and eventually deciding on specific actions (Bowden, 125).

Her firm decision to marry Sarkar manifests Action based agency exercised through deliberate moves rather than passive acceptance of circumstances.

The following section of the novel traces Jindan's life from chaste girl to youngest Queen of Sarkar in Lahore's Royal Court. She exhibits unwavering loyalty towards her husband, and constantly supports him in his administration. Though their relationship is deeply influenced by rivalries, internal conflicts, and external infiltration prevailing in the empire, she still manages to resolve these challenges alongside Sarkar. However Sarkar's sudden demise leaves his widowed queens prey to court intrigues, colonial invasion and familial disputes. Widowed queens are forced to commit sati—a dreadful and dehumanizing tradition that relies on the systemic erasure of women's existence after the death of their husbands. Many of his concubines and queens, like Rani Guddan, are heavily intoxicated with opium and dragged to the funeral pyre to perform sati. Divakaruni presents this forceful intoxication of victims as a symbol of silencing female will and Guddan's death of as a deeply unsettling example of patriarchal brutality.

The notion of Sati is predicated on the belief that existence of a woman is inextricably tied to her husband, leaving her no purpose without him. It exemplifies the control patriarchy exerts over women's bodies, leaving a small room for them to exercise their own will over their lives and bodies. Their actions are interpreted and appropriated by dominant groups, making it impossible for the women to speak for themselves. The Royal court secludes them behind 'pardah,' restraining them to paltry visibility and limited participation. It further confines them to separate accommodation 'zenana,' regulating their mobility and interaction with the outer world. The confinement of women in 'zenanas' functions as socio-cultural mechanism through which men restricts their influence to the private sphere, where they exert control mediated through domestic roles of nurturing, caregiving, and household management. While explaining her conceptions on Countering Oppression, Jane Mummery in her book, *Understanding Feminism* (2009), sheds light on the segregation of public and private spheres that ultimately renders men's control over women. She argues that:

The dominant liberal social ideology holds that activities in the public sphere, the realm of economic production and political decision-making, are more significant and valuable than those of private sphere of family nurturance and personal life. The accompanying designation of the public sphere as the



location of men and their activities, and the private sphere as that of women, enshrines men's dominance in social life (Bowden, 18).

The confinement of women in private spheres ultimately leads towards institutionalizing gendered hierarchies that ensure their autonomy remains limited within domestic realms only. In contrast to other queens, Jindan refuses to commit sati and decides to remain a royal widow. She challenges conservative norms of marital bonds, traditional expectations of celibacy or seclusion, demonstrating conscious rejection of cultural prescriptions. While courtiers try to hide her identity behind 'pardah,' she casts off her veil and steps out of 'zenana' into the public sphere to protect her young son Dalip and safeguard the interests of her empire.

The novel's final sections delineate Jindan's tumultuous journey from monarch to exiled queen and desperate mother separated from her child. After Sarkar's demise, Lahore's Royal Court, once a place of splendor and luxury, becomes a site of political manipulation where Dogra ministers and British officials collaborate to weaken her influence. With Naunihal crowned as king, under his policy of 'state security,' her access to the Royal treasury is blocked and her Sheesh Mahal is put under strict surveillance, restricting even her physical movements. Jindan's fall from power strips her of grandeur, authority, and autonomy. Following courtly killings, Dalip is coronated as king, reclaiming Jindan's position as Regent Queen. Shortly after the coronation, Jindan enters a relationship with court's influential minister Lal Singh and conceives a child with him which turns out to be one of the most controversial chapters of her life. As a widow bearing socio-political responsibilities, she decides to abort. Such conservative norms reflect powerful traditional mechanisms of controlling women's sexuality, their bodies, and the choices regarding pregnancy. The sexist restraints imposed on her resonate with Jane Mummery's stance on women's embodiment, in *Understanding Feminism* (2009), explaining the ways where, "Women cannot rely, for example, on having the right to decide whether or not to start, continue or terminate a pregnancy or even whether or not to have sex" (Bowden, 45). Such conservative norms enact two-fold oppression of a women's body, firstly denying basic right of companionship, and secondly turning her body into political landscape to strip her of authority. Instead of recognizing her emotional and personal needs, royal society condemns her, marking her as a blemish on ideal royal widowhood. These accusations do not break Jindan, rather, they augment her affection for Dalip and strengthen her devotion to the Empire.

Serving as the Sikh Empire's only queen during a brief reign, Jindan is imprisoned at Chunar Fort from where she stages a dramatic escape and flees Nepal. Even though in exile, she constantly strives to meet Dalip, and secure the ascendancy of Sikh Empire by returning to her terrain. Jindan's dedication and care towards both Dalip and her people reflect that agency is not primarily autonomous but often relational and responsibility driven. This notion converges meaningfully with Bowden's concept of "Care-Based agency" as, "agency, in this context, comes to point to decision making that actually factors in human dependency and values social relations and that response to both contextual factors and the very specific needs and desires of others" (Divakaruni, 131). Jindan envisions herself as a caretaker of her kingdom, bearing responsibility to defend her people against colonial invasion. Throughout the narrative, she endures sufferings like exile, imprisonment, and separation from her son and homeland, yet prioritizes their safety above her personal desires. Throughout the novel Jindan shows her resilience through relationships, and not by acting individually. This parallels Bowden's concept of Care-based agency unlike western ideas of individual autonomy. When she elopes to marry Sarkar, she does it because both of them want each other. Even when she refuses to commit sati she does it to protect her son Dalip, and to take care of her people. Her escape from Chunar fort is again a deliberate step to reunite with her son and to secure sovereignty of her empire. Jindan sacrifices her



relationship with Lal to terminate crisis in Sikh Empire. This recurrent motif highlights that she is most powerful when she acts with care and her responsibilities towards others. It challenges the western feminist thought who articulate that women need to be independent and individual to be autonomous. Jindan's relationships never weakens her, they instead build her stronger, which highlight a different model of feminism based on Indian sub continental values of family, relationship, and responsibility. While both British historical narratives and Indian national historical accounts focused on masculine warrior ship, the study amplifies role of women in shaping our history which has largely been overlooked.

Divakaruni's retelling of Rani Jindan in *The Last Queen* reimagines her defiance who actively destabilizes oppressive structures of gender inequality, cultural constraints, and colonial rule imposed upon her. In a research article entitled "The Lost World of Rani Jindan: Rewriting Women's History in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*" published in *International Journal of Religion* (2024) Surbhi Saraswat, a scholar of Women's History and Gender Studies, observes that, Divakaruni places Jindan at the centre of two lost worlds, the crumbling Sikh Empire, and the intimate loss of a mother whose child has been taken away from her, alienated, and manipulated in a foreign land so far that he loses connection to his roots. Saraswat argues that through the novel, Divakaruni deliberately highlights Jindan's unyielding spirit, her devotion to Punjab, unwavering affection for her son, and fierce determination. Jindan's tragic demise shortly after reuniting with her son not only symbolizes the doom of an era but also signifies the decease of an enduring spirit of agency she embodied. The novel stands as a testament to a valiant girl, affectionate mother, and audacious queen with unwavering loyalty to her people. By doing a feminist historical study the paper instigates reader to question the dominant historical narratives where achievements and contribution of women have been neglected.

Conclusion:

To conclude, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* deftly portrays female agency through Jindan's determined and resilient character. The novel represents her as an epitome of agency, who thrives to overcome complexities of gender, power dynamics, and colonial encroachment in a male-dominated 19th century. The study adds something new to feminist research by describing a differentiated form of resistance which arises from caring for others, taking responsibilities, and being connected to people, which juxtaposes the western model of an independent and separated agent. The paper scrutinizes the ways Divakaruni's depiction remarks her strategic acumen, political engagement, and personal sacrifices that fuel her resistance. In sum, *The Last Queen* not only resurrects a historical figure to reconsider the roles of women in shaping history but also serves as a testament to the resilience and agency a woman embodies while enduring overwhelming struggles and odds. By focusing on the life narrative of a real historical figure the paper argues two dimensions, firstly, the way colonizing powers erased women's contribution, and secondly, the way Indian historical accounts silenced role of women in shaping the glorious past of nation.

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Article Received:15/12/2025

Article Accepted:22/12/2025

Published Online: 26/12/2025

To Cite the Article: *Kour, Ivleen, Kour, Dilpreet and Shah, Sadaf.* “Tradition, Subjugation, and Resistance: Rani Jindan’s Relational Agency and Feminist Historiography in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Last Queen*.” *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-3, December, 2025, 91-98. www.liter-arycognizance.com

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