

First a Woman then a Warrior: Disassembling Stereotype in Jaishree Misra's Novel *Rani*

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Abstract

The present has always the essence of past which continues to live simultaneously with present. The past therefore has a significant place in the construction of the present. Historicism as a critical approach refers to historical perspective. It challenges the linear and uniform progressive approach to history. It castigates the notion of truth, fact and rationality; and it argues for the historical contexts of knowledge and truth. *Rani* is a historical novel which deals with the story of Rani Laxmibai, popularly known as the freedom fighter of India. She has always been idolized as a goddess who has fought for the freedom of her country. Jaishree Misra speaks of her personal affairs besides her involvement with the public world. She has re-created the history behind the life of this warrior and has rendered her story as a common girl who goes through all significant phase of human life. The present paper intends to explore how a warrior's life has found all the voices of a woman that has been denied under the curtain of history. However, her fictionalized life might have some resemblance or no resemblance with her actual life.

Keywords: Stereotype, body, womanhood, sexuality, motherhood.

Introduction:

When the name Lakshmibai is taken, the only image appears is of a lady garbed in armed costume as a valiant 'warrior', a 'queen' who fought squarely for her people. She is considered an epitome of assiduous valour and tenacity; she is more of the goddess 'shakti' (energy/power) than a woman. Literature and writing has paved path for the possibilities of re-representation of such universal portrayal by re-contextualizing their lives discretely. Jaishree Mishra, the Indian Malayali writer, writing in English, has rendered Lakshmibai with entirely humanist aspects with all its attributes. She has delineated a woman Lakshmibai rather than a warrior.

Historical novel is genre that has created a space for the writer to have a play of their imagination. It is quite possible that it might have some truth in that period of time because a writer does a meticulous research work on that specific content. The novelist has also explored the place and the manuscripts related to her directly as well as to her time-period. It is indeed her imagination but there might be some reality. In her introduction of the book, she has ascribed the sources that have motivated her to bring out a woman out of a stereotype of a warrior and to create the sort of relationship with her advisor. She has explored her womanly peculiarities such as maternity, womanhood, female body and female sexuality in a broader level with the embedded relationship with Captain Ellis. The stereotype of a warrior with a sole desire to fight for others has been shaken if not completely broken.

There have been many stereotypes associated with women. There are notions of bad/good women and moral/immoral women; women are always seen through the lens of these binaries. A woman with humility, submissiveness, yielding conduct, conforming and without assertion of her own is considered good woman; while a woman with radical attitude, asserting, less submissive without any conformation, opposing and fighting does not fit to the society. A good wife to her husband, a good mother and daughter comes under the phrase of good or moral woman; whereas a resisting woman for her own desires, a fighting woman against the societal oppression and violence strive to find a place for themselves in society. Societal norms label certain women as good such as wife, conforming daughter and mother and some women as bad or immoral such as prostitutes, priest women, lower working class women and to a certain extent single women. In order to fit in one of the criteria of good women, they are compelled to make many sacrifices amongst which death of their own desires take the primordial place. They strangle the desire of fulfilling their own dreams just to be confined to fit into the notion of a good woman. A good woman has always to be associated with men whether as her father, husband or son. If she is not associated with men, she hardly finds her own respectful existence. But she should not be associated with many men except her husband as it will stain her character. Therefore a good wife, daughter or mother has a more respected place than a single woman who is striving for her dreams. Even in becoming a good wife, she has to conform to the desire of her husband silencing her own desires in terms of body and sexuality too. It is this stereotype under which our 'sheroes' have been delineated silencing her body

sacrificing for her people to save her mother land. Laxmibai is a woman who has an immense courage to stand for her land and people; she is depicted in papers and historical manuscripts as a woman who fought bravely for her son to enthrone him for her people. Her womanly traits such as her motherly experiences, body needs or to be specific her sexuality have been away from those scripts. Indeed the historical manuscripts did not need this sort of exploration but the literary manuscripts could have done it but it is hardly anywhere. The most popular poem in Hindi titled Jhansi Ki Rani; the title itself suggests the queen of a specific land with the duty of its protection. Throughout the poem, her valorous courage to fight has been depicted as 'khoob larhi mardani woh toh Jhansi wali rani thi'. She therefore has always been depicted as a fighter and warrior not as a woman. The novelist has rendered her character in a more humanist and womanly manner. She is more a woman than a mere fighter.

The novel opens with the letter of the advisor, and then delves deep into the time of Mani, the name given to the girl Manikarnika or Lakshmibai. She lives with her cousin Tantiya in the palace of Peshwa where she befriends with Nana. With them, she is educated well and more independently than any of the girls of her own time but at home only. She is brought up under the shadow of her baba, Moropant Tambe. Her aunt, Asharfi-bua wants her get married to Gangadhar albeit her baba resists it as she is very young. At the end he is convinced for it; her aunt tells her about her marriage to Raja Gangadhar. The very thought of marriage renders a sort of sensation into her:

On the one hand, the very sound of words like 'marriage' and 'husband' made her want to retch out but, on the other hand, she rather liked the idea of a raja coming from a faraway land to seek her hand in marriage. If truth were to be told, she had already attributed to raja of Jhansi with a face – oldish, but in a nice benign way and with soft, kind eyes that were devoted, already, to her. (*Rani* 35)

Mani is seen pondering over the thought of her marriage to raja, she is excited to get married and think of her husband appearance as was said by others. She imagines her to be an old person as she has heard of him. She thinks of it as any woman would have thought. Once she gets married, her name is replaced by Lakshmibai and she is crowned as 'Rani of Jhansi'. She is more excited to get married than to be a Jhansi ki Rani.

The womanly attributes have been given a meticulous attention in the re-construction of the character of a warrior, Manikarnika. She is a woman first then a warrior. It is the daily experiences that a woman goes through makes her a warrior. A woman is seen always in terms of men, what a man is not is a woman and this sort of binaries continue to exist everywhere. Marriage is one of the chief areas that justifies and decides the place of a woman. Her marriage is a sort of renew of the alliance with Peshwa's court as her father had been the king's senior political advisor. When Mani gets married to Gangadhar, the thought of being with her husband and of her desires for him have begins to interest her with a greater intensity. Her relationship with her husband is not like what she has thought of. She finds him different from what she has thought; he is short heighted old man before him she leans in order to come equal to him. He maintains a distance from her that she wants to end. She considers her young age as a hindrance in the path of their conjugal life. She thinks of the ways to allure her husband towards her as any woman would have done but she fails in her ways. When she turns seventeen, she observes herself and tries to find out the reason.

Slipping off her robes, she examined her body closely in the full-length three-way mirror. What could see were well-rounded breasts and hips that had filled out, making her waist look even slimmer than before. She had over recent months, seen the areolae of her nipples grow and darken, becoming soft discs of dark gold against the wheaten sheen of her skin; that triangle at the base of her stomach turn to secretive black velvet. . . . Surely, her husband would find her beautiful if he would care to look! (*Rani* 127)

The bold description of a queen's or a warrior's (to be worshipped) body let this novel banned in the eastern state like Uttar Pradesh. People could not digest the ruin of the ideal image of the warrior that they have been sustaining from a long period of time; they just want to see only the one side of that lady is her sacrificing attitude for her people and mother land. But there are the possibilities that a queen might have gone through all those experiences that any woman could have. Observing herself, Mani feels that she has grown enough to begin her conjugal life and decides that she will take step for this, if not her husband. She starts speculating the possible reasons behind such attitude of her husband. She thinks that earlier she was not grown up or matured enough to spend time with her husband who is not elder but older too for a little girl, Mani; but now she is matured enough to take this step to begin her relationship. She goes to her husband and tries to begin her new life, but she finds him cold and considers it his ill health, preventing him for that beginning.

Simultaneously her encounter with her political advisor is shown. Captain Ellis has already seen her in the wedding but only from one side never completely. Gangadhar would always have a normal discussion with him and would always have his Rani assist them. She is there in the conversation and participates in it but is seen from purdah so that he is not to see her. Ellis reads about the ban of punishment of sepoys. There is a peace between the Britishers and Jhansi regime because they consent to the wish of the Europeans as far as it does not involve a big damage to their own land. When he continues the talk, she also takes part in it with her own reflections on it. The flogging of sepoys could not leave her affected. She argues with her husband that they cannot flog them to which he replies that the company soldiers will not have a say of them. However her seventeenth birthday arrives and she joins her husband in the court where the celebration is to take place; the European councils also join them. Mani has seen Ellis but only slightly, this time she yearns to see him fully.

Lakshmibai, seated behind the silken curtains along with the other women who were in purdah, observed the Englishman seat himself on the carved gilt chair reserved for foreign visitors. . . . Suddenly she was curious to see his entire face and peered through the thin silk, leaning forward. Through the blue gauze of the purdah, his countenance seemed pleasant enough. (*Rani* 135)

She is shown to be affected by the personality of the Englishman, Ellis. She even compares him to Gangadhar's fastidiousness. She observes a sort of melancholic sorrow on his face and tries to conceive it. She does not want her Jhansi sepoys face the corporeal punishment and decides she will have a talk with Ellis regarding this however her husband never takes interest in it. In the meanwhile she listens to the death of her uncle who was almost like a father to her; Nana comes to stay with her in Motimahar and Tantiya and her father are about to join him. At the news of his death, she needed her husband support but he remains unable to do it and sends her to Sundar, her maid.

Womanhood is one of the important aspects that a woman novelist delineates through her writings. Womanhood etymologically refers to the state of being an adult woman; it shows a female's journey from being a girl to a growing adult woman. Mani observes how her body changes with the passage of time. It is first the body that turns a girl to a mature lady; and it is the girl herself at first who gets to know about the changes. Later the experiences turn her to a mature woman. Waiting for her husband makes her strong enough to take step on her own to begin their conjugal life. Woman is never a woman if she is not associated with a man; a woman is a daughter, wife and a mother, the respected ones. In all of the roles, she is associated with men whether as her father, husband or son. Rani of Jhansi is Mani as belonging to her father and Lakshmi Bai as belonging to her husband. At first she lives for her father, gets married on his will however her willingness remains their hidden; after marriage she begins her new identity as wife to her husband and queen to his people who naturally become hers. Her journey to womanhood has been well delineated through Mani's life. It clearly shows that before being a warrior she is a woman. It is her experiences that transform her to a warrior from a queen. It is responsibility that that transform her to a queen from a little girl, Mani.

It has been said that a woman writes through her body; her writing therefore claims all the experiences that a woman goes through. The novelist has presented the ways how a woman starts observing her body as it attains the maturity and full growth towards youth. She has given ample opportunity to escalate bodily needs and female sexuality. She is glad being queen or rather convinces herself being happy in her new life but she remains alone. Loneliness haunts her and she acknowledges it. She spends most of the time crawling on bed and thinking of her husband. As a woman, she does have the experiences of her bodily demands which remain

unreciprocated due to her husband negligence. The feeling of loneliness begins killing her from inside; she misses her childhood friend Nana and Tantiya who are now replaced by her handmaidens. The pangs of deep desolation leave her shattered and that make her to fill the gap with different things. When she is left alone in the Amod Garden for bath, she calls her maids Sundar and Kashi to assist her.

After her hair and body had been oiled, Lakshmibai insisted that she and her handmaidens bathe together, preferring the laughing companionship of women as they splashed and swam in the cool water to the solitary bath she was entitled to as queen. (*Rani 107*)

While the handmaidens make her ready for the visit to her husband, the thought of loneliness keeps her at hold. She baths with them in order to forget about her husband's negligence for a while; she enjoys their company at least if not of her husband's. Perhaps it could be one of the ways to refrain from what her craving bodily needs. She is indeed an epitome of dauntless and steadfast courage; and the British were very well aware of it. On her way to visit to her home in Varanasi on her eighteenth birthday, she communicates with farmers and gets to know about the zamindari system which was supposed to be removed. His increasing ill health takes her to move to his palace participating in political activities. She gradually moves towards becoming a warrior and perhaps her husband's ignorance could be one of the reasons that propelled her to take more interest in political activities to remain busy which later became her most important duty as a queen of Jhansi.

Motherhood is what brings out a woman as a whole. A woman becomes complete when she gets married but when she becomes mother it makes her complete in her own. After eight years of her marriage, she becomes pregnant. It is not her husband but Ellis who is aware of the rumours around the palace regarding their relationship. He feels relieved when he hears the news of her pregnancy which will stop the rumours. Her experiences of becoming mother turn her first to a sensitive woman then a stronger woman with the passage of time. After the labor, when the child arrives she is overjoyed with the feeling of being mother. She feels a sort

of change inside her after the arrival of the baby. As she is wiped and cleaned by her handmaids, emptiness she feels inside her. When she falls asleep half consciously after the labour:

She could feel Sundar and Kashi gently sponge her and dry her and she wondered at the empty feeling inside her body so accustomed to carrying life within it – until she remembered that she had actually spawned a whole new life. The prince, her son, who would one day be her support and Jahnsi's future. (*Rani* 173)

Within this dauntless warrior, there is a mother who gives birth to a new life to the throne of Jhansi. The novelist has described painstakingly how a woman rejoices the motherhood; she looks at him and wishes her child grow soon as she and her Jhansi need him. The need of support for herself can be clearly drawn through the very sentence. It simultaneously shows how in spite of being a strong support for herself, a woman always needs either her husband or her son to support her emotionally and mentally. She never receives the sort of support that she always craved from her husband, she thinks her son would do that. She beholds two of her maids playing with her kid and somewhere she feels a lack of maternity.

How patient these girls are, Lakshmibai thought, feeling faintly guilty at her own lack of maternal instinct. Perhaps, it's because I cannot remember my own mother, she thought. Perhaps it will grow on me, like all these things have – being queen, being Gangadhar's wife. Who would have thought then that little Mani, only bothered about riding horses once, was capable of all these things. And now, motherhood too. (*Rani* 173-4)

She becomes aware of her strength of procreation but she feels a lack of maternity within herself and feels that it is just because of lack of mother's lap in her own childhood as she lost her when she was only four that she is unable to enjoy her maternity fully. She hardly remembers any of the lullabies for her child; but she thinks that

she will learn as she has learnt being queen and wife. Mani has learnt to be wife and queen as Lakshmibai, when she was Mani, she did not have to learn the demeanor and code of conduct typical of a girl. But after marriage, she has learnt to shoulder her responsibilities as wife and queen; so she will learn to be a good mother as well. It typically conforms to the concept of performativity through a woman learns to behave and act according to the needs of the specific social milieu surrounding her. The very statement 'one becomes a woman' is the very essence of a female who continues to become more of a woman shifting from a little immature girl to mature lady. Lakshmibai is more a woman than a mere warrior or queen in this novel. The novelist presents another peculiar trait of a woman interweaving it in her portrayal. When she is informed of the demise of her uncle Bajirao, she runs to her husband and clings to him seeking comfort; but her husband calls her maids to take her back on finding himself incapable of providing comfort. When her child Damodar dies after four months, she becomes very stiff and does not let him go off his lap. Her husband could not bear the pain of his demise, he collapses and his servant takes him to his room where he locks himself bearing the pain alone. He remains unaware of the fact that his wife might need him albeit he does not. Lakshmibai looks for him and gets to know about his state of bereavement. She ponders and feels that it is the time when she needs her husband more than anyone, but he is not with her. She feels herself numbed at the demise of her dear child and on the attitude and behavior of her husband. As any of women, she also yearns for her husband's presence at the most crucial times whether on the occasion of her child's arrival or departure of her child and uncle, at each of these moments she needed her husband most but never gets her needs fulfilled. All these aspects show that the valorous warrior also has all the womanly needs and desires.

Jaishree Misra has fictionalized the life experiences of rani in order to present a woman who might have been lying within her very self. Due to lack of empathetic feelings within her husband, she becomes a bit indifferent to him. When her son Damodar dies, she is broken asunder with burgeoning pangs of pain inside her. When she was moaning, her husband is shattered and locks himself with his sorrows alone. She needed him but he was alone with his own suffering. She wanted a husband more than a mere friend. She looks for love in her husband but she never gets it. This realization dawns to her after the demise of her child, after that moment she begins detesting her husband.

It was *his* child that had died, the loss of the heir to his throne. Had that made him forget that she had lost her most precious gift too? . . . She detested the thought that she had been so young and foolish that she had satisfied herself for years with receiving just his friendship and not a husband's love. (*Rani* 178)

She finds herself cold towards her husband due to the realization of his negligence towards her. She adopts a child named Anand; she attempts to mother him as her own child but always finds herself no more than a mere caretaker to him. She finds herself a failed mother to her adopted child but she never gives up towards him. She also comes to know of the mental illness of her husband when the doctor informs her that there is nothing wrong physically with Gangadhar. The lack of love and affection in her husband and her adopted son made her the most alienated woman. She was indeed the loneliest person, someone who had none of the really important things in life – ‘. . . the love of a mother, the passion of a husband, a child to call one's own, not forgetting love and companionship and peace (*Rani* 204).’ Her wealth and queenliness could not bring what she really needed as a woman, neither husband's love nor a child's care. When her husband dies, she does not shed a drop of tears. She becomes numbed because she has been deprived of so many things that she needed but she could never meet them partially because of the lacuna in her husband's part. On his funeral, she comes to face the society without any hindrance, shattering the conformity.

But now, on the death of her husband, she had found a moment most opportune to relinquish the custom. It occurred to Ellis that the act was a courageous gesture indicating that she was ready to deal with all the challenges that lay ahead of her. (*Rani* 207)

This is the first time Ellis beholds her completely. Lakshmibai is endowed with all the peculiarities of woman; her bodily desires and needs are again emphasized when her husband dies. She turns numb at first, she does not speak only thinks of her own self and sort of her own relationship that has been between her and him.

It was impossible to tell if her aching grief was for the loss of her husband or the life she had never had with him. Deep down too was the realization that she only had herself to blame for putting her husband's needs before her own. (*Rani 208*)

She is an iconoclast; she comes forward to witness her husband's funeral without any purdah (curtain) which is a clear indication of her courage to deal with all the challenges that lay ahead of her. But she is shown as a woman who believes in peace or even the one who wishes to follow the path that has been chosen by her husband. She always goes for the peaceful path as Raja had adopted with the British. She is a diplomat and a lover of establishing a peaceful relationship.

Jaishree Misra has scrupulously dealt with the fictitious relationship between Captain Ellis, political advisor to Jhansi and Lakshmibai. When her husband dies, she starts spending more time with her horse equally engaging herself with her people too. While riding nearby Bahrwa river, she beholds Ellis busy with his paintbrush on the canvas. Both of them start sharing their interests and knowing each other more closely. She also invites him to her palace library as he was also fond of reading Persian poetry; he begins the project of translating them visiting each Thursday where she would sometimes assist him. Through her relationship with him the novelist shows that how a woman despite being allotted to a specific sort of responsibility does not hesitate voicing her own concealed desires. Their daily meetings are disclosed to her people; and their 'liaisons' attain the notoriety. However, she never conceals it. Through their relationship, the novelist probes deep within a woman who is not only sensitive towards the sensitivity of her people but also her own sensitivity for her body. It was more than only between the two persons. As Lakshmibai reflects over her own rejoice of his

company ‘. . . she could have what other women enjoyed in such abundance. His candid appreciation made her feel alive, energised (*Rani* 217).’

After the demise of her husband, she begins to observe herself again and realizes that with the loss of her husband her needs have not vanished. They are still with her because it was never reciprocated by her husband. She again observes herself in front of mirror and she thinks that she still possess certain needs; and if it is disclosed to her people, they will not justify it. But she never hesitates accepting it that sometimes she feels eagerly ‘. . . for the small, mundane, everyday preoccupations that other women were so blessed with; the chance to . . . beautify herself while awaiting a lover’s football in the night (218).’ She observes his limbs very closely without making him aware of it; but traditions and customs do not acquiesce to these things to a widow.

Gangadhar was gone and custom demanded that her every last aspiration should have departed with him. All desires and longings seen off forever. But what did one do with expectations that refused so obstinately to die? Somehow it had been decreed that she should be denied the love of a man. Other people are deprived of other things; this was the gift she was simply not to have.
(*Rani* 225)

With the departure of her husband, her desires could not depart and it remained with her. Their meetings continue till Ellis informs her about the effect of the Doctrine of Lapse that is to take place in Jhansi. However, she remains calm and quite with her consistent appeals to Lord Dalhousie to cancel it. Meanwhile she gets her relationship disturbed and Ellis leaves India after resigning from the Company. He continues to help her by writing as queen to the general, but no result is brought out. Ellis even sends Captain Skene as his replacement who comes to Jhansi with his wife and children. He fights with her against the Company. But the result is 1857 rebellion or the First Indian Revolution. However reluctant she was forced to fight left with no other option. The novelist has rendered the ideal freedom fighter Lakshmibai as a woman with a reason to explore her very feminine traits which refrain her being a murderer as she has been presented in many of British narratives and a

warrior in Indian narratives. She has been accused of her involvement in Jhokan bagh and Bibighar massacre. The novel presents the incident in a different way. Lakshmibai tries to protect Skene's family in her Palace but her people do not allow, therefore she concedes to send them to the king of Dantia. When the rebellions reach her palace for ammunition, she denies providing more and talks to them in order to help her sending them to a safer place. The rebellions agree but while turning they kill those Britishers. This incident leaves her standstill, she still without losing hope commands her people to write about it to the general. She begins rising before sunrise to take bath with cold water, the retribution she decides for herself. It shows all the soft side of a woman. It presents Lakshmibai as 'woman, with passions and relationships' in whom peculiarities of womanhood and motherhood are interwoven.

Jaishree Misra has re-contextualized life of a universally known 'warrior' within the frame of a woman rather than a queen or a mutineer. In her re-contextualization she has explored a woman who has been or could have been concealed because of the interpretations that are present in the narratives. The bold description of a woman's desires and needs made this book banned in UP, India. However, the fictionalized relationship between queen and political advisor could be true because during her research work, the novelist did come across a letter that shows a bitter relationship between the Jhansi and political advisor, she mentions it in section, Author's Note of the novel *Rani*: 'I read a letter written by an irate Lord Dalhousie to Major Ellis, curtly informing her that news of his conduct had been received by Calcutta 'with much dissatisfaction' (Author's Note vii).' The author's intention was not to present a woman's bodily needs or desires as it was conceived but a woman who is quick to response to whatever her body goes through. Lakshmibai is a 'Kashikanya' (Varanasi-girl); people found it against the very tradition and culture of the city which has always adored her as a 'demi-goddess' or 'warrior'. Her birthplace in Varanasi near Bhadaini is worshipped and her statue as everywhere is on riding horse along with her child at her back which symbolizes a woman ready for war. But there is nothing wrong if a woman is brought out from a warrior with all her passions, needs and desires. The past resides in present and continues to shape the future by living simultaneously with present. So the Rani lives with us as a warrior who is a symbol of courage and power within a woman; this fictionalization intended to break it. This could be the reason behind the protest against the book.

Conclusion

The novel thus re-contextualizes the life of Lakshmibai in the frame of a modern woman. She is a new woman different from the idea of New Woman who does not conform to the society still adheres to certain norms to be a part of it. She is endowed with the peculiarities of a woman. The novelist has attempted to justify whether Lakshmibai is of a soft woman rather than only a warrior and rebellion. The past of Rani exists with present and she is known as 'warrior' within the power structure of society; and this structure does not allow the stereotypical presentation of a woman to be broken. The novelist however breaks it through her fictional stories interwoven in the life of Lakshmibai. The European manuscripts have presented her as a murderer while Indian historical evidences present her as a freedom fighter. Through this novel, both the stereotypes are shattered. The sort of woman she has presented in her could be true to a greater extent.

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