

The Last Queen: The Epitome of Bravery and Maternal Love By Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

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Abstract: Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, an acclaimed Indian-American author, is known for her insightful and emotionally resonant storytelling. Her novel "The Last Queen" was published in 2021 and tells the story of Rani Jindan Kaur, the youngest wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the powerful ruler of the Sikh Empire in the early 19th century. The novel sheds light on the life of this influential yet often overlooked historical figure. She chose this kind of protagonist because Rani Jindan Kaur played a pivotal role in the history of the Sikh Empire, especially during its turbulent times after Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death. Her story provides a unique perspective on the political and cultural landscape of the time. It often explores the experiences of women, particularly their resilience and agency in the face of adversity. Rani Jindan Kaur's life was marked by political intrigue, betrayal, and exile, making her a compelling figure to explore through a feminist lens. Divakaruni's works often delve into Indian culture, history, and the immigrant experience. Rani Jindan Kaur's story allows for a rich exploration of the Sikh culture, traditions, and the historical context of the Indian subcontinent during the 19th century. By bringing Rani Jindan Kaur's story to the forefront, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni likely sought to raise awareness about an often overlooked historical figure and her contributions to the Sikh Empire.

Key Words: Storytelling, Political Intrigue, Adversity, Immigrant, Exile.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her meticulous research and her ability to vividly depict cultural nuances and historical settings. In "The Last Queen," she brings to life the rich cultural backdrop of the Sikh Empire, incorporating intricate details that help readers immerse themselves in the historical context.

It provides a unique and compelling perspective on the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, a historical figure who has often been overlooked in mainstream historical narratives. Divakaruni's portrayal offers insights into the challenges and struggles faced by a powerful woman in a male-dominated political landscape. Her exploration of Rani Jindan Kaur's life is infused with a strong feminist perspective. The novel delves into the complexities of Rani Jindan Kaur's experiences, highlighting her agency, resilience, and determination in navigating the challenges posed by her position and the political turmoil of her time. Divakaruni's storytelling is known for its emotional depth and resonance. In "The Last Queen," she delves into the emotional complexities of Rani Jindan Kaur's life, portraying her not just as a historical figure, but as a woman with her own desires, fears, and aspirations. The novel provides readers with a deeper understanding of the historical events that shaped the Sikh Empire during the 19th century, including the political intrigues, power struggles, and the broader cultural and social dynamics of the time. By connecting the historical context with the present, we can draw parallels and understand the relevance of past events in shaping current realities. Rani Jindan Kaur's story highlights the challenges faced by women in male-dominated political spheres. By examining her struggles and triumphs, we can reflect on the progress made in women's empowerment today and recognize the ongoing challenges that women continue to face in various fields. The political intrigue and power struggles depicted in the novel can be compared to contemporary political scenarios, emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership, transparency, and accountability in modern governance. Understanding historical political dynamics can provide insights into present-day power structures and decision-making processes. The portrayal of the Sikh Empire in "The Last Queen" can prompt

discussions on cultural identity and its significance in the context of globalization and cultural diversity today. By examining the historical preservation of cultural practices and traditions, we can appreciate the importance of cultural heritage and its impact on modern identity formation. The historical backdrop of the Sikh Empire also offers an opportunity to reflect on the legacies of colonialism and imperialism that continue to impact societies worldwide. Drawing parallels between historical struggles for independence and contemporary movements for social justice and decolonization can foster a deeper understanding of current global challenges. Rani Jindan Kaur's resilience in the face of adversity can serve as an inspiration for individuals confronting challenges in their own lives. Her story can encourage discussions on resilience, perseverance, and the ability to overcome obstacles, fostering a deeper understanding of the human capacity for endurance and growth.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW :

In a Book Review by Nazia Akhtar , she analysed Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's latest novel *The Last Queen* (2021) which depicts the turbulent life of Maharani Jind Kaur (c.1817-1863), Queen Regent of the Sikh Empire (1843-1846). It is Narrated chronologically, it offers a fictional representation of Rani Jindan's childhood, her courtship and marriage to Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839), the brief and mercurial reigns of his successors, the wresting of Punjab from the hands of Rani Jindan and then her son, Maharaja Dalip Singh, and her subsequent exile in Nepal and later, Britain. It is journey of a woman from wife to mother and then fighter for her ruin. It is a tale of mother struggle for her child. **Dr Padmini Mane (2021)** in her research paper "Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen: Rani Jindan*" analyses Rani Jindan" portrays the life and struggles of Rani Jindan Kaur, as a powerful woman during the turbulent times of the Sikh Empire in the 19th century. She highlights the complex political landscape of the Sikh Empire after Maharaja Ranjit Singh's death, focusing on the power struggles, betrayals, and political intrigues that Rani Jindan faced as she navigated the treacherous court dynamics.

Lynsha Irene Rowena Lobo(2023) explains in her research paper "The Location of Power: An Alternative Retelling of Rani Jindan's Life in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*" about a multifaceted and resilient character Rani Jindan, whose life is marked by significant triumphs and tragedies. Divakaruni delves into Jindan's inner world, offering readers a nuanced understanding of her desires, fears, and motivations. Through Divakaruni's prose, readers are immersed in the opulent and tumultuous world of the Sikh Empire, as Rani Jindan navigates the treacherous political landscape and fights to preserve her family's legacy amidst external threats and internal turmoil.

3. Discussion:

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is known for her adept storytelling and meticulous research, and in "The Last Queen," she likely employs a blend of historical research and creative imagination to retell the life of Rani Jindan, the last queen of the Sikh Empire. While the specific methodologies employed by the author might not be explicitly outlined, we can make some educated assumptions based on her past works and the typical approaches utilized in historical fiction writing. Divakaruni likely delved deeply into historical accounts, archives, and scholarly works to gather information about the life and times of Rani Jindan and the broader historical context of the Sikh Empire in the 19th century. This would have included studying primary sources, historical documents, biographies, and other relevant literature. To capture the cultural nuances and societal intricacies of the time, Divakaruni would have studied the cultural, social, and political milieu of the Sikh Empire, ensuring that her portrayal of characters and events is grounded in historical and cultural accuracy. In developing the characters, particularly that of Rani Jindan, Divakaruni likely employed a blend of historical evidence and empathetic imagination, allowing her to fill in the gaps of historical records with emotionally resonant and relatable portrayals. Divakaruni's storytelling skills and creative interpretation of historical events likely allowed her to weave a compelling narrative that engages readers while staying true to the spirit of the historical context. Her artistic license and narrative craftsmanship would have played a significant role in bringing the story of Rani Jindan to life. Given the historical and cultural significance of Rani Jindan and the Sikh Empire, Divakaruni would have likely approached the narrative with sensitivity and a commitment to authentic representation, aiming to honor the cultural heritage and historical legacy of the characters and settings. By integrating these methodologies, Divakaruni would have created a rich and immersive narrative that brings the world of Rani Jindan and the Sikh Empire to life, while also exploring the universal themes of love, power, and resilience that resonate with contemporary readers.

4. "The Last Queen" as a Indian Mythological Novel

While this focuses on historical events and the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, but the struggles faced by the last queen of the Sikh Empire and the archetypal themes found in various mythological narratives. One possible connection could be drawn between Rani Jindan's resilience and the archetype of the warrior or the protector found in many mythological

tales like the fierce and determined goddess Durga from Hindu mythology, Rani Jindan can be seen as embodying qualities of strength, courage, and maternal protection as she fiercely fought to safeguard her son and her people against the British colonial forces. This connection highlights her portrayal as a powerful and protective figure, similar to the protective deities often found in mythological narratives. Furthermore, her struggles and trials can be compared to the challenges faced by mythical heroines who often endure adversity and betrayal. Similar to the trials faced by Sita from the Ramayana or Draupadi from the Mahabharata, Rani Jindan's experiences highlight the theme of resilience in the face of political turmoil and personal tribulations. These parallels emphasize the universal nature of enduring hardships, a theme prevalent in both historical accounts and mythological tales. By exploring these parallels, readers can gain a deeper appreciation for the universal human experiences and enduring themes that transcend historical and mythological narratives alike, emphasizing the timeless nature of resilience, courage, and maternal protection found in both Rani Jindan's story and various mythological tales.

5. “The Last Queen” as a Magical Novel

While this focuses on historical events and the life of Rani Jindan Kaur, but the theme of magic, albeit indirectly, in the form of the resilience and fortitude displayed by the characters in the face of extraordinary challenges. The portrayal of Rani Jindan's unwavering determination and political prowess, despite being faced with daunting circumstances, could be interpreted as a form of metaphorical magic. Her ability to navigate treacherous political landscapes, confront betrayal, and protect her son in the face of overwhelming odds demonstrates a kind of inner strength and resilience that could be seen as akin to a form of magical power. Furthermore, the novel might indirectly touch upon the idea of the magic of history itself, as it allows readers to delve into the past and experience the lives of historical figures in a way that can feel almost mystical. Through the retelling of Rani Jindan's life, Divakaruni enables readers to immerse themselves in a world that is both distant and yet intimately connected to our present, thus invoking a sense of enchantment and wonder. Although this does not directly incorporate elements of traditional magic or the supernatural, it offers a different kind of magic through its portrayal of human resilience, the transformative power of love, and the enchantment of history, inviting readers to explore the extraordinary within the realms of the ordinary.

6. “The Last Queen” as a Realistic Novel

In this novel she portrays Rani Jindan Kaur as a woman of remarkable strength and resilience, which can be likened to the elemental traits of fire, such as passion, endurance, and transformation. Similar to the intense and unyielding nature of fire, Rani Jindan is depicted as a fiercely passionate and determined individual, especially when it comes to protecting her son and her people. Her unwavering commitment to their well-being, even in the face of adversity and betrayal, reflects the fiery spirit that refuses to be extinguished. Fire has the capacity to endure and persist under challenging conditions, much like Rani Jindan's ability to withstand the trials and tribulations thrust upon her. Despite experiencing imprisonment and exile, she demonstrates resilience, refusing to succumb to the pressures of her circumstances and emerging as a symbol of strength and endurance. Fire has the power to transform and change everything in its path. Similarly, Rani Jindan adapts to the changing political landscape, navigating through treacherous situations and transforming herself to protect her son and the legacy of her people. Her ability to strategize and adapt to the challenges she faces reflects the transformative nature of fire.

By drawing parallels between Rani Jindan and the elemental traits of fire, one can appreciate her character's complexity and understand the depth of her resilience and determination in the face of adversity. This comparison emphasizes her fiery spirit and enduring legacy, highlighting her as a formidable figure in history whose strength and determination continue to inspire generations.

7. “The Last Queen” as a Diasporic Novel

This novel can be connected to the theme of diaspora through its exploration of the experiences of Rani Jindan Kaur, who faced displacement and exile during her lifetime. The narrative reflects the struggles and challenges that individuals encounter when they are forced to leave their homeland and confront the complexities of adapting to a new cultural and social environment. Rani Jindan's experiences of being uprooted from her homeland and subsequently exiled could resonate with the experiences of diasporic communities worldwide. Her forced displacement reflects the dislocation and cultural alienation that many individuals and communities face when they are compelled to leave their native lands due to political upheavals or other circumstances beyond their control. Additionally, the novel can be seen as a reflection of the resilience and perseverance exhibited by diasporic communities as they strive to preserve their cultural identity and heritage in foreign lands. Despite the challenges she faced, Rani Jindan remained steadfast in her commitment to protecting her son and preserving the legacy of her people, demonstrating a determination that mirrors

the resilience often displayed by diasporic communities in maintaining their cultural traditions and values. By connecting Rani Jindan's story to the theme of diaspora, readers can gain a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological challenges faced by individuals and communities who are compelled to leave their homelands. This connection emphasizes the universal nature of the struggles faced by those in diaspora and underscores the resilience and determination exhibited by individuals like Rani Jindan, whose experiences continue to resonate with diasporic communities around the world. After the death of her husband, Rani Jindan faced significant political turmoil and was subsequently displaced from the position of power and influence she once held within the Sikh Empire. She was betrayed by individuals within her court, leading to her imprisonment. This act of betrayal further disrupted her life and marked a significant period of displacement and isolation from her family and her kingdom. She endured the anguish of being separated from her son, Maharaja Duleep Singh, who was taken away from her and sent to England. This separation not only caused personal anguish but also symbolized a forced displacement from her maternal role and familial bonds. Even after her son's ascension to the throne, Rani Jindan faced continuous political turmoil and was denied the opportunity to reclaim her rightful place in the kingdom. This ongoing struggle perpetuated her sense of displacement and alienation from the political sphere she once inhabited.

8. "The Last Queen" as a Epitome of Bravery vs Maternal Love

"The Last Queen" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni can be seen as an embodiment of the struggles that many mothers face, reflecting the universal theme of a mother's unwavering dedication to protecting and fighting for her child, despite the odds stacked against her. The novel resonates with the broader societal theme of maternal love and the unique ways in which mothers navigate challenges to secure a better future for their children. Rani Jindan's relentless efforts to safeguard her son, Maharaja Dilip Singh, mirror the profound sacrifices and struggles that mothers across different cultures and societies endure to ensure the well-being and success of their children. Her resilience and determination in the face of adversity exemplify the lengths to which mothers often go to protect their children from harm and adversity, showcasing the timeless and universal nature of maternal love and sacrifice. This portrayal of maternal love and sacrifice in "The Last Queen" reflects the multifaceted roles that mothers play in society, serving as caregivers, protectors, and advocates for their children. Rani Jindan's story highlights the complexities and challenges that mothers confront in their efforts to provide a nurturing and supportive environment for their children, even in the most challenging circumstances. By presenting Rani Jindan's struggles as a reflection of the struggles faced by mothers everywhere, the novel emphasizes the universal nature of the maternal bond and the enduring strength and resilience exhibited by mothers in their efforts to secure a better future for their children.

9. Conclusion

"The Last Queen" serves as a poignant reminder of the powerful and enduring role that mothers play in shaping the lives of their children and the broader societal fabric. Rani Jindan's unwavering love for her son, Maharaja Dilip Singh, serves as a driving force throughout the novel. Her actions are consistently motivated by her desire to ensure his safety and well-being, demonstrating the depth of her maternal instincts and love. Despite the challenging circumstances she faces, her primary concern remains the protection and preservation of her son's legacy, highlighting the profound sacrifices and selflessness often associated with maternal love. Rani Jindan's resilience and determination in the face of adversity underscore her indomitable fighting spirit. Her refusal to succumb to the challenges posed by political upheavals, betrayal, and exile exemplifies her unwavering strength and courage. Her strategic maneuvers and political acumen showcase her tenacity and fierce determination to navigate treacherous situations, highlighting her unyielding spirit in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles. The juxtaposition of Rani Jindan's maternal love and fighting spirit serves to emphasize the complexity of her character, showcasing the multifaceted nature of her identity as both a devoted mother and a formidable political figure. This portrayal underscores the nuanced interplay between love and resilience, illustrating how these two seemingly contrasting attributes can coexist within a single individual, shaping their actions and defining their legacy.

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