

Problems in Visualising and Validating History: A Discourse on Jaishree Misra's *Rani*

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History is neither about 'past' nor 'dead' in India. The past mingles with the present in a continuous confluence and the dead infuse life too often in today. This is because the ancient social, cultural, literary and historical traditions spanning several thousand years, sustain the present day India. It is therefore, natural that history is pulsating with life and verve. For this reason writers in all ages have turned to history for inspiration and to draw material for their themes. However, the linguistic and ethnic heterogeneity which comprises the complex socio-cultural fabric of India facilitates viewing the past from various angles. According to their perception and socio-cultural concerns, writers have painted Indian history in various hues in their fiction. The interrelationship of history and literature is intricate and deep rooted. Therefore, it is not surprising if different literary works sharing the same historical theme receive divergent reviews and responses of readers from different regions. It is difficult to define the parameters of historical fiction, and equally baffling to explain and predict the reception a particular work of historical fiction will have among readers, or that the author's vision will reach the readers in the same light as he perceived it. A reaction substantiating this argument is the row over and the subsequent banning of Jaishree Misra's novel *Rani* in the State of Uttar Pradesh in Central India few years back, whereas other works on the same historical personality have been immensely popular.

Keywords : Novel *Rani*, Jaishree Misra novel *Rani*, Biography of Rani Lakshmi Bai , woman warrior

Rani is a fictionalized biography of Rani Lakshmibai, who was the Queen of Jhansi, a state situated in the Bundelkhand region of Central India, in the second half of the nineteenth century. The history of the first uprising against foreign rule in 1857, cannot be complete without referring to her contribution. Schools, colleges and institutions are named after her, in honour of her memory and as a tribute to her sacrifice. Over the years she has become an indispensable part of Indian folklore. The image of a young queen on horseback, dressed in male attire, carrying a small child tied on her back, is unforgettable. Recently a rally was organized to reinforce Indian values and traditions in the modern generation, from Iqbal Maidan in Bhopal. In the present times of cultural shifts and changing values, to serve as a symbol of Indian womanhood, a woman dressed as Rani Lakshmibai, was leading the procession on horseback. She has figured in several poems, dramas and novels, in various Indian regional languages. A poem celebrating the valour of the queen by the famous Hindi poetess Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, can be recalled by almost all school children in India, being a part of school text books. Ketan Mehta, a famous filmmaker of Bollywood, who made historical movies earlier, has one on the anvil about Queen Lakshmibai. Mahasweta Devi, a Bangla writer and winner of *Gyanpeeth* award, the highest literary award in India, also wrote a fictional biography of the queen, in 1956. The book is now available in English translation as *The Queen of Jhansi*. A biography in Hindi, also available in English translation, is by Vrindavan Lal Varma, another noted Indian novelist. Another biography in English *the Rane of Jhansi* was written by D.V. Tahmankar as early as in 1958. Fifty years later, on 13 May, 2008, a play entitled *Jhansi Ki Rani*, based on Varma's biography of the queen was performed at *Bharat Bhawan*, a premier national institution for culture and performing arts, situated at Bhopal. The play was performed by *Rang Saptak*, a Delhi based theatre group. The foregoing list is only indicative, and by no means exhaustive. It is sufficient to show the charisma of the queen's persona in literature and other creative arts. Even authors outside India, interested in British colonial history, could not choose to ignore the queen, as Jaishree Misra also points out in her *Author's Note*, "India's Boudica, whom even her British victors would come to grudgingly describe as an 'Indian Joan of Arc'." (v) More than a hundred years before Jaishree Misra, 1901, Michael White wrote a fictional

biography of the queen entitled *Lachmi Bai, The Rani of Jhansi*. In 1986, Joyce Lebra - Chapman published *The Rani of Jhansi, a Study in Female Heroism in India*; in 1988 Antonia Fraser published *Warrior Queens*, which included an account of the queen's life as *the Valiant Rani*; in 2007, Rainer Jerosch published *The Rani of Jhansi, Rebel Against Will*. The publication details and dates signify that Lakshmibai, the Queen of Jhansi has continued to have an aura for more than a hundred and fifty years, which attracts fiction writers; and that it is not the first time that her life has been fictionalized. Moreover, none of the fictional works have sparked a row as Misra's *Rani*. On the contrary they have increased the popularity of this Indian icon.

In view of the aforementioned conclusion, one naturally wonders why the hue and cry over Misra's fictionalization? It is pertinent to ponder why people were piqued, when Misra claims she has researched her facts well. In an interview given to Arathi Menon for *Deccan Herald* she says, "There is a lot of research material available on Rani of Jhansi. In fact, I got more than half of the material from one single book, *India and it's Native Princes: Travels in India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal* by Louis Rousselet who had visited India in the 1830s. All that was left to me was to use my imagination. I did a lot of traveling to these places I describe in the book to get the details right." She further claims in the interview: "I referred to many books and visited the places. I referred to Indian sources as well as English ones." If she has her history right, why the hue and cry? Interestingly, the book was banned only in the state of Uttar Pradesh, which includes Jhansi, and not the whole of India. One is therefore forced to mull the mystery over. What is so objectionable in Misra's portrayal? Is it an inherent defect of the work, or something else that has disrupted the delicate balance between history and fiction? Or literary conditions have changed with the passage of time? In an attempt to seek answers to these questions, I have first examined Misra's stance and depiction and then I have shown how it is different from other authors preceding her. This exercise explains what happens when history, especially that of the colonial period like the British *Raj*, which is frequently viewed from diametrically opposite angles, enters the realm of fiction.

I

Misra's *Rani*, like other fictional biographies before her, is a narrative about the transformation of the beautiful and intelligent daughter of Moropant Tambe into the fiery queen of Jhansi, widow of Raja Gangadhar Rao. The book begins with the thirteen year old living in Saturn House at Varanasi, household of the deposed Peshwas, with her father, who was a courtier and advisor there. She has Nana, the Peshwa's adopted son and Tatyá Tope, an orphan of noble lineage, for playmates. It describes how her ordinary life becomes extraordinary due to her marriage with the ruler of Jhansi, a childless widower, much older than her. Gangadhar Rao trains her in the affairs of the state, which she is quick to grasp. However, she is tragically widowed at the age of twenty four, and thereafter trapped into endless troubles. Misra also shows her struggle to survive when Lord Dalhousie, following the famous Doctrine of Lapse, refuses to recognize Damodar Rao, the child adopted by the King, as his successor. Like other narratives on the life of Lakshmbai, Misra's novel also depicts why and how to save her kingdom, she picks up the sword in defiance of the mighty colonial power of the *Raj*. Her portrayal of the queen so far, is the one traditionally accepted and much eulogized by Indians and sometimes also accepted, though grudgingly, by the European writers. Commenting upon this aspect, while reviewing the novel for *India Today*, Prema Jayakumar says, "A woman warrior, in an age when women lived behind the purdah, is indeed memorable."

But Misra's fictional narrative moves beyond this, and that creates problems for the readers rooted in traditional history, myths and legends. The departure from history, into the field of fiction, is unsettling to many, because they are not conscious of when facts move on to fiction and vice-versa. Misra clearly tells such readers in her *Author's Note* at the beginning of her book how much of it is fact and how much is fiction.

I can assure them that the dates and important historical events within which the story takes shape are based on recorded details and that all the main characters existed in real life. To breathe life into those characters and offer explanations for how they might have come to make their decisions was, I believe, my main task as a novelist and, in order to achieve this, I have had to create imaginary conversations and scenarios. (vi)

In the 'imaginary conversations', in order to humanize the dehumanized demi-goddess, a status that Lakshmibai has acquired in Indian annals, the author conceives her in the light of contemporary modern womanhood.

It was with more than a little trepidation that I took my own steps into Lakshmibai's world. To my astonishment, what I found was a fascinatingly modern woman, with passions and relationships that were completely recognizable ... (vi)

In her efforts to humanize the woman, Misra is unique. No other fictionalization of Rani's life treats her as a woman with passions, a woman who wants to consummate her marriage with a man several years older, a woman who finds love most unexpectedly, although in the form of a silent yearning.

Misra places an unfulfilled love story at the heart of the book. The story runs throughout the narrative as an undercurrent of silent yearning of Jhansi's British political agent Major Ellis, for the queen he serves. The book has passages like:

Despite the dangers, they continued to ride out into the forests together whenever they could, careful to avoid the cantonment area..... Of course, he knew he had fallen hopelessly in love and knew, even as he did, how dangerous such a liaison would be, both for her and for him. (244)

And again in Chapter 25 we have,

They sat on that bench for what must have been a very long time, even after her tears had subsided, savouring a pleasure they may never be allowed again. With no words to break the silence, she finally removed his hand from her shoulder, taking it in her own.... Rubbing at it gently, she slowly raised her eyes to look at his face before daring to run a finger over its features, memorizing it for a time when it may not be before her anymore. (250-51)

This is where Jaishree Misra drifts into fiction, which is unacceptable to a section of readers in the state where the book was banned. Commenting candidly upon the event in NDTV Active, Anant Zanane says:

Rani is a work of historical fiction. The *Author's Note* at the start of the book is specifically intended to address this question, clearly setting out what has and has

not been directly sourced from history..... But she has hurt sentiments, even if she set out to explore the human heart behind the steely façade of Rani Laxmi Bai.

For many in Uttar Pradesh, the queen is nothing less than a goddess.

Though Misra admits that in placing the love story, she has taken liberty with history, and she is perfectly right in doing so because the genre is fiction, it is a fact of history that there indeed was Major Ellis who risked his career in East India Company by upholding the Queen's right to rule. For this he incurred the wrath of Governor General Dalhousie. Ellis was sent back to England in disgrace. The author could foresee that by picking up these details of history and turning them into a love story she might invite trouble. Yet she felt convinced to exercise her creative licence. She explains in her *Author's Note*:

Of course, in placing a love story - albeit unspoken and unfulfilled - at the core of this book, I was concerned that I would be upsetting those Indian sentiments that have been carefully schooled into seeing Rani Lakshmibai as virtuous and valiant and no more. (vii)

Yet she wrote the way she did because she was inspired enough by the historical material available to her, and convinced that, as she says, "... I had to find the woman behind the warrior." (vii)

One reason why Misra wanted to discover the woman behind the warrior, as she says in her interview to Arathi Menon, is that Queen Lakshmibai was perceived by some European historians in a completely different light, which the author came to know during her research:

I am aware, of course, of fictional and non-fictional western depictions of Lakshmibai, going back to Victorian times, that often describe her as licentious but these I chose to dismiss, mostly because promiscuity was a common charge made of strong female character in those highly moralistic times.

Another discrepancy which the author noticed was, as Prema Jayakumar also observes, that the Rani was "A brave queen in Indian narratives and a mutineer and murderer of women and children in British narratives." Obviously she was held responsible for a massacre of British fugitives at Joka Bag, for which there is no conclusive historical evidence. Therefore, the author seeks to explain and justify how the peace-loving woman

transformed into a fierce warrior. Motivated by her concerns she chose the genre of fiction, preceding it with her *Author's Note*. In her statement, she concludes:

To an unbiased reader who reads the *Author's Note* and subsequently completes the book, it will be manifestly clear that mine is a sincere effort to understand and humanize a brave and immensely admirable woman. For far too many of us, she should otherwise remain a remote stone figure Atop high pedestals in a few town squares.

II

The foregoing account on Jaishree Misra's historical fiction *Rani*, amply illustrates the predicament of the historical novelist, and the problems he faces in visualizing and validating history, especially about colonial India or the *Raj*.

An author attempting to fictionalize history is confronted with a Herculean task. He is inspired enough by some historical person or event, and has already formed a perception of it before he uses it as the subject of his creativity. He then visualizes this perspective in a manner which may or may not conform to that of the historian. At the same time he also has to validate his vision either with information from authentic historical documents or texts, or from his own imaginative perception of the past. In the process the author trudges a very narrow and intriguing path between history and fiction. History is perception of past factually, and historical fiction is rendering these facts imaginatively. Since there is an inherent dichotomy between the two - history and fiction, there is an inherent dialectical tension in historical fiction too. The historical novelist is required to remain on an even keel. But in practice we find that he often strays into the realms of pure history or pure fiction. With a view to validate his fiction he holds on to history and to visualize history he resorts to imagination. He thus oscillates between the two, history and imagination or facts and fiction. In conceiving history creatively, he thus encounters problems, in terms of validating his visualization due to the inherent dialectics of historical fiction.

The second question is that of freedom in historical fiction. How much leeway does the author have in deviating from facts in his fiction? Even if the author asserts, as Jaishree Misra did in her *Author's Note*, that the work is *fiction* based on history, people still view it in the light of established and accepted history. Therefore, if the fictitious work deviates from facts established through history, which it inevitably does, there is an important issue of acceptability involved.

Another hurdle for the novelist to cross is that of information gaps, or to use Misra's words "holes in history." For example, the chronicles about the crowned and royalty often remain silent on the conditions of common man. Depending upon a ruler's attitude, achievements and policies, substantiated by historical evidence, the author can only conjecture, deduce or conclude, their effects on the lives of common men, and then use his observations / conclusions to fill these information gaps by his imagination. He may do this, besides other literary techniques, by inventing fictitious characters in the novel. Such characters also serve to voice the opinions of the author and to project his perception of the period he portrays. They also sometime help in cementing the brickwork of historical narrative. Misra gives us a host of minor characters in the form of courtiers, maids, British officers and their kin.

In the course of writing historical fiction, an author usually undertakes extensive research. Even though he is to paint the picture with colours of his imagination, he has to sketch authentic details so as to give shape to his composition. Often in this exercise he comes across conflicting evidence and opinions in history. This happens too frequently in the case of Indian history of the colonial period. Events related to the uprising of 1857, of which Rani Lakshmibai was also a part, have been viewed from mutually opposing angles by Indians and British. Just one example can amply illustrate this. The uprising is referred to as 'the first war of Indian independence' by Indian historians and as 'sepoys mutiny' by British. Similarly the Rani is perceived very negatively by some British historians because of the massacre of Britishers at Jokaan Bagh. Some others realize that she was not directly involved with the massacre. Such historians feel that she was even justified in joining the rebels, because the British did not take timely action on her petitions after the annexation of Jhansi. The Indian sources uphold that the Rani had a

baby who died in infancy, while the British maintain she never bore a baby. On such occasions she exercised her right as an author to incorporate what she felt was right and suitable to her theme. Therefore she picked up the story of Robert Ellis, which is a lesser known fact among Indian masses, and justifies her stance thus, in the statement issued by her on her website after the ban:

In my book, Ellis's love, both for Jhansi and its queen, acts like a metaphor for Empire, representing the attitude many early British settlers had for India before it passed officially into the Crown.

Apart from conflicting and contradicting opinions on history of the colonial period, another fact which affects fictionalization of facts is that the cultural blocks of the people of India. Due to cultural constraints the readers have pre-conceived notions, fed and sustained by history, any major deviation from it is resisted. For example in Indian history, by Indians, Rani Lakshmi Bai holds an exalted place, almost that of a demigoddess in India. To view her as a human, an individual and not merely a wife and an able queen, is not possible due to cultural mental blocks.

The writer is so moved by the person or event of history that at times his concerns take precedence and he is carried away by his emotions. For example, when Queen Lakshmi Bai becomes the warrior widow, and sets out for the battle-field to avenge the wrongs done to her, Misra's sympathy takes control of her narrative. She is more concerned with justifying the moves Rani made, rather than the sequence of events in her life. Once this happens, the grip she had over the narrative is slightly loosened.

Sometimes a writer picks up only a bit of history and constructs the whole narrative from myths, legends and imagination. This fictional account becomes so popular and is etched in public memory that actual history is effaced and modified permanently. The Indian blockbuster movie *Mughal-e-Azam* is an example in point. The Salim-Anarkali myth, depicted in the movie, so captured the imagination of the masses, that from being a myth Anarkali became a part of history which most people believed in.

This brings us to the question, if there are so many hurdles in the path of fictionalizing history, then should an author go for it. The answer is an emphatic YES. This is because if a writer refuses to look at history from his perspective, he denies

posterity from knowing immortal works of literature like *Julius Caesar* and all the other historical plays of Shakespeare, Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* and a plethora of such other works.

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