Singh, Harleen. "India's Rebel Queen: Rani Lakshmi Bai and the 1857 Uprising." *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories*. .. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 23–38. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350140301.ch-002>>.

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India's Rebel Queen: Rani Lakshmi Bai and the 1857 Uprising

Harleen Singh

Considered the “most dangerous of all the Indian leaders,” the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, challenged the might of the British Empire in the Uprising of 1857 and died on the battlefield with her soldiers.¹ Known as the greatest heroine of Indian history, represented variously in folk song, poetry, novel, and film, and commemorated with postage stamps and statues, the Rani (Hindi for Queen) of Jhansi is a contradictory figure in British history as both worthy foe and rapacious whore. My work looks at the historical and literary representations of a woman warrior to flesh out the myriad and conflicting, and yet often coterminous, narratives surrounding women in the public sphere.² For example, Indian mythology has numerous Goddess figures who are invoked in the realm of war, and yet widespread understanding of women's roles in India continues to stem from, and is limited to, the domestic. Similarly, even as Queen Victoria ruled England at the time of the rebellion in 1857, Indian queens were rarely entitled to occupy a parallel position of authority in British policies.

This chapter seeks to question why, despite her bold stance as a rebel against the British, the Rani continues to symbolize, in mythological and historical modes, a politically conservative figure. What about history allows for a safe distance of representation when the same actions in India's present might be demarcated seditious, recalcitrant, monstrously masculine, and even anti-national? Although she was a warrior in the midst of violent battles, the Rani does not disrupt gender and sexual hierarchies and continues also to be represented as a socially conservative figure. How does a woman who upset social, cultural, religious, and gendered norms in both India and Britain end up being represented as a laudable figure of kinship, femininity, and nationalism? It is precisely this domestication, an impulse to bring the Rani under control, that forms the basis of this chapter. My work questions how the woman “warrior” functions as a conservative signifier of a glorious national past, even as representations, ambivalent and ambiguous, of the Rani change over time to accommodate the British Empire and Indian Nationalism. I suggest that the female warrior, whether in the service of the nation (India) or against it (Britain), produces a problem of signification—thus, while a plethora of representations are extant, these figurations essentially distil dominant narratives of femininity, sexuality, and sex to

reorder structures disrupted by the female warrior, to reinstate patriarchy's sanctioned categories, and to bring to heel the fighting woman.

The rebellion of 1857, sparked partly by the insubordination of *sepoys* (soldiers) of the East India Company and timed to end one hundred years of British rule, lasted only a year. It resulted, however, in monumental administrative and social policy shifts, as India went from being a mercantile colony to a dominion of the crown, elevating Victoria from Queen to Empress. Known in imperial historiography as the "Mutiny" and in Indian nationalist accounts as the "First War of Independence," the events of 1857 continue to galvanize scholarship and popular representation; the figures of the rebellion, from the sepoy Mangal Pandey to the Queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmi Bai, caught both the Indian and British popular imagination. Laws curtailing Indian writing about the rebellion essentially ensured that archives and literature from that period tend to represent the British perspective.³ It was only during the burgeoning years of Indian nationalism and after independence in 1947 that film, writing, and historiography became available from the Indian side.

On that discursive battlefield, the Rani embodies an enduring enigma as a character in English romance novels, as a topic of debate in historical narratives, as the mobilizing spirit in the rhetoric of Indian patriotism, and as a celebrated figure in folk ballads and theatre. Doubly articulated as history and metaphor, the Rani is crucial to disciplinary discourses that produce the historical subject within the colonial and postcolonial conceptualizations of gender, political power, and resistance.⁴

History, popularly understood, is the story of the past. In academic, scholarly parlance, one may also read history as a legitimating narrative. Partha Chatterjee calls for an "analytic of the popular" in history—"the domain of the popular had many narrative and performative strategies through which it could tell the story of conquest and tell it to the satisfaction of both victor and the vanquished."⁵ Thus, the Rani "doubly articulated as history and metaphor" in the "domain of the popular" embodies one such story told to conservative ends by both the rebel and the oppressor, indicating, of course, that historical representations are "never ideologically or cognitively neutral."⁶

Literature may be read as a collective interpretation that makes history "readable." In colonial narratives, the Rani becomes a sexually excessive, hysterical body, symbolizing the chaos of India in need of masculine British supervision. Similarly, though the Rani is an invaluable symbol of the nationalist project, her disturbance of the male-identified public sphere in India requires her reframing as an acceptable model of symbolic power. Dipesh Chakravarty argued that besides the factual and proven record of history, or the given sensational traction of a debate, the history that takes hold of the popular imagination has at its core a persuasive rhetoric. Rani Lakshmi Bai, in British and Indian literatures, becomes the vehicles for precisely such persuasion, albeit to different ends and yet, with remarkably similar traditional, conformist effects.

Unlike the usual suspects of colonial and nationalist enterprise—i.e., the subaltern, the prostitute, or the persecuted wife—the Rani is an elite colonial subject whose

refusal to be restrained within the available paradigms necessitates a larger, multilevel project of representation. Neither entirely victim, nor agent, the Rani is objectified by colonial and nationalist discourse to perpetuate sexually, culturally, and politically viable modes of traditional femininity. I rephrase and rework Shahid Amin's concept in typifying the Rani as a "recalcitrant figure"—not because there is a paucity of narrative about her, but because the innumerable ways in which she is textually articulated defy any attempt to uncover a singular historical archive or literary figure.⁷

By moving, as Shahid Amin exhorts, "beyond the territory of the contested fact, the unseen record, from the history of evidence into the realm of narration," I read this symbolic idiom of literary representation to demonstrate how the textual, persuasive sweep of the Rani's story bests the actual military and political history of 1857.⁸ A critical evaluation of this figure interrogates women's participation in the public sphere, evaluates the subaltern space of gender, and brings attention to the continued use of sexuality as the primary epistemological lens for women in power.

Her Story

Born Manikarnika, and known affectionately as "Manu," the Rani was the daughter of an ordinary Brahmin in the court of the Peshwa Baji Rao II. She was married to Gangadhar Rao, the aging Raja (King) of Jhansi, in 1842 and given the name Lakshmi Bai. Most Indian sources give her date of birth as 1835, which would make her seven at the time of her marriage and twenty-two in 1857.⁹ However, various British records place her birth in 1827 and refer to the Rani as a woman in her thirties.¹⁰ It may have been the advanced years of the King and the lack of natural heirs that recommended, as yet, an ordinary girl to such a prestigious marriage; she had a son who died in infancy. According to the infamous Doctrine of Lapse, the East India Company annexed the kingdom after the Raja's death in 1854 and refused to recognize the adopted son, Damodar Rao.¹¹ Most sources claim the Rani administered Jhansi at the dispensation of the Company from 1854 to 1857, but threw in her lot with the rebellion once it overtook the area and made her stand against the British in Jhansi and Gwalior in 1858.¹² Details of her life, her friendships, and her daily routine are anecdotal at best as there was no reason before 1857 to record the life of a girl who was not of royal lineage. In both Indian and British accounts, the numerous stories about the Rani are presented as factual history but cast always in the form of legend.

If you visit the famous fort at Jhansi today, most guides will breathlessly pause for effect as they narrate the story of the Rani as she jumped, while astride her horse and with her son tied to her back, from the ramparts of the Jhansi fort, preferring death to surrender. Most historical accounts confirm the Rani was killed in battle against the forces commanded by Sir Hugh Rose, and was presumably cremated by her soldiers before the English could retrieve the body. While Sir Hugh Rose was credited with ending the rebellion, and the death of the "Rebel Queen" fostered Britain's inevitable triumph, the absence of corporeal proof allowed Indian accounts to construct her, and

by extension the nation, as a defiant, even victorious, figure—jumping always out of reach of the colonialists. Yet, dying, suitably so, for the nation.

In India, it is no exaggeration to state that every school-going child and literate adult is acquainted with the story of Rani Lakshmi Bai. The refrain from Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem, written in 1930, "*Khoob Lari Mardani woh to Jhansi wali Rani thi*" (It was the Rani of Jhansi who fought with the valor of a man), is an aspect of all school curriculum in Hindi. When Subash Chandra Bose created the Indian National Army, bifurcating from the dominant ideology of Gandhian non-violence, he raised the only regiment of female soldiers on any side in the Second World War and named it the Rani of Jhansi regiment. Perhaps it is no surprise that Gandhi, given his particular enthrallment by Indian women's so-called capacity for restraint, passive resistance, and silent suffering, did not refer to this warrior from India's past in his writing and exhortations on Indian nationalism and social reform. For many ardent nationalists, however, the Rani was a harbinger of India's struggle against colonialism, representing as such a dormant feminine energy that lay latent, waiting for the kinesiology of twentieth-century masculine nationalism. In the years after independence, stamps were issued; statues were raised; and schools, colleges, and streets were named after her. In England, supplanted perhaps by the villainy of Hitler, she seemed to go out of vogue as a literary and historical character after the Second World War. Nineteenth-century Victorian literature and historiography seemed fascinated by the stories of the "warrior queen," sometimes holding her responsible for the Jhansi massacre and terming her a bloodthirsty Jezebel, and at other times characterizing her as a worthy foe and justified adversary. In Indian and the British narratives, factual details of her biography remain tangential to the ways in which she serves the cause of nineteenth-century colonialism or twentieth-century nationalism. The figure of the warrior queen, in all her myriad representations, poses a threat to the unifying national principles that naturalize colonial and later postcolonial rule. Although Britain and India had obviously competing agendas, both discourses ostensibly produce a singular, coherent version of the Rani, even in negative and derogatory frames, that reproduces her conservative significations. For example, even when she is the "Jezebel" or the "rapacious whore" in British narratives, she is the maternal queen for her kingdom in some stories and thus conforms to the Mother-Whore Judeo-Christian dichotomy. And when the Rani is the Hindu goddess of war or the mother of Indian nationalism, she personifies Hindu mythological representations of "Shakti," the feminine power that is central to all Vedic scriptures. Fight as she might, she is reformulated somehow, in this Anglo-Indian history, from the warrior into the woman.

Victoria(n) Rani

Read slightly creatively, the title above could be interpreted both as "Queen Queen" or the "Queen according to Victorian mores." As the death of the Rani in 1858 brought an end to the rebellion, Queen Victoria issued a proclamation that rescinded the charter to the East India Company and declared India to be a dominion of the British crown. This brought the colony under the direct supervision of Parliament and elevated Indians to

the status of Her Majesty's subjects. But, as many statesmen and politicians warned, the rebellion also clearly demarcated the gulf of understanding between Indian cultural mores and the British reformist impulse. For example, the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the Hindu Widows Remarriage Act of 1856, alongside the Doctrine of Lapse, were seen by many Indians as a direct affront to their religious and social values. While colonial administrators seemed to take a step back from cultural reforms, it was also evident to them that structural categories such as caste and religion had to be better defined to serve the imperial machinery.¹³

Thus, mirroring in some ways this new, at odds, colonial policy, the literary representations of the Rani in Victorian fictions ran the gamut from Aryan Royalty to promiscuous eastern whore, and from a worthy foe to a murderous despot.¹⁴ It "provides a site of convergence for the grid of colonial urgency invested in stabilizing the empire after 1857," and "reflects a crisis of authority that had to be resolved both through the continuity of links to the past but also through a recently energized and revamped template of governance for the future."¹⁵ Amidst the taxonomies of loyal races and barbaric despots, a recurring gendered demarcation of masculine and effeminate stereotypes, regional and religious, gained credence. The Rani's story, during Victoria's reign, was as much a parable of disobedient subjects as it was of uppity, unruly queens. Maria Jerinic reads the many colonial stories of the Rani of Jhansi as indicating a "British discomfort with ruling women and consequently with their own queen. This interest in the Rani is tied to an imperialist vision, one that looks with suspicion on all female political involvement, British as well as Indian."¹⁶ Thus, I titled this particular section "Victoria (n) Rani," (Queen Queen) to indicate that not only was the Rani defined by English codes of honor, sexuality, and race but that her story in Britain, a story about the proper place of femininity, was also a disciplining narrative about women who presumed to rule.

Infamous in British history for the Jhansi (Jhokan Bagh) massacre of more than sixty British men, women, and children, the Rani was derisively titled a murderous whore. An eyewitness account from a Mr. Crawford who had escaped the massacre indicated the Rani's culpability:

It is the general impression that the mutineers after killing some of their own officers and plundering the town, were going off, and it was only at the instigation of the Jhansie Ranee with the object of her obtaining possession of Jhansie state that they attacked the fort the next day together with other armed men furnished by her. The town people are said to have also joined. For this act the mutineers are said to have received Rs. 35,000 in cash, two elephants and five horses from the Rani.¹⁷

However, in 1943, C.A. Kincaid first raised doubts about the Rani's complicity by providing a contrary eye witness account: an undated letter written to the Rani's adopted son Damodar Rao by a Mr. Martin who had been in Jhansi in 1857, "your poor mother was very unjustly and cruelly dealt with—and no one knows her case as I do. The poor thing took no part in the massacre of the European residents of Jhansi in June 1857."¹⁸ A response followed in the next year, written by R. Burn and Patrick

Cadell, which relied solely on the *Official Mutiny Narratives* for evidence of the Rani's involvement.¹⁹

Although the alleged perpetrator of the massacre escaped with her army, the British meted out an indiscriminate carnage in which more than three thousand people were killed:

In Jhansi we burned and buried upwards of a thousand bodies, and if we take into account the constant fighting carried on since the investment, and the battle of the Betwa, I fancy I am not far wrong when I say I believe we must have slain nearly 3,000 *of the enemy*. Such was the retribution meted out to this Jezebel Ranees and her people for the heinous crimes done by them in Jhansi.²⁰

Taken from the journal of Dr Thomas Lowe, a member of Rose's contingent, the quote bears testimony to the events that took place in Jhansi. While the loss of sixty British civilians constituted a massacre, "a thousand [Indian] bodies" were simply "retribution." The Governor-General declared the Rani a rebel leader in June 1858 and offered an award of 20,000 rupees for her capture: "His Lordship, however, authorises you to offer such rewards as you think fitting for the capture of these persons, provided that the sum offered for the Nawab does not exceed 10,000 Rs. & that for the Bae²¹ is not more than 20,000 Rs."²² By the time the reward was offered, Sir Hugh Rose had taken Jhansi, and the Rani had fled to Kalpi to join Nana Saheb and Tantya Tope. She regrouped with other rebel leaders and captured Gwalior, but the celebrations were cut short by the British attack and her eventual death in that battle.²³

Popular novels and newspaper reports sensationally cast the uprising of 1857 as a set of depredations done by Indian men against British women. In this "rape script," popularized by the nineteenth-century colonial romance novel, an English woman under threat by lust-ridden Indian men is rescued by the white colonial male in the eventual, heteronormative triumph of British masculinity. Four particular novels create a rather different rape script with the Rani at their center—Gilleen's *The Rane: A Legend of the Indian Mutiny* (1887), Hume Nesbit's *The Queen's Desire* (1893), Philip Cox's play *The Rani of Jhansi* (1933), and George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975) depict the Rani of Jhansi as a rapacious whore, effectively "raping" the white British male.

This peculiarly sexually aggressive aspect of the Rani does not just read her rebellion as an extension of her, as yet, untrammelled sexuality but also, in relation, constructs the Indian male as sexually deficient. The colonial logic of gender defined the primary site of British occupation, Bengal, as the home of effeminate, overly educated, artistically prone, heterosexual men subject to the whims of their women, while simultaneously reading the martial ethnicities of the Punjab and the North Western Frontier Province as excessively masculine and homosexual.²⁴ And thus, the Rani's sexual pursuit of British manhood, when read against these lacking masculinities, is posited as her eventual submission to colonial virility. The eroticization of power, as represented by the Rani's rebellion within these British texts, stands Prometheus-like at the intersection of an inertly feminine Indian masculinity, a sexually aggressive Indian femininity, and the eventual dominion of British manhood over both.

On the other hand, literary representations of the Rani of Jhansi engage with notions of “Aryanism” in Europe and she is defined in Alexander Rogers’s novel in verse, *The Rani of Jhansi, or The Widowed Queen* (1895), Michael White’s novel *Lachmi Bai of Jhansi: The Jeanne D’Arc of India* (1901), and Norman Partington’s novel *Flow Red the Ganges* (1972) as an Aryan queen; a seemingly benevolent readings of Rani Lakshmi Bai as an Aryan model of heroic womanhood comparable to Joan of Arc. The surprising “aryanization” of the Rani illustrated, albeit in a specific example, the unstable context of nineteenth-century racial and colonial theory, which can read the otherwise defined “murderous whore” as a worthy Aryan ruler. Perhaps not so surprisingly, by casting the Rani as an Aryan, these narratives suppress her national and regional context to assimilate her within a larger European hagiography. These two extreme and oppositional characterizations of the Rani of Jhansi in British literature and historiography indicate the instability of such race, sexuality, and gender while highlighting the centrality of such concepts to the business of empire.

Indian Queen

Victorian representations, from seductress to worthy foe, construct a particularly ambivalent framework for the rebel woman. However, Indian representations are not without paradox or ambiguity. As stated before, there are hardly any contemporary accounts of the 1857 rebellion from the Indian side because of colonial censorship, and Indian literary representation begins mostly in the early-twentieth century alongside the rise of Indian nationalism. Subhadra Kumari Chauhan’s iconic poem “Jhansi ki Rani” (1930) is arguably the most familiar textual reference for Rani Lakshmi Bai, weaving the Rani’s story through the many regional centers of the rebellion, presenting a national geography as in Rabindranath Tagore’s song, and now India’s national anthem, “Jan Gan Man” (1911). Hindi literature’s foremost historical novelist Vrindavanlal Varma published his novel, *Jhansi Ki Rani* (1946), just before India’s independence, and the novel’s canonization within India’s “national” literature clearly links Hindi literature to the historical validation and reconstruction of its national story. In fact, the most famous dialogue attributed to the Rani, “Mein Apni Jhansi Nahi Doongi” (I will not give up my Jhansi), can only be traced to her literary depiction in Varma’s novel. Sohrab Modi’s *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953), India’s first film in technicolor, and based on Varma’s novel, reframes the historical “real” in “reel.” Notable for its authenticity in depicting historical events, the film remains neglected even in the midst of a great outpouring of scholarship on Indian cinema. In these three examples of poetry, novel, and film, the Rani is invariably compared to and symbolized as a Goddess of freedom and war, and thus indelibly marked as a symbol of India’s glorious Hindu past.

However, even as the nationalist celebration of the Rani’s story seemed beholden to reinforce her as a “Hindu” queen, postcolonial activist writers such as Mahasweta Devi published a biography, *The Queen of Jhansi*, in 1956. It is the first biography and fictional rendering of the Rani’s life written by a woman. Eschewing the academic rendering of a historical narrative that reproduced a chauvinist logic, Mahasweta Devi redrafted the Rani’s story as a narrative of the people by engaging memory and

folklore as her primary documentation. By telling the story of the Rani through the participation of *Dalit* (untouchable) and indigenous communities in 1857, Mahasweta resists upper-caste, male-identified historiography. By redefining the biographical form and unsettling the historical record, Mahasweta Devi's rendering of the Rani raises the uncomfortable questions about the shared heritage of the postcolonial nation.

These projects of representations engage the power wielded through the body of the rebel woman. Represented as a heroic Aryan, a sexually promiscuous Indian whore, a Hindu goddess of nationalism, or a folk symbol of indigenous resistance, these literary figurations employ a range of tropes that bolster the dominant patriarchal framework where women fight to serve the interests of the family, the community, and the nation. Whereas the Rani embodied a monstrous rendering in the British colonial project, Indian nationalism apotheosized her as a symbol of an enduring India. My reading of these texts, produced from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century, first paid attention to the ways in which the rebel queen unhinges official narratives. However, as I continued to work on this project, even after the book, I began to consider the ways in which this "unhinging" is met with a counter-project, not necessarily cohesive or monolithic, that elevates the Rani as a "proper" national subject: a good wife, a good mother, and thus, a good queen who fights for her nation. The fact that she died provided the perfect *Deus ex machina* for all narratives to follow; neither British nor Indian representations have to deal with the real problem of a woman in power. Of course, each of these stories reduces the Rani in magnitude to colonial and postcolonial preoccupations when such an extraordinary woman ought to serve as the sole motivator of her own story.

These sexual, racial, linguistic, and caste-based formations of the Rani portray the nature and administration of colonial, monarchical, and nationalist authority. My project engages a theory of power articulated by the intersection of the "public woman" with the "public life" of history. "Defiant of a singular theoretical articulation, the woman in the public sphere, elite monarch or nationalist military leader, disrupts the available epistemologies of representation, and power is accessed here through a complex and contradictory matrix of sexuality, race, language, and caste."²⁵ Spivak has famously argued that feminist thought must return to "measuring silences;" my research seeks a measure of the noise surrounding Rani Lakshmi Bai, the Queen of Jhansi.²⁶

The Rani Rides Again: Film, History, and Women's Lives in Contemporary India

"There's always more to tell even when the story has ended."

Mahasweta Devi

I first heard of Rani Lakshmi Bai at the age of six. The national, and only, television channel *Doordarshan* broadcast Sohrab Modi's Hindi film *Jhansi Ki Rani* to mark August 15, India's Independence Day. The next day, I eagerly bought and read the

Amar Chitra Katha comic *Rani of Jhansi*, my first foray into the realm of the popular and the historic. “As a girl growing up in India, I often got into minor brawls with boys of my age. Reprimanding teachers and parents would say, ‘Who do you think you are? The Rani of Jhansi?’ Fighting boys, or fighting the British, is modulated by social norms. Girls do not fight and legendary warrior queens must not upset the patriarchal, societal order.”²⁷

The Indian female rebel, monarch and warrior, is a disruptive figure. It is the precise impossibility of reading that motivates and links these assimilative projects for powerful women. If a woman is to be the center of the home, and thus the building block of the society and the nation, she must be a pliable, evident entity—whose functionality can be simply managed. Often depicted as a utopian character of literature, symbolizing freedom, strength, and the poetic worth of outmatched fights, these romantic figurations relegate the Rani to irrelevance; the Rani is worshipped as a goddess or mother figure, but not given the crucial regard she deserves in historical research and political reality. As daughter, wife, mother, and then queen, the Rani holds the home and nation above all else. Thus, she is hardly anomalous in Indian texts where even as a “heroine of unending fascination, her remaking in new forms transforms the marginalized into a bounded, integrated, and meaningful entity.”²⁸

It is the precise mobilizing of female icons, such as the Rani of Jhansi, in terms of their “power” that has been undertaken in this project. Thus, gesturing towards the mythically heroic Rani may at first be heard as an inspirational call to the nation’s women. Closer reading, however, reveals the extent to which even the historical Rani may be recast as the fictional, poetic, or cinematic configuration of a traditional Indian womanhood that is instead a vehicle for the patriarchal destinies of the nation. Thus, at both colonial and postcolonial junctures, while traditional gender roles are most under scrutiny, the figure of Rani Lakshmi Bai, in equal parts, daughter, wife, mother, and queen, functions as a haven of representation—in which female strength may emerge and yet subside on male-identified and male-dominated whims.²⁹

The figure of the fighting Rani has inspired a host of biographies, comic books, historical narratives, films, and even a television serial: *Jhansi Ki Rani*, which aired between 2009 and 2011 and added new twists of familial intrigue, love, and jealousy. The most recent entrant to the field is the film *Manikarnika*, released on January 25, 2019. Almost a year before it was released, the Sarv Brahmin Mahasabha held protests in India against the “indecent portrayal” of Rani Lakshmi Bai. Responding to unfounded reports that the film was based on a novel by Jaishree Mishra, *Rani* (2007), which creates a story of unrequited love between the Rani and the Englishman Major Ellis, the protests were meant to “protect” the chastity and honor of an upper-caste, Brahmin, Hindu woman. The mere hint that this heroic figure of India’s glorious past could have had a romance with an Englishman had unsettled the equilibrium for these guardians of caste privilege. “Battling the East India Company, as a queen, mother, and widow, falls squarely within the dictums of *dharma*. Being depicted as a woman with dilemmas or desires, whether fictional or real, calls, however, for the banning of books and

films.”³⁰ In an eloquent article on the controversy, the journalist Adrijia Roychowdhury writes, “What is certain though is that it is the imaginary depiction of the queen in a banned book that is being feared to disrupt her legendary status.”³¹ And yet, the Rani’s legendary status has everything to do with imaginary depiction. But this impulse to wrest control of women in popular culture has risen in opposition to women’s presence as equal participants in India’s politics, economy, culture, and society, which has vastly increased since liberalization in 1991. The attacks on *Manikarnika* resonated with the added scrutiny of the female body in the public sphere; the Brahmin Mahasabha was insulted because the film allegedly depicted the Rani in a romantic relationship with a white man. It is not the case, and the filmmakers denied the charge vociferously, but the mere hint of women stepping out of bounds was enough to convulse parts of the country into mob violence.

The author Jaishree Mishra wrote that she created her novel *Rani* (2007) “to find the woman behind the warrior,” who was “strangely, a little bit like every woman I knew.”³² Why domesticate the Rani to privilege romance? This motivation to make the Rani a “bit like every woman” is a new iteration of the same domesticating impulse espied in colonial and national novels. Why must the Rani be like anyone else when she is so clearly extraordinary? Why turn the warrior into a woman while dominant narrative continues to make men into warriors? Rani Lakshmi Bai and other female warriors and queens of India—foremost daughters, wives, and mothers—represent a female heroism bound to the family and the nation, a valor that does not detract from masculinity.

This celebration of female power in the service of the nation is complicated, however, by the Hindutva politics in which women have played a significant role militating against other religious and cultural minorities. Amrita Basu’s work on women in Hindu nationalism uncovers some of the complex interplay of factors behind women’s participation in these chauvinist politics of religion and the nation, which do not challenge “patriarchy in male-dominated societies.”³³ Similarly, the high degree of exposure accorded to the Rani of Jhansi is not at odds with the dictates of patriarchal nationalism. Tales of Hindu women in India, whether as military leaders or inspiring mothers, are foundational in the nationalist formations of gender.³⁴ As recently as 2007, Sonia Gandhi, the leader of the Congress Party, was depicted on a poster as the Rani of Jhansi, with the *adult* face of her son Rahul Gandhi on her back. It was a telling moment in historical recasting to have the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi reconfigured as yet another incarnation of the Rani: “The one who fought with the valor of a man was the queen of 10 Janpath, Delhi.” [*khoob lari mardaani woh to 10 Janpath Delhi waali Rani*]

With the talented young actress Kangana Ranaut portraying Rani Lakshmi Bai and directing the film, *Manikarnika* (2019) opened to box office success and a fair deal of press coverage. So much so, that *The Guardian* from England reviewed the film.³⁵ With the basic framework of Bollywood film, replete with songs and dances, fabulous colors and costumes, the film is a computer-generated image (CGI) bonanza. The landscape, architecture, and military battles of the mid-nineteenth century are portrayed with as much accuracy as one might expect from a commercial release. I was struck however by the use of certain words. Interestingly enough, in Vrindavanlal Varma’s seminal

Figure 1.1 Popular Congress Party Election Posters depicting Sonia Gandhi as the Rani of Jhansi.

Hindi novel, *Jhansi Ki Rani*, the Queen repeatedly states that the nation must have *Swarajya* (self-rule). Anachronistic, for sure, as the Rani fought for Jhansi and for the larger Maratha conglomerate of which Jhansi was a vassal state, but there is no evidence that she fought for the nation manifested as India. Replicating Varma's nationalism in the new film, the Rani rips through the Union Jack with her sword, crying out *Azaadi* (freedom). Representing the distance between the concerns and preoccupations of 1946 (Varma's novel) and the language of 2019 (*Manikarnika*, the film), the concepts of *Swarajya* (self-rule) and *Azaadi* (freedom) dovetail with the historical moments of their audience rather than their story. While self-rule is really not a concern for India in 2019, the liberty, dignity, and freedom of women remain under threat.

In a popular trailer for the film, the Rani asserts, "We both want Jhansi, the only difference is that you want to rule it and I want to be of service to those who are mine." In line with the large lettered words that appear on the screen "QUEEN," "MOTHER," and "WARRIOR," the Rani remains, forever, in service to the family, the community, and her kingdom. Even in this new extravaganza, with Hong Kong-style choreographed fight scenes, blood splashing on the camera lens, and with the Rani screaming out her battle cry as she slices the head of a British soldier, it is grief—the loss of her son, her

husband, and then her kingdom—that propels the queen into war. The Rani never fights for herself. Aggression in a woman is cleverly showcased as the righteous anger and fire of independence; to allow it simply as an individual trait would legitimate women's anger, which is rarely a spectacle in India, or even the world. Perhaps, in a culture where the idea of sacrifice is so revered, these representations of the Rani may be interpreted as the highest form of praise. And yet, these self-sacrificial modes of representation, clearly in the service of the male-identified nation, are all stories of women whose lives have been erased to make room for their legends. Two major historical films, focused on women, opened in India in the last year or so— *Padmaavat* (2018) and *Manikarnika* (2019). The first is a story based on a poem about a legendary Hindu queen known as Padmini who committed *Jauhar* (ritual self-immolation) along with the other women of her kingdom rather than fall into the hands of the invading Muslim army. The second, of course, as has been discussed, is the story of a warrior queen who dies on the battlefield, in the violent, public arena of war. While the first sacrifice is about protecting the private, domestic realm that is women's bodies, the latter sacrifice is for the larger, public, national dominion of the country, the nation. While diametrically opposed in the actual happenstance of death, both narratives celebrate women dying for the glory of the nation. Thus, in the British imagination of the nineteenth century, the nationalist rendering of the twentieth century, or the popular cultural narrative of the globalized, transnational present, the warrior woman, Rani Lakshmi Bai, Queen of Jhansi, whether celebrated or reviled, presents an abiding conundrum of the warrior woman—whose innate power must be unleashed at strategic moments but then harnessed, locked-up, and brought under control lest she really “cry havoc and let loose the dogs of war,” not only on the enemies outside but also on the structures within.

Notes

- 1 Saul David, *The Indian Mutiny: 1857* (London: Penguin, 2003), 367.
- 2 Harleen Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India* (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 3 Lord Canning's “Control of the Press Act” banned publication of political and historical pamphlets in 1858.
- 4 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 1.
- 5 Partha Chatterjee, “Introduction: History and the Present,” in *History and the Present*, ed. Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh (London: Anthem Press, 2002), 1–18. p. 16.
- 6 Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text*, no. 17 (Autumn 1987): 3–25. p. 6.
- 7 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 23. Shahid Amin, “Writing the Recalcitrant Event,” a paper presented at the conference “Remembering/Forgetting: Writing Histories in Asia, Australia and the Pacific,” University of Technology, Sydney, July 5, 2001.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Mahasweta Devi, *The Queen of Jhansi*, trans. Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2000). Originally published in Bengali as *Jhansir Rani* in 1956. Vrindavan Lal Varma, *Lakshmi Bai, The Rani of Jhansi*, trans. Amita Sahaya

(New Delhi: Ocean Books, 2001). Originally published in 1946 in Hindi as *Jhansi ki Rani*. D.B. Prasnis, *Jhansi ki Rani Lakshmi Bai* (in Hindi, trans. From original in Marathi). Allahabad: Sahitya Bhavan Pvt., 1964. Siriniwas Balajee Hardikar, *Rani Laxmibai* (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1968). E. Jaiwant Paul, *Rani of Jhansi, Lakshmi Bai* (New Delhi: Roli Books, 1997).

- 10 D.V. Tahmankar. *The Ranee of Jhansi* (Bombay: Jaico, 1960). S.N. Sinha, *Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi* (Allahabad: Chugh, 1980).
- 11 A son was born to the Rani and Gangadhar Rao in 1851 but survived for only a few months, and so the king adopted a five-year-old, Damodar Rao, as his heir. The king's health deteriorated rapidly, and, fearing the worst, he wrote a letter to the East India Company on November 19, 1853, translated by Major Ellis, the political assistant at Jhansi:

God willing I still hope to recover and regain my health. I am not too old, so I may still father children. In case that happens, I will take the proper measures concerning my adopted son. But if I fail to live, please take my previous loyalty into account and show kindness to my son. Please acknowledge my widow as the mother of this boy during her lifetime. May the government approve of her as the queen and ruler of this kingdom as long as the boy is still under age. Please take care that no injustice is done to her.

The letter expressly stated the king's request that the Company recognize his adopted son as the heir to the throne and the Rani as his regent. The Political Agent at Gwalior, Major D.A. Malcolm, wrote back to say, however, that "the adoption cannot be allowed or recognized without the special authority of the Government of India." The matter was then referred to the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, who quoted Sir Charles Metcalfe's words from 1837: "Chiefs who hold grants of land or public revenue by gift from a sovereign or paramount power ... the Power which made the grant, or that which by conquest or otherwise has succeeded to its rights, is entitled to limit succession ... (and to) resume on failure of direct heirs." With this precedent, Lord Dalhousie argued that since Jhansi had been a vassal state of the Peshwas, whose holdings had fallen to the East India Company, the British held the authority, as the "paramount power" to end the line of succession, and the "Doctrine of Lapse" took effect for Jhansi in 1854. The Doctrine of Lapse, though not formulated by Lord Dalhousie, was primarily implemented under his rule (1848–56). In his words, "Indian Kingdoms lapsed to the sovereign power by total failure of heirs natural." Michael H. Fisher, ed., *The Politics of the British Annexation of India, 1757–1857*.

- 12 In the ensuing years, the Rani carried out a protracted campaign of diplomacy by writing several letters to the Company, and by engaging a European lawyer named John Lang to argue her case. She invoked Jhansi's long-standing loyalty to the British and sought permission, according to the rights of the Hindu *Shastras* (laws), for her adopted son to be recognized as the rightful petitioner to the throne. In her invaluable *Kharita* (letter) dated February 16, 1854, the Rani initially employed the position of a supplicant in her interactions with the Company:

I am listing a few precedents of allowing adoption to the widowed queens after the king dies without leaving an heir in various states of Bundelkhand. Because of this permission, their bond of loyalty to the British Government has become

stronger. They are totally happy and at peace. After looking at these examples with your kind consideration, I hope that you would allow the same right also to the widowed daughter-in-law of Shivarao Bhau. Please have sympathy with her helplessness. (Signed and Sealed by Maharani Lakshmi Bai, Translated and signed by R.R. Ellis.)

The letter is evidence that the Rani explored diplomatic channels that were open to her, and neither acquiesced obsequiously to the annexation nor jumped impatiently into rebellion. This is not to say that the Rani was a reluctant participant in 1857, which she may have been, but rather to clarify that in 1854 she was, in fact, carrying on the administrative and diplomatic duties that befell her as a ruler well before she rose to prominence as a rebel leader. The Company, however, ignored the Rani's pleas and stationed a garrison in Jhansi to oversee the administration of the state. In 1857, when the sepoys of Jhansi threw in their lot with the rebellion, the Rani was once again thrust into the limelight.

- 13 For a larger consideration of these imperatives, see David Washbrook's "After the Mutiny: From Queen to Queen-Empress," *History Today* 47, no. 9 (September 1997): 10–17.
- 14 Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire, The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 58.
- 15 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 2.
- 16 Maria Jerinic, "How We Lost the Empire: Retelling the Stories of the Rani of Jhansi and Queen Victoria," in *Remaking Queen Victoria*, ed. Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 123–139.
- 17 "Jhansi rani instigated soldiers to attack the Fort." Letter from S. Thornton, Deputy Collector, to Major W.C. Erskine, *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh: Source Material. Vol 3. Bundelkhand and Adjoining Territories, 1867–59* (Lucknow: Publication Bureau, 1959), 8–9.
- 18 C.A. Kincaid, (Charles Augustus), *Lakshmibai, Rani of Jhansi and Other Essays* (London: C. Kincaid, 1941), 12.
- 19 C.A. Kincaid, "Lakshmibai Rani of Jhansi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, no. 1 (1943): 100–104. R. Burn and Patrick Cadell, "Rani Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1944): 76–78.
- 20 Thomas Lowe, *Central India during the Rebellion of 1857 and 1858* (London: Longman, Green, and Roberts, 1860), 261.
- 21 "Bae" is the Anglicization of the "Bai" of Lakshmi Bai's name, and is also the usual Maratha honorific accorded to women.
- 22 National Archives of India, New Delhi. Papers of the Foreign Department of the Government of India, 1858, June 11, 1858.
- 23 "Because she did not have an army of her own, she requested that Rao Saheb give her one. With Rao's permission, I fought in Kunch under her leadership." Tanya Topé's confession of April 10, 1858. Quoted in G.W. Forrest's *History of the Indian Mutiny 1857–58*.
- 24 Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995).
- 25 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 28.

- 26 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Economic & Political Weekly* (2013): May 25, 2013.
- 27 Harleen Singh, "The rani rides again: After Padmavati, Manikarnika's Rani of Jhansi gets caught in the crossfire," <https://thewire.in/film/rani-rides-padmavati-manikarnikas-rani-jhansi-gets-caught-crossfire> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 28 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 164.
- 29 Singh, *The Rani of Jhansi*, 167.
- 30 Singh, "The Rani Rides Again," *The Wire*, 12 February, 2018, <https://thewire.in/film/rani-rides-padmavati-manikarnikas-rani-jhansi-gets-caught-crossfire>, (Accessed 12 October, 2019).
- 31 Adrija Roychowdhury, "Manikarnika: A Legendary queen and her fictional depiction in a banned book," <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/manikarnika-controversy-rani-laxmibai-jhansi-brahmin-protests-5054740/> (accessed October 13, 2019).
- 32 Jaishree Mishra, *Rani* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007), vii.
- 33 Amrita Basu, "Women's Activism and the Vicissitudes of Hindu Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 104–120.
- 34 Manisha Sethi, "Avenging Angels and Nurturing Mothers: Women in Hindu Nationalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 16 (April 20–26, 2002): 1545–1552. Kalyani Devaki Menon, "'We Will Become Jijabai': Historical Tales of Hindu Nationalist Women in India," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 1 (February 2005): 103–126.
- 35 Michael Safi, "Bollywood epic Manikarnika tells tale of India's anti-British queen," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/25/ill-destroy-you-all-indian-historical-epic-star-critics-manikarnika> (accessed October 13, 2019).