SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:** 8.175 (SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 7, Issue 8(August)2025**

Girl, Bride, Queen, Rebel: Female Agency and Resistance in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen*

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Article Received: 10/07/2025
Article Accepted: 24/07/2025
Published Online: 05/08/2025
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.08.631

Abstract

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Last Queen* (2021) retells the story of Maharani Jindan Kaur, Ranjit Singh's last and youngest queen, who later ruled Punjab on behalf of their son, Dalip Singh. Narrated in Jindan's own voice and divided into four parts, Girl, Bride, Queen and Rebel, the novel follows a kennel-keeper's daughter who rises to power in Lahore and then defies the East India Company that dismantles the kingdom. Applying a liberal feminist framework, this article examines how Jindan claims a voice in politics and authority over her own desires, and how she resists both the courtiers who would confine her to purdah and the colonial power that imprisons her. Divakaruni restores a marginalised historical woman to the centre of her own story while acknowledging the personal cost of her defiance.

Keywords: Historical Fiction, Colonialism, Female Agency, Patriarchy, Liberal Feminism, Resistance.

Introduction

Divakaruni opens *The Last Queen* with an epigraph from Chinua Achebe: "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" (vii). The proverb names the problem the novel sets out to solve. Histories of the Sikh Empire have tended to remember Jindan Kaur, its last queen, chiefly through the men around her: the husband who raised her to the throne, the son who lost it, and the British officers who removed her from power. Divakaruni reverses that perspective by letting Jindan tell her own story.

A liberal feminist framework is applied in the re-telling. As a girl she fights for schooling; as a queen she demands a hearing in a court that expects her to stay behind the veil; as a widow she claims the right to love.

The world Divakaruni recreates was hostile to such claims. In nineteenth-century Punjab, women of noble and royal households lived in purdah, hidden from public view; girls were married young, seldom with any say in the matter; and women's rights to hold or inherit property were narrowly drawn. Political life offered no greater security. After Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, the empire he had built was weakened by a chain of murders and coups among rival claimants and their advisers, and then defeated by the East India Company in two Anglo-Sikh wars, in 1845–46 and 1848–49. In 1849 the Company absorbed Punjab into its Indian territories.

The novel's form is central to its purpose. Apart from a third-person Prologue, set beside Ranjit Singh's deathbed in 1839, and an Epilogue, set in Nasik in 1864, the narrative is Jindan's own first-person account. Its four parts, Girl (1826–1834), Bride (1835–1839), Queen (1840–1849) and Rebel (1860–1863), mark the stages of a life that runs from a poor household on the edge of Gujranwala to the royal fort at Lahore, and from there to exile in Nepal and, finally, London.

In this article, 'female agency' refers to Jindan's capacity to choose and act on her own behalf within a system built to limit her. 'Resistance' refers to her opposition, sometimes open and sometimes strategic, to the powers ranged against her: a patriarchal court, a father who would trade on her, and a colonial government bent on annexation. The first section traces how Jindan gains and uses agency as girl, bride and queen. The second examines how she voices resistance against courtiers and colonisers, from her regency to her final years. Throughout, the discussion shows that Divakaruni presents Jindan's defiance as admirable but never free of cost.

Female Agency in *The Last Queen*

Jindan's agency begins with a claim to learning. The younger daughter of Manna Singh, keeper of the royal kennels, she grows up on the muddy fringe of Gujranwala with her mother, Biji, her older sister, Balbir, and her brother, Jawahar. She pleads until Biji lets her attend school, aware that she is an exception: "Most of the families here don't believe in educating their girls" (12). Her schooling ends not through obedience but through defiance. When a group of boys jeers at her on the way home, she pelts them with stones and strikes their leader on the head, and she understands at once what the act will cost her: "After that, I knew I couldn't go back to school" (21).

Her family offers little protection. Manna, who serves at court, sees in his daughter's beauty a means of advancement, and Jindan reads his intentions clearly: "Manna will use me any way he can to get ahead" (41). Yet she does not become the passive instrument he imagines. When she meets the Maharaja, whom his people call the Sarkar, she dares to contradict him, and he answers with admiration: "You're brave. I like that" (45). From the outset, the qualities that draw the Sarkar to her are the ones her society discourages in girls: candour, curiosity and nerve.

Her courage is tested in the zenana, the women's quarters of the Lahore fort, even before her marriage. When she appears at a gathering there at the Sarkar's invitation, Mai Nakkain, his chief queen, accuses her of lying and orders the guards to "throw this lying harlot out of the qila" (63). Jindan's response is a private vow of self-command: "I will not give her the satisfaction of seeing me cry" (64). The wedding that follows shows how little say a bride has in her own marriage. Because the Sarkar is kept away by affairs of state, Jindan is married to his sword and taken to Lahore without him. In the zenana she is isolated and resented; she senses fear beneath Mai Nakkain's hostility and even suspects the older queen of poisoning her food.

Jindan learns to turn her humble origins into a source of authority. Her maid and confidante, Mangla, urges her to carry her low birth proudly, so that people will think: "she was a dog-trainer's daughter and still the Sarkar chose her" (102). The advice teaches Jindan that a queen's power rests partly on performance, on the dignity she projects. The price of her rise is loneliness: she grieves that she can never share her good fortune with Biji and Jawahar, the people she loves most. Motherhood strengthens her position. After Dalip's birth, Fakir Azizuddin, the Sarkar's envoy and her own adviser, warns her that "a queen who is a mother must play the royal game more skilfully because she has more to lose" (133).

Ranjit Singh's death in 1839 strips away her protection and turns her agency political. As rivals try to seize and lose the throne, Jindan must judge whom to trust. When the powerful wazir Dhian Singh offers to hide her and Dalip from Kharak Singh in his brother's mountain fortress, she accepts, but warily: she insists on taking Mangla with her and keeps her small store of valuables secret, knowing that his help also serves his own designs. When Dalip is at last crowned as a child, Jindan becomes regent and governs in his name.

Divakaruni extends Jindan's agency into the most private sphere of all, her desire. Widowed young, she has set aside her own needs to keep her son alive, and when she falls in love with the nobleman Lal Singh, she admits that she is "parched for love" (237). She also exposes the double standard that governs such feelings: noblemen keep several wives

and mistresses without reproach, so she asks, "Am I a sinner just because I'm a woman?" (241). Yet she refuses to marry Lal, because marriage would force her to give up the regency and abandon Dalip's cause. The novel then shows the price of her choice. During the war with the British, Lal betrays Punjab, and Jindan. She wonders whether infatuation blinded her to his nature; holding her drowsy son, she confesses that she has endangered his throne. Her desire is a genuine assertion of autonomy, but the novel refuses to pretend that it comes without cost.

Voicing Resistance in *The Last Queen*

As regent, Jindan meets resistance at the very centre of power, and she learns to answer it in her own voice. Her first guide is the Fakir. His last letter, dictated from his deathbed through his younger brother, Nuruddin, compresses his counsel into a few urgent lines, beginning: "Rely on yourself. Do not trust too quickly" (227). The letter breaks off mid-warning, but its lesson shapes her conduct at court. When Hira Singh, Dhian Singh's son, becomes her wazir, his adviser Pandit Jalla opposes her at every turn and publicly objects that royal women are "expected to remain in purdah" (231). Jindan refuses to withdraw: "As regent, it is my duty to be here with my son" (232). She then reminds the assembly that the Sarkar himself rode into Lahore beside a woman, Sada Kaur, whose daughter he had married and who helped him to the throne. By invoking a woman from the empire's own past, Jindan turns the court's tradition against its prejudice.

Her defiance of the British is no less outspoken. After the first war, in which treacherous commanders hand victory to the East India Company, the durbar prepares to ask the British troops to remain in the city. Jindan insists on addressing the courtiers herself: "Don't hand over our motherland to the firangs. Don't become their vassals" (274). She offers to serve as the link between the court and the scattered Khalsa soldiers who could rebuild the army. Lured by promises of land and honours, the courtiers conclude the Treaty of Bhairowal without her. Dalip is placed under British guardianship, and Jindan, reduced to a small pension, is confined to the zenana. Even then she sends secret messages urging the people of Lahore to resist. In them she styles herself the Khalsa's mother, turning her maternal role into a claim to speak for the army and the people, and her words help provoke scattered attacks on British soldiers.

The British respond by removing her altogether. Driven out of Lahore in a carriage and parted from Dalip, she is held in the fort at Sheikhupura, cut off from all news, and later moved to Chunar Fort near Benares, where even her jewellery is confiscated. Imprisonment does not silence her: "The British are determined to break my spirit. But they don't know Jindan!" (280). It is at Chunar that she learns of the annexation of Punjab in 1849 and of the seizure of her son's wealth, the Koh-i-Noor included. Her answer is escape. She gets out of

the fortress and leaves behind a note that mocks her captors: "You thought you could keep Rani Jindan imprisoned. But look, I got out by magic from under your nose!" (283). After more than a month of hard travel she reaches Kathmandu, where Jung Bahadur, Nepal's prime minister, grants her asylum. Wounded but unbowed, she declares that she is "not defeated yet" (286).

The final part of the novel, Rebel, turns her resistance towards reclaiming her son. Dalip, raised by British guardians who told him that his mother had lost her mind and fled, has grown up a Christian, dressed and schooled as an Englishman. When mother and son are reunited at Spence's Hotel in Calcutta, Jindan's grief at his conversion breaks out: "But your religion! How could you let them take that, too?" (300). She sails with him to England and, in her last years, works to restore his pride in the heritage the British could not confiscate.

Even in death she is treated as a threat. After she dies in London in 1863, the British delay for a whole year the return of her body to India, fearing that funeral rites in Punjab might spark an uprising, and they permit the cremation only near Bombay, at Nasik. There, scattering her ashes, Dalip vows: "I will return to my roots and my religion" (351). The vow shows that Jindan's resistance outlives her, passing to the son whom the empire had tried to remake in its own image.

Taken together, these episodes show Jindan's resistance working on two fronts at once. Against the patriarchal court, she insists on her right to be present and to speak; against the colonial state, she refuses to accept that a treaty signed without her can silence her. Her methods change with her circumstances: speeches while she holds office, secret messages when she is confined, flight when she is imprisoned, and finally the patient work of reminding her son who he is. What stays constant is her refusal to let others define her, whether as a dog-trainer's daughter, a widow who ought to withdraw from the world, or a deposed queen who should be grateful for a pension.

Conclusion

The Last Queen traces a single life through four identities, and each stage reveals a different face of female agency. As a girl, Jindan claims schooling and refuses humiliation; as a bride, she survives the hostility of the zenana by learning to project the dignity her new rank demands; as a queen, she governs in her son's name against courtiers who would send her back behind the veil; and as a rebel, she defies an empire that imprisons her, seizes her son's inheritance and reshapes his faith. In liberal feminist terms, the novel affirms a woman's claim to education, to a voice in public affairs and to authority over her own desires. It is equally candid about the price of those claims. Her love for Lal Singh ends in betrayal,

her defiance costs her both her freedom and years with her son, and even her body becomes hostage to colonial caution.

Divakaruni's decision to let Jindan narrate her own life is the novel's most significant feminist choice. It answers the Achebe proverb with which the book begins: here, for once, the lion has her own historian. By restoring a queen whom history has often overlooked, *The Last Queen* makes a distinctive contribution to Indian historical fiction, one that places a woman's voice at the centre of a story of empire and resistance.

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