

Reclaiming the Virangana Myth: A Study of Selected Contemporary Historical Fiction

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis entitled ***Reclaiming the Virangana Myth: A Study of Selected Contemporary Historical Fiction*** is the result of research carried out by me in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, under the supervision of Prof. Rohini Mokashi-Punekar, Professor in English in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences. The research findings and the information derived have been acknowledged duly with necessary citations and a list of references provided.

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Certificate

This is to certify that the research work for the thesis titled ***Reclaiming the Virangana Myth: A Study of Selected Contemporary Historical Fiction*** submitted by Snigdha Deka for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati was carried out under my supervision. The present thesis or any part thereof has not been submitted to any other Institution for a degree or a diploma.

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ABSTRACT

Although there has been extensive scholarship and literature on the figure of the warrior woman and the gendered metaphors to disseminate hypermasculine nationalist narratives, this figure has been dominantly used as a masculine tool, as and when required, to sustain the narratives of nation and nationalism. This warrior woman is dominantly perceived and depicted as the Virangana in cultural and historical narratives in India. These representations of the popular Virangana trope also suggest how the figure, apart from being a portrayal of the once assertive pre-Aryan formation of the Mother goddess, is also stereotypically graceful, beautiful and sometimes sensual. She appears as the mother-in-pain as well as the wrathful warrior on the battlefield. The hyperbolic myth that the Virangana is made to be has found increased reproduction in popular literature, culture and media. Such reproductions claim to be essentially feminist revisions of both fictionalised history and historical fiction, thus catering to the contemporary market and “the need of the hour” narrative spin and debates.

However, the academic work and literature concerning the Virangana is limited and selective. The category of the Virangana excludes certain female figures based on their deviant identities. Even in the case of those included, the category limits itself to attributes associated with traditional roles of women in India, and the ideas of nation and nationalism. In most cases, the figures’ more personal choices and even silences are not of much significance in the way their public personas are shaped. It is fascinating how simplistically such complex gendered associations are layered to shape the female figure in popular currency. Furthermore, making this figure larger than life lays bare the politics of inclusion and exclusion. Most fictional literary and cultural texts on the Virangana seem to fall into two over-arching rubrics: one caters to the male gaze, with their portrayals as exoticised/ eroticised objects of desire and fantasy, and the other

oversimplifies their depictions through the feminist lens. Therefore, there is perhaps a need to trace the trajectory of such literature on the Virangana to examine how the discourses of nationalism, subaltern feminism and capitalist publication markets have influenced the perception of the figure across time.

Thus, this thesis attempts to disentangle the narratives around the figure of the Virangana while analysing their socio-political and spatio-temporal locations. Through a study of contemporary historical fiction, this thesis will attempt to bridge the lacunae mentioned above in academic research, literary criticism and cultural studies. It will analyse the construction of the dominant myths of the popularly known warrior women in the making of the nation. The alternative narratives of the marginalised women will be examined to interrogate the hegemonic narratives. By focusing on selected novels, plays, poems and films produced on the warrior woman in India, this thesis will attempt to examine how different discourses across time in India have affected the perception of the figure of the Virangana. The thesis will thus try to decipher the politics of the changing times that have deployed the figure. In the process, this thesis will also explore the nuanced politics of the everyday choices the Virangana, as a flesh-and-blood woman, makes.

Chapter One

Introduction

A Hindi film poster appeared on a billboard in 2019. Kangana Ranaut, a popular Hindi-speaking actress, can be seen on the film posters for *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi*. Ranaut portrays Rani Lakshmibai, a famous historical figure. She has blood on her face, is wielding her sword, and is riding her horse aggressively towards the adversaries (in this case, the British colonial troops). One notices how the character she plays has her male child securely tied to her back. Similarly, a few years prior in 2014, Priyanka Chopra, an Indian Hindi-speaking actress who had by then risen to global popularity, is seen with a muscular body, exuding boundless physical strength and tenacity but also sporting a self-assured smile on her face on the poster of the film *Mary Kom*. The several combat representations of her to her right and left may resemble the ten avatars of the Hindu goddess Durga. This eponymously named movie is based on a living legend, an Olympic champion from Manipur (a state in Northeastern region of India). Her real-life experiences and, consequently, the culture of Manipur are the basis for the film. It also presumably aims to build a Hindi-speaking Indian warrior goddess who fights against all odds and, more so against other foreign countries to bring laurels to her nation. Once more, her infants bound to her back are conspicuous in the poster.

Who are these female figures in the posters? Furthermore, why do they recur in warlike personas with their children tied to their backs? Learning their stories intrigues one because the fictional characters represent real women in different spatiotemporal contexts. However, the posters portray them almost in the same way: as courageous warrior women who will fight for their nation without hesitation while simultaneously being devoted mothers. Contrarily, other

female figures like Mother India (from the film *Mother India*, 1957) are honoured not for their ability to fight enemies physically but for their forbearance, and endurance of pain and suffering to protect their nation.

Although these are two opposing tropes of female figures, they are both popularly celebrated as Viranganas in the hegemonic culture of India, either for their physical prowess and courage, forbearance of physical and emotional suffering or for showcasing both. The common thread tying them together is their sacrifice for the nation or nation-state and their traditional motherhood. The representations of the popular Virangana trope in literature and culture also suggest how the warrior woman, apart from being a mother, is also stereotypically graceful, beautiful and sometimes sensual. She appears as the mother-in-pain as well as the wrathful warrior on the battlefield. She also appears as the Hindu goddess Kali, who evokes fear and terror among the enemy, and the viewer.

It is noteworthy that this category of Virangana excludes certain other female figures based on their deviant identities. Even in the case of those included, the category limits itself to attributes associated with traditional roles of women in India, and the ideas of nation and nationalism. In most cases, the figures' more personal choices and even silences are not given much significance. It is fascinating how simplistically such complex gendered associations are layered to form this female figure. Furthermore, making this a larger-than-life figure lays bare the politics of inclusion and exclusion.

The figure of the Virangana has lately been reproduced profusely in popular literature, culture and media. Such reproductions claim to be essentially feminist revisions of both fictionalised history and historical fiction, thus catering to the contemporary market and “the need

of the hour” narrative spin and debates. The construct of the Virangana is a depiction of a warrior woman in India, albeit central to certain socio-politico-cultural conditions. Before delving into a more detailed exploration of the construct of the warrior woman in general, and in India in particular, vis-à-vis the figure’s representations in literary and cultural texts, one needs to understand how the figure came to be used in the discourse of feminism.

i. Warrior Woman in the Discourse of Feminism

There has always been a mystique around the figure of the warrior woman worldwide. The figure has been pervasive in world literature and culture. Its representations have also changed through time. These representations, which have been dominantly patriarchal and sexist, have often attracted discussions and debates within the discourse of feminism. The changing representations of the figure in contemporary times, which claim to be progressive and liberating for women, have also been debated extensively.

An integral body of feminist scholarship has developed around the figure, although marked by internal contestations. Different feminist ideologies consider the figure differently. This caters to the very differences within the various branches of feminism. While subscribing to the same ideology of women’s empowerment, these different feminist consciousnesses differ in their approaches towards achieving it. Moreover, these ideologies frequently intersect with each other without forming exclusive categorisation.

Liberal feminism calls for a reformist approach to forming an egalitarian society. According to critics, it does not challenge the deeper structure or the system that finds the hierarchical, patriarchal practices. Liberal feminism advocates for freedom of choice and equality between sexes. Since the eighteenth century, writers like John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft

“argued for the necessity of social reform to give women the same status and opportunities as men” (Gamble 239). In *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan brings forth how American women post-World War II realised their limited role in society as the ideal wife and mother. Thus, women’s subjectivity and ambitions are thwarted in the process, calling for reforms for women’s emancipation beyond traditional gender roles. Modern liberal feminists further discuss the pressing issues of exploitation of women in all spheres of the modern world, thus challenging the gendered division of labour in professional spaces (Gamble 239).

While discussing the female body and the market, Laurie Shrage, in her essay “Feminist Perspectives on Sex Markets” (2004), discusses how modern liberal feminists consider pornography and prostitution a matter of economic choice for the woman concerned and do not generalise these as derogatory in nature. Shrage, however, further explores the contextual problematics of the sex market. The usually hypersexualised representations of the image of the warrior woman in popular media, the scantily clothed and large-breasted Wonder Woman and Catwoman of the DC universe, for instance, would be considered as an exercise of choice and, therefore, apt progressive symbols by feminists subscribing to liberal ideologies. Such neo-imperial American characters have become global and transnational icons. Subscribing to a liberal feminist consciousness, these characters are celebrated not only for their physical might but also for their sexual freedom.

However, radical feminists would disagree with this perspective. Contrary to liberal feminism, radical feminism stresses more on the systemic oppression of women in society. It questions how sex is intricately connected to power, thus calling for more revolutionary approaches against hegemonic patriarchy for women's empowerment. It believes that society

cannot be reformed unless the male-dominant system is uprooted. The most significant idea of radical feminism is the American feminist Carol Hanisch's essay "The Personal is Political" (1970), which throws light on how patriarchal power also functions in capillaries of private spaces. Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) is the earlier seminal work on women's historical and existential oppression in society. Beauvoir explores the body and sexuality, motherhood, women's socialisation, etc. Kate Millett, in her book *Sexual Politics* (1970), discusses how "biology is used as a defence for the ideological domination of men over women" (Gamble 283). Betty Friedan also talks of radical approaches against the foundational aspects of power politics in the marginalisation of women.

Radical feminists, unlike their liberal cohorts, believe that male supremacy is not only limited to political public spaces; it also percolates into women's personal lives. Thus, women's political rights should not be exclusive of their right to equality in their private spaces. Radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catherine Mackinson have also opposed pornography and the sexual objectification of women. To achieve an absolute re-ordering of society, radical feminists advocate for "replacing of male culture with female culture" (Gamble 282-83).

According to a radical feminist consciousness, the warrior woman's popular representations may be seen as hypersexualised distortions of conventional femininity catering to the male gaze and consumption. Thus, the very "toughness" of the characters is reduced by their overt sexual depictions. The exercise of choice and free expression of their sexuality would be considered a dissimulation.

Upholding the spirit of the first and second waves of feminism, the third wave, which was founded in a media-influenced age, continued advocating for political and social rights for women

and further stressed intersectionality and diversity. The advent of the internet age furthered the debates of feminism and ushered in the ideas of the fourth wave and postfeminism. Nicola Rivers, in her book *Postfeminism(s) and the Arrival of the Fourth Wave: Turning Tides* (2017), states that postfeminism opens different tangential understanding of and response to feminism. Postfeminism itself constitutes plural perspectives towards feminism. While one perspective regarding postfeminism deviates from the metanarrative of feminism as a socio-political movement against women's oppression, another perspective considers that feminism is a passé and no longer applies to the contemporary world. Similar to this latter perspective, a third understanding of postfeminism further asserts the need to argue against feminism, which, according to this ideology, has stretched further than necessary. On the other hand, the fourth perspective of postfeminism allows for the coexistence of counterarguments in both feminist and anti-feminist sensibilities. Thus, it is noteworthy how postfeminism perhaps overlaps with liberal, radical and anti-feminist ideologies. Subscribing to such ideologies, therefore, the figure of the warrior woman, as already stated, would either be considered a feminist or a patriarchal, sexist construct. However, this thesis aligns with Rivers' fourth perspective of postfeminism, thus acknowledging the imperative for a more contextual understanding of the figure.

Situating the warrior woman within the web of these varying ideologies in the discourse of feminism seems challenging. While the objectification of a warrior woman for the male gaze and consumerism also debases a woman's autonomous subjectivity, reclaiming sexuality and freedom of expression, especially in the sexual realm, may be considered liberating for women. Thus, the icon of the warrior woman as an embodiment of such opposing yet blended perspectives only makes it a very ambivalent figure. Hence, rather than formulating clean categories, there is a need to look at the intersectional changes, thus bringing into consideration more factors like race, class,

caste, ethnicity, capitalist market and so forth to understand how and why the images are created and redeployed and to examine whose interests are thereby served.

Virangana, a warrior woman in India, is also such an image which maybe perceived differently by different feminist consciousnesses. However, for a more nuanced understanding of the Virangana, the image needs to be first located in a global understanding of the figure of the warrior woman and the similarities and/or dissimilarities need to be examined.

ii. The Warrior Woman in Global Understanding

a. The Historical/Mythical Amazons

Ancient Greek literature refers to the Amazons, who were described as a warrior women clan. Mythologically, they got their name because they were “missing one breast,” which they cut off to throw spears without any physical obstruction (*Perseus Digital Library*). They are referred to in Greek literature by Euripides, Lysias, Plutarch, Virgil and several others. Lysias, in his *Funeral Orations*, describes the Amazons as:

[They] were the daughters of Ares in ancient times who lived beside the river Thermodon. They alone of those dwelling around them were armed with iron, and they were the first of all peoples to ride horses, and, on account of the inexperience of their enemies, they overtook by capture those who fled, or left behind those who pursued. They were esteemed more as men on account of their courage than as women on account of their nature (physis). They were thought to excel men more in spirit than they were thought to be inferior in bodies (trans. Penrose 2).

Walter Duvall Penrose’s study shows how “the Greek understanding of the Amazons as masculine is...an Orientalist interpretation.” Since the fifth century BCE, masculinity in women, which the

Greeks perceived through activities such as “women riding, herding, and fighting” was not typical. Such “non-Greek customs” were viewed through the binary lenses of racism and gender. Thus, women's “non-Greek” customs were deemed masculine, a deviation from the normative and, hence, described as barbaric. The gendered, racist binaries were so set that barbarianism, even when displayed by men outside the Greek civilisation, came to be considered “effeminate.” A society where “men allowed women to fight or hold power” was Othered by the Greeks, and thus, the latter “assumed that women warriors [whom they termed the Amazon] either murdered or dominated men” (6-7). Thus, these men, who lost to the masculine women, were not “man enough.”

Penrose further states that the “Amazons were the prototypical example of female masculinity to the Greeks of the archaic and classical periods, but by the Roman era, they had also become the prototype of matriarchy” (Penrose 10). The term used by the ancient Greeks to denote matriarchy was “gunaikokratia (guné, guniakos = ‘woman’ + kratia = ‘rule’) or gynecocracy,” which referred to “any situation where women held power” (10). Thus, gynecocracy was not limited to all-women spaces and places; it also referred to women-run families and households while their men were at war. There is evidence in Argos, Scythia and Libya, where women fought “not necessarily to kill or torment their menfolk” but “rather to defend their families, homes, cities, and kingdoms.” Unlike Greek societies, men of these societies “follow[ed] a woman into battle or listen[ed] to her at war council” (Penrose 18). From the Greek perspective, these non-Greek, unconventional women would also epitomise gynecocracy. The term also designated societies where “effeminate men” were ruled by conventionally masculine women or warrior queens (10). Therefore, one may note “the blurred lines [existing] in Greek thought among the categories of Amazon, matriarch, and warrior queen” (10). While in dominant Greek gender norms, female

masculinity was mostly considered to be situational and temporary, women showcasing deviant signs of “permanent masculinity” were categorised under the broader umbrella of the Amazons. The unconventional Amazons were either “killed off in Greek literature and art,” or they were portrayed as “Orientalised distortions of real women warriors and warrior queens” to finally resituate the patriarchal order that these women unsettled (11, 14, 15). Thus, the Amazons in Greek thought came to include deviant women from all across the world.

Like most narratives about women, the Amazons were also written by men. Aptly described as “the media of male ventriloquism” by Penrose, these narratives describing the Orientalised construct of the broader category of Amazons were replete with “exaggerated” and “eroticized” narratives to “entertain” the colonial Greek male gaze and educate the Greek women about the patriarchal threshold (Penrose 16). Looking through the postcolonial feminist scholarships of Gayatri Chakraborty-Spivak and Leela Gandhi, the unconventional Greek masculine woman can be seen as a “gendered subaltern” who is not permitted to speak for herself (Spivak 102; Gandhi 90; Penrose 16).

Thus, a postcolonial study of the subaltern Amazons disentangles Western colonial perspectives about the masculine female, the warrior queen and the warring woman. However, it also lays bare the power politics and hierarchies existing within the gendered subalterns as well. While the warrior women in Hellenistic kingdoms were mainly from “the top of the social scale,” warrior women in ancient India and Persia were primarily from the lower strata of society. They included bodyguards of kings (known as yavanī-s in Sanskrit) and accompanied the latter on hunting expeditions. Although they functioned as armed women in Indian and Persian realms, they were mostly imported from Central Asia until the nineteenth century (Penrose 21-22). Such armed women across the globe were both mythical as well as historical.

b. Women Soldiers

There have been women soldiers across world history. In the early fifteenth century, Jeanne d’Arc, “a peasant girl...led French armies during the Hundred Years War.” Agustina of Aragon fired “a canon at the French army besieging Zaragoza during Napoleon’s invasion of Spain in 1808.” Warrior queen Boudica (also known as Boadicea) “led a failed revolt against the Romans in the first century CE.” The Chinese warrior woman Hua Mulan disguised “herself as a man” and fought “for twelve years in her father’s place in the ultimately victorious Toba Wei army.” The “Heroines of Cochamba (Bolivia), a group of mixed-race women...died defending the town against the Spanish in 1812” (Cothran et al. 1-2). Similarly, history is also witness to such women soldiers in India like Razia Sultana, the first female ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. Mula Gabhoru, an Ahom princess of sixteenth-century Assam, died fighting Turbak Khan’s army (Gogoi and Bora 1511). Mata Bhag Kaur, a nineteenth-century Sikh woman soldier, fought against the Mughals. Onake Obavva, an eighteenth-century Hindu armed woman from Karnataka, fought against Haider Ali. The list is undoubtedly endless.

Such women from historical and mythological narratives are either celebrated as martyrs or feared for their deviance. They have often been iconised and deified for a greater patriarchal, national cause. For instance, Jeanne d’Arc has become “the heroine every movement has wanted as its figurehead” (Cothran et al. 2). Mulan has similarly become a metaphor for the Asian warrior woman and female masculinity, so much so that there have been several representations of her, including the ones by Disney, which have made her a timeless heroine. However, many warrior women like “the all-women Santa Barbara Company who fought to defend the city of Gerona against a French siege” have been forgotten and have faded into oblivion. However, few other

warrior women have been revived after decades to serve different national causes (Cothran et al. 2).

Although there have been examples of armed women in history, modern institutional military still did not permit women to join the armed forces until World War I (WWI). While the governments of Britain, the United States of America and Germany “used [women] to supplement the manpower shortage and free able-bodied men to serve as combatants,” the Russian government used women extensively “in combat roles” in both “WWI and the Russian Revolution.” One popular Russian woman combat was Maria Bochkareva and her infantry unit, “The Women’s Battalion of Death,” created in 1917. However, female combats in the military are still not the rule but an exception (Sowers 4). Moreover, there are many possibilities of sexual abuse of women in the otherwise male-dominated military units. Therefore, it is a common practice to assign women “softer” roles in such male-dominated enterprises, for instance, the role of a woman spy.

c. Female Spies

Unlike the case of a mainstream warrior woman, on whom the debates of femininity and masculinity are hinged, the woman spy is used in the military for her femininity, which is hypersexualised for the male gaze and male enterprises. The woman spy does not necessarily engage in conventional hypermasculine combat but must use her body and sexual wiles to accomplish her mission. These manoeuvres are considered “softer.” However, the woman spy occupies a somewhat challenging position in the masculine enterprise of war. Her “insufficient fidelity, sexual or political” deems her inadequate to be celebrated as a warrior woman (Cothran et al. 11). The very sexuality that the enterprises use for political purposes is considered a bane which defines the female spy as an innate “bad woman,” the whore. Thus, cases of sexual abuse of women in the military, which are not unheard of, in any case, would be justified in cases of

women spies. They are “confronted with ostracism and judgments of impurity in the war’s aftermath.” Women spies are celebrated posthumously, like Guan Lu of the Chinese Communist Party. Alternatively, the female spy’s weaponised sexual infidelity in an otherwise dominant heteropatriarchal moral society is viewed as her choice and, therefore, the highest form of sacrifice for her nation. (Cothran et al. 11, 12, 218, 230). Thus, one may note that martyrdom is essential for a (warrior) woman to be put on a mythic pedestal.

d. Women Martyrs

Why is this sacrifice for the nation by the woman necessary? To sustain the myth of a nation, the myth of the quintessential warrior woman is essential, especially one who is a martyr. Chapter Two of this thesis examines in detail how the nation is gendered. Elleke Boehmer argues that the nation is personified as a female body. Consequently, on the one hand, women become physical sites for a patriarchal, hypermasculine political tussle between men warring over ownership of a nation (22-23). On the other hand, the figurative woman is used to evoke jingoistic feelings amongst men who are deemed responsible for its safeguard. This metaphoric woman who is the nation personified was visualised in many ways; the warrior woman is one of them.

The widespread “production, circulation and strategic redeployment” of the myth of the warrior woman and narratives about her happened during two distinct “global historical” periods. The first period is “the final decades of the nineteenth century and first decades of the twentieth century, a period of nation-building ...in many parts of the world.” The second period is “the often-violent process of decolonization in the decades after the Second World-War” which “saw the most extensive creation of new nation-states in history” (Cothran et al. 7, 8, 10). Nineteenth-century French historian and philosopher Ernest Renan described the nation in similar veins. In

his essay “What is a Nation?” (1882), Renan argues that factors like race, class, religion and language do not define a nation. Instead, a nation is perceived by its individuals depending on its common past, common adversaries, collective sacrifices, experiences and loss, which thus creates a sense of solidarity to build a collective “everyday plebiscite” or the will to live a shared existence (10). For the building of new nations, “new pantheons” were needed (Cothran et al. 8). As discussed, since nations are gendered, the new nation thus requires tales of mythological or/and historical warrior women who fought against the common enemy to fill in the pantheons. Tales of such warrior women served to (a) add to the figure of the gendered nation, (b) sustain the patriarchal and political purpose of the very process of nation-building, and (c) encourage the women of the nation to locate themselves as subjects in the new national community (Cothran et al. 7).

However, the very term “warrior woman” is an oxymoron in the dominant tradition. It is “a juxtaposition of the feminine qualities attendant in the word ‘woman,’ and the requisite violence that is fundamental to the role of ‘warrior’” (Cothran et al. 10). Thus, violence and courage are conventionally gendered. If the woman adopts violence at home or on the battlefield, she is either vilified or must revert to traditional femininity's limits. In the process, if the woman dies as a warrior on the battlefield, she is celebrated as a martyr. Thus, it may be noted that the “warrior woman” construct for nation-building also relies on conditional grounds. The dominant myth of the warrior woman who deploys violence and courage on the battlefield perhaps does not readily include non-violent courageous women, silent courageous women, female spies, femme fatales, and violent women who survive and do not revert to traditional femininity. In such cases, courageous women are seen as deviant, whether violent or not. However, even the idea of gendered courage is conditional. A wife and a mother taking care of the household and her children in her

husband's absence is usually seen as courageous but perhaps not celebrated, considering she must carry forth her duties. Nonetheless, if the same woman expresses her courage in deviant forms through her sexuality or might, she is usually considered more fearful than courageous. Thus, the concept of the warrior woman, which is dominantly deployed as a tool for nation-building, is a profoundly nuanced and intricate construct.

iii. Warrior Women in World Literature and Culture

The figure of the warrior woman is popular in folklore, fairy tales and world literature. However, it is commonplace for most of these fictional representations to celebrate the warrior woman as an affirmation of the patriarchal order of society. Amazons have been mentioned in epics like Homer's *Iliad* (late 8th-early 7th century BC). Greek and Roman mythology has its share of stories of warrior women, including the Goddess of war, Athena/ Diana. Indian epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also refer to warrior women like Kaikeyi (King Dasharatha's wife who saves his life on the battlefield) and Chitrangada (who commandeered her father's army). Hua Mulan is a popular Chinese folk warrior woman. Virgil's *Aeneid* portrays Camilla as a warrior and a huntress. *Shāhnāmeḥ* (1000 AD), a long poem composed by the Persian poet Hakīm Abū l-Qāsim Ferdowsī Tūsī, narrates the story of a woman named Gordāfarīd, who fought against the Turanian army (*Encyclopædia Iranica*, XI, Fasc. 2, p. 138).

Jessica Grace Oxendine, in her thesis, *Warrior Women in Early Modern Literature*, discusses such depictions in literature written in the early modern period in England. Oxendine states that "travel narratives such as Sir Walter Raleigh's *The Discoverie of Guiana* (1595) portray Amazon encounters in the New World." Popular ballads tell the "tales of women assuming male attire to fight wars." Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (1596) portrays warring women

fighting with spears. Certain plays by Shakespeare (for instance, Hippolyta from “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”) and John Fletcher “stage the adventurous feats of women on the battlefield.” Most of these writings surrounding a female ruler and her military prowess in modern England reflected the changing socio-political times during the Renaissance and the common perception of Elizabeth as the Amazon queen. However, as Oxendine posits, this literature dominantly portrayed the woman from the man’s gaze and pen, thus re-establishing patriarchal perspectives in the finales of these texts (1-16).

The figure of the warrior woman is also pervasive in popular culture and media. The female characters in superhero comic worlds, like those of DC and Marvel, have been dominantly depicted as sidekicks to male superheroes. Notably, there have been contemporary representations of female superheroes as well. However, as Miriam Kent states, even the “superheroines” which exist in the comic world are, in fact, “female derivatives of existing male superheroes” (399). Moreover, popular projections of either the female sidekicks or the protagonists have been often overtly sexualised. DC’s Wonder Woman or Captain Marvel from Marvel’s earlier issues would appear to be scantily clothed. As stated earlier, in feminist discourse, such depictions and the changes they undergo are received differently. While the sexual commodification of these female characters and superheroes is considered to debase a woman’s subjectivity, there are alternative feminist sensibilities, as discussed in a section above, that see such female superheroes in swimsuits reclaiming their sexual agency and freedom.

There has, however, been a shift from swimsuits to lesser revealing attires, from long flowing hair to short cuts in recent years. The very recent Captain Marvel, unlike Wonder Woman, dons short hair, “humor, heroism and hot temper” (Kent 403). She is a military who competes

against male villains using her martial abilities. While one may consider this new avatar a feminist revisionist creation of the prototypical superhero (and warrior figure), it can still be problematised based on the mechanism which creates her. Kent argues that the problem lies in the “intersection of gender and temporality” (395). The remodelled, progressive “superheroines” are made to travel through time to a pre-second wave of feminism era where they contest against the paternalistic world with what Rosalind Gill terms a “postfeminist sensibility” (Gill 610-630). Thus, as Cat Mahoney in her book *Women in Neoliberal Postfeminist Television Drama: Representing Gendered Experiences of the Second World War* (2019) argues, the “superheroine” figures seem anachronistic because “the insertion of ostensibly feminist women characters into [pre-second wave of feminism settings] results in a distinctive dehistoricization of political feminism” (15). It is not to deny the feminist rewriting of hegemonic narratives. However, Miriam Kent perhaps seems to assert a dire need to acknowledge the chronological arc of the history of feminism and, more so, the history of women and their sufferings since before the first wave of feminism.

Thus, the list of representations of the warrior woman in different cultural texts is inexhaustible. Having located the subjectivity of the warrior woman in a global understanding, the figure of the Virangana, which is how most often a warrior woman is depicted in India, must be explored in detail.

iv. Virangana: The Warrior Woman in India

Before examining the warrior woman in India, a brief review of the seminal literature on feminism in India is discussed here.

Although the feminist movement in the West has influenced Indian feminism, there have always been discussions about women’s issues in India, historically and culturally. Thus, Indian

feminism has been significant on its own. The second wave of Western feminism was criticised for being hegemonic White. The third wave, thus, acknowledged and advocated for the multiplicities in women's identities worldwide. The voices of women belonging to different gender, racial, national, class, caste and religious identities emerged globally. Therefore, to understand the nuances of the plural voices, one must first understand them without the all-encompassing colonial rubric of Western feminism. Many feminists have discussed this in the context of feminism in the Global South, in general, and India, in particular.

Twentieth-century Sinhalese feminist Kumari Jayawardana's *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) is a significant text exploring the nuances of "Third World feminism." Focusing mainly on the Global South, her book unpacks the idea of "Third World feminism" and its constituent ideologies and movements which had emerged in the twentieth century. Western feminism is based on a privileged position, whereas non-Western feminism, which is primarily entangled with a colonised history, has been marginalised on several more dimensions. She stresses the intersectional identities of women in non-Western countries and their myriad experiences based on race, class, caste, religion, nationality, sex and gender. Jayawardana explores the tensions between patriarchy, colonialism and nationalism in the "Third World" countries, thus subjecting its women to various kinds of exploitation. Jayawardana further illustrates women's participation in the nationalist movements in the Global South against the White Western colonisers. She has further called for a need for global solidarity, asserting that Western feminists should, therefore, engage in unbiased dialogues and collaborations with their cohorts from all identities across the world to produce a more inclusive and authentic discourse on feminism and its emancipatory actions.

Twentieth-century Indian feminist and professor Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Feminism Without Borders: Colonising Theory Practicing Solidarity* (2003) is another pivotal text to understand Indian feminism. In her collection of essays, Mohanty deconstructs the White, Western hegemonic construct of feminism and the "Third World Woman." Aligning with the third wave of feminism and its ideologies, Mohanty unsettles the Western-centric idea of feminism. However, she argues that it denies the pluralities existing within the homogenised construct of the "Third World Woman" umbrella term, thus deconstructing it. The essay from the collection "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" particularly critiques the Western feminist body of work and scholarship. Like Jayawardana, Mohanty's text also elaborates on the foundational differences between Western and non-Western discourses. Discussing feminist scholarships in particular, Mohanty thus states how feminism in South Asian countries has been influenced by colonial discourses whose layered aspects have been discussed in its feminist scholarship. Like Jayawardana, Mohanty also insists on global solidarity.

Jasbir Jain's "Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity, and Agency" (2019) explores the tenets of feminism in India sans the influences of Western ideologies and movements. She traces the roots of feminism and the idea of the feminine self to the socio-cultural and mythological aspects of Indian history. Her book emphasises the unique experiences of women in India, which is very different from the Western countries. She locates the construct of the feminine self in key cultural texts like *Upanishads*, *Manusmriti*, *Natya Shastra*, epics and their retellings. Like most other non-Western feminists, Jain also argues for acknowledging the varied cultures across the world, and thus, she asserts the importance of global solidarity. However, she posits that respecting and incorporating Western cultural ideologies into Indian ideas of feminism should only

be founded on indigenous roots. Thus, the significance is laid upon the trope of the traditional modern Indian woman.

In *Feminism in India* (2005), Maitreyee Chaudhuri questions the origin of feminism in the West. She discusses how the feminist movement in India is founded on colonial, anti-colonial nationalist and post-independent contemporary socio-political grounds. Aligning with the other feminists from the Global South, Chaudhuri also explores the issues of women's experiences influenced by intersectional aspects like class, caste and religion. She focuses on how Indian feminists have thus talked about women's emancipation, considering such intersectionalities and the challenges they face in the process.

Another significant work which explicitly traces the historical trajectory of women's movements in India before and after Independence is Radha Kumar's *The History of Doing* (1993). In her book, Kumar elaborates on how the nineteenth-twentieth century male social reformers and anti-colonial nationalists incorporated women into the nationalist movements. The "Woman's Question" was, however, as Kumar argues, used as a political agenda during the social reform and nationalist movement. Discussions and debates regarding women's issues were gradually given less priority after Independence till the 70s.

Since feminism in India is intricately linked with nationalism, an extensive body of feminist scholarship has also dealt with the idea of a gendered nation. It has not only been examined in various cultures across the world but has been also dealt with extensively in the context of the Indian nation in general and the concept of the Hindu nation in particular. As mentioned earlier, Chapter Two of this thesis expounds on the concept of gender and nation. Western feminists like Elleke Boehmer and Elisabeth List argue against the male-dominant construct of nation and nationalism. While Nira Yuval-Davis discusses the usage of women as

nationalist metaphors, Ritu Menon and D. Kandiyoti explore the same, specifically in the context of the Indian nation and nationalism. Sumathi Ramaswamy discusses how these gendered metaphors have been located in caste Hindu mythologies in India. Mrinalini Sinha and Tanika Sarkar explore the status of women in colonial and post-independence India and the production and deployment of the “new Indian woman” trope. These ideas are discussed comprehensively in the following chapter.

Of the several ways in which the nation is gendered in India, the figure of the warrior woman, as in most global cultures, is perhaps the most produced and circulated. As stated earlier, there are historical examples of warrior women in India ranging from bodyguards to hunting companions to kings, to soldiers and warring queens. However, over time, the figure of the warrior woman in India came to be referred to specifically as the “Virangana.”

Etymologically, the term “Virangana” connotes a woman who displays qualities of “viryam” or heroism. Although this term is borrowed from the comprehensive repository of Hindu tropes and texts, it has come to be used in the context of a warrior woman fighting for her nation. Unlike the Western idea of a warrior woman, which struggles to grapple with the traditionally contradictory qualities of femininity and masculinity displayed by her, one, however, does not need to contest the Virangana’s masculinity as deviant because in the very creation of the metaphor her masculinity is subsumed under her necessary femininity. Now, the term is used rather loosely, referring to any “tough” woman as a Virangana; the “toughness” refers to both physical and emotional qualities. However, there is still an enemy in this case, and it can be the patriarchal man or a foreign nation. The definition still includes either combat fighting or the capacity to forbear pain and sacrifice her own self.

Kathryn Hansen, in her essay “Virangana in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture,” states the qualities a Virangana generally portrays:

[Virangana is a] valiant fighter who distinguishes herself by powers in warfare, an activity generally reserved for men. She demonstrates her martial skills and courage by direct participation in combat, at the risk of her life: in fact, sometimes she dies in battle or takes her own life on the battlefield to avoid ignominious defeat. She is a leader of women and men, acting as head of state during peace and general in time of war. She adopts male attire, as well as the symbols of male status and authority, especially the sword and she rides a horse. Virangana is dedicated to virtue, wisdom, and the defence of her people. Above all, she is a fighter and a victor in the struggle with the forces of evil. (26)

Hansen is not concerned with the origin or the definition of the term Virangana. She instead emphasises the characteristics of this warrior woman. This thesis follows Hansen’s description of the figure; however, it attempts to challenge its concrete characterisation. Like Hansen’s work, the more significant concern of this research work is also with the category of the Virangana rather than tracing the term’s etymology. However, the thesis goes further and attempts to problematise the figure and its making.

The category of the Virangana originally included warrior women who fought for their idea of the nation. However, one wonders what happens to women who do not engage in combat. What happens to the silent women or the female spies? And so forth. Like the Western construct of the warrior woman, perceptions of Virangana are also influenced by the trajectory of socio-political, historical and economic factors in India. The silent and forbearing Virangana, for instance, is produced and represented during the times of Gandhian ideals and the Non-Cooperation movement. Thus, if courage, as discussed earlier, is a gendered attribute and female

masculinity is a free-floating signifier, Virangana, as a warrior woman in India, perhaps already constitutes these fluidities, unlike its Western counterparts. However, it is not to state that the construct of the Virangana cannot be problematised. Thus, there are several questions which perhaps lie within the closed quarters of the Virangana myth.

Research Gap and Statement of the Problem

As stated, there has been extensive scholarship and literature on women and gendered metaphors that disseminate masculine narratives and masculine nationalist narratives. Most of this corpus of work also explores the figure of the warrior woman and “male warriors and hero cults” (Cothran et al. 3). However, the positively growing work on warrior women in history, myth, fiction and culture still “has not been broadly or systematically explored” (Cothran et al. 3). The critical engagements tend to stress more on how the figure of warrior woman has “destabilize[d] gender norms, creating the space for women warriors to enter the canon” (Cothran et al. 3). But the creation of the warrior woman is, in fact, a masculine tool to use and redeploy her, as and whenever required, to sustain the narratives of nation and nationalism. Although this holds globally, it does not find much examination in the literature.

Sherrie A. Inness has comprehensively explored the figure of the warrior woman in popular media in her work *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture* (1999). Unpacking the idea of “toughness,” Inness considers a woman tough when exuding both physical strength and capabilities to tolerate physical and emotional suffering (13). She focuses on popular warrior women icons in media and cultural texts like Wonder Woman, Charlie’s Angels, Xena: Warrior Princess, etc., to examine how these figures are represented as tough, however, without actually transgressing the hegemonic constructs.

Adrienne L. McLean, in her review of Inness' book, argues how Inness probably fails to produce "a nuanced and careful argument, or even a solid definition of toughness itself" (56). McLean asserts that despite subscribing to Judith Butler's ideas of fluid gender identities, Inness herself oscillates between the gendered attributes traditionally associated with a conventional tough woman and a progressive, gender-fluid understanding of the same. According to Inness, as McLean rightly argues, when a tough woman cries, it "undercuts" her toughness. Thus, Inness herself ascribes to the hegemonic idea of toughness (McLean 57). Therefore, Inness' ideas, much like the popular icons of the tough women, are ambivalent.

Kathryn Hansen's definition of the Virangana can be considered similar to Inness' idea of the tough woman. Both brute force and tolerance are significant in the making of the figure. However, within the popular perception of the Virangana in historical and cultural narratives in India, possession of either of these qualities is considered to suffice. Thus, the popular construct of Virangana, unlike the dominant Western concept of the warrior woman, seems to be more inclusive and allows room for gender fluidity. A silent, forbearing woman who never enters the battlefield may also be considered a Virangana. However, in cases such as these, the female body is perhaps used as a metaphorical representation of the battlefield. Her body functions as a conduit through which she challenges the male adversary in either aggressive or non-violent, silent forms. However, one cannot wholly dismiss the significance of women's performative protest on these grounds. Perhaps, as Mclean suggests, a more nuanced exploration of these constructs, including their inherent identity politics, appears to be a requirement. Furthermore, an intricate inquiry into the nature of the structural context against which the Virangana contests seems imperative for a comprehensive examination of the representations of the figure. Thus, the construct of the warrior woman, which is a global phenomenon, needs to be problematised further, and the complexities

need to be discussed more in order to humanise the women and to unpack the politics of making them hyperbolised personas.

Academic work and literature concerning warrior women in India, who can be looked at as Viranganas, is limited and selective. The narratives of popularly known warrior women like Rani Lakshmibai have been circulating in popular culture. However, there are also lacunae and silences embedded in most of these hegemonic historical and cultural narratives. Most fictional literary and cultural texts on the Virangana seem to fall into two over-arching rubrics: one caters to the male gaze, with their portrayals as exoticised/ eroticised objects of desire and fantasy, and the other oversimplifies their depictions through the feminist lens. Thus, there is perhaps a need to trace the trajectory of such literature on the Virangana to examine how the discourses of nationalism, feminism and capitalism have influenced the perception of the figure across time.

This thesis will focus on the representations of selected warrior women as Virangana emerging from specific socio-political and spatio-temporal contexts in different narratives. These women are—the first popular Virangana in India, Rani Lakshmibai; the courtesan-warriors Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa; and finally, the silent Virangana Joymoti. Entangled in the narratives concerning these figures are more subsidiary female characters, both fictional and historical. They are underexplored pertaining to their marginalised identities as the Other to the dominant woman. The thesis will, thus, also try to examine these supplementary female characters.

Rani Lakshmibai, who has been the most popularly known Virangana in India, has also been the subject of many fictional, cultural representations and academic debates and discussions. There has also been the historical/fictional Dalit warrior woman, Jhalkaribai, who is considered to have fought alongside. She has also received much attention politically and culturally. However, even the retellings inclusive of the subaltern women can be unpacked and interrogated. It is

possible to see these narratives as an attempt to form the subaltern's identity "as a critical part of movement to define [their] political and social positioning" (Gupta 1741). The Muslim courtesan-turned-warrior woman is not as well-known as Lakshmibai in popular literature and academic discussion. The courtesan's religious identity may be the primary reason for the insufficient representation in an otherwise patriarchal, hegemonic Hindu nation. Another popularly considered Virangana Joymoti, who belongs to the Northeastern region of India is not extensively portrayed in the hegemonic discourse of history and culture in India. The narratives of Dalimi, who is a Naga princess, are also concomitant with the dominant historical narratives of Joymoti. However, Dalimi is not represented at all in the history of Assam. Only two narratives mention her but insufficiently.

Although the dominant Viranganas are invoked time and again in the context of anti-colonial nationalism, sub-nationalism and caste Hindu nationalism, not many literary and academic engagements discuss the subjectivities of these popular figures. The battlefield, though a crucial masculine arena for female subversion, is, however, overused for the circulation of the same hegemonic narratives. The women's personal choices and expressions of sexuality lack exploration. Even when these issues are explored, for instance, in the narratives of the Muslim courtesans Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai, they are mostly commodified for the male gaze. In the process, the nuances of the women's private lives and the politics of choices remain underexplored.

Similarly, Sati Joymoti is also a revered and popular Virangana figure in Assam. Unlike the warrior woman on the battlefield, Joymoti is celebrated for her silence, forbearance and sacrifices for her husband. However, there has been little engagement with this figure in academic discourse. Even the corpus of historical as well as fictional narratives written in this region represents Joymoti only in the context of anti-colonial nationalism and later as an "Assamese"

symbol in the context of “little nationalism” (Guha 455). Moreover, the Naga princess Dalimi, who concomitantly finds popularity in the reproduction and circulation of the dominant Joymoti metaphor, is not, academically or otherwise, given individual attention. One also needs to examine the figures of Joymoti and Dalimi against the backdrop of the incipient nationalism prevalent in the Northeastern region of India.

Thus, this thesis attempts to untangle the narratives around these warrior women while analysing their socio-political and spatio-temporal locations. Through a study of historical fiction, this thesis will attempt to bridge the lacunae mentioned above in academic research, literature and cultural studies. It will analyse the construction of the dominant myths of the popularly known warrior women in the making of the nation and nation-state. The alternative narratives of the marginalised women will be examined to interrogate the hegemonic narratives. By focusing primarily on selected novels, plays, poems and films produced on the warrior woman in India, this thesis will attempt to examine how different discourses across time in India have affected the perception of the figure of the Virangana. The thesis will thus try to decipher the politics of the changing times that have deployed the figure. In the process, this thesis will also explore the nuanced politics of the everyday choices the Virangana, as a flesh-and-blood woman, makes.

Research Objectives

This thesis tries to explore the construction and marginalisation of the narratives of the Virangana, dominant or otherwise. Thus, the dominantly known Virangana will be studied as opposed to the marginalised. In the process, an attempt will be made to see the commonality in their narratives and the reasons behind the voices and behind the silences. The thesis proposes to observe and analyse the conversations, if there are any, between these narratives. Borrowing from Anne Castaing, this study is “a historiographical project aiming to give voice to the absence

through... ‘polyphonizing’ the historical narrative” (2). This study will not be chronological; it hopes to be a discursive one. In the proposed study, an attempt will be made to fulfil the following objectives:

1. The female will be figured in the formation of the nation-state and its associated sentiment of nationalism. The dichotomy between the flesh-and-blood woman and the woman as the goddess will be examined in general. The status of the woman as the subject/object in the making of the nation-state will be analysed.
2. The paradoxical status of the warrior woman in society will be discussed in particular through narratives concerning the popularly known and the lesser-known women warriors in different kinds of nationalism in India.
3. The literary and aesthetic representations underpinning these narratives will be specifically evaluated to deconstruct the socio-political grounds in the historical making of these warrior women.
4. The figures of the dominantly known Viranganas, i.e., Rani Lakshmibai and Joymoti, will be re-examined. Furthermore, the thesis will try to focus more on these flesh-and-blood women than the patriarchy-made goddesses.
5. The thesis will also study the lesser-known warrior women Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai. Owing to their marginalised identity as Muslim courtesans, the way they engage in an anti-colonial nationalist uprising will be examined. The thesis will further look at how Dalimi, the Naga princess, who is pertinent to the making of Sati Joymoti in Assam, is produced and represented. This thesis will also examine the representations of marginalised women like Jhalkaribai, which most narratives of Rani Lakshmibai create as the queen’s foil.

6. Silences around the marginal women warriors in Indian history and culture will be analysed through perspectives gleaned from social, political and historical studies. Thus, the present thesis will try to recuperate these marginal warrior women from history and myths vis-à-vis their representations in literature and culture.

7. A postcolonial, feminist revision of Indian history will be made through a study of selected historical/imaginative fiction on the warrior women mentioned above.

8. Through the objectives stated above, the thesis will primarily try to unsettle the hegemonic idea of the Virangana and look at the politics of various representations of the figure(s) across varied socio-political times. By exploring the individual woman's subjectivity, voice, agency, desire and sexuality within the hyperbolised construct formed by patriarchy and nationalism, the thesis will try to provide a more inclusive understanding of the myth of the Virangana and thus augment the existing literature on the figure.

Rationale for Selection of Texts

From a plethora of fiction on Lakshmibai, the primary texts chosen for this thesis represent the Rani across different spatio-temporal and socio-political locations, which influence the identity politics in the narratives. As it happens, these texts are written by women authors. Thus, the novels are also examined from the perspective of interrogating the politics of feminist writings in the capitalist publishing market. The primary fictional texts chosen to explore the historical and mythological narratives of Rani Lakshmibai are Mahasweta Devi's biographical fiction *Jhansir Rani* (1956), Jaishree Misra's novel *Rani* (2007), Michelle Moran's novel *Rebel Queen* (2015) and Moupia Basu's novel *The Queen's Last Salute* (2019). These texts are not only based on historical records and archives on Lakshmibai but also on folklore and collective memory. Devi's

biographical fiction, as she claims, primarily deals with biographical history (focused more on folk narratives of subaltern sections in society). The other three primary texts are imaginative novels. However, despite their historical basis, these texts perhaps seem to flesh out alternative dialogic narratives while making meaning of the lacunae in hegemonic disciplinary history, thus reflecting the very socio-political variables which form dominant history and memory.

Unlike Lakshmibai, not much fiction based on Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa is available. Thus, the texts chosen are two of the few representations of the courtesan who participated in the Revolt of 1857: Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) and Tripurari Sharma's play *San Sattavan ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa* (1999).

From literary texts, songs, and films to school plays, Joymoti has been so frequently represented in the popular imagination that it is not easy to establish a concrete list of all fictional representations of this historical figure. Of all these representations, the first three chosen primary texts, Padmanath Gohain Barua's play *Joymoti* (1900), Lakshminath Bezbaruah's play *Joymoti Kunwori* (1915) and Jyotiprasad Agarwala's film *Joymoti* (1935), are considered to be seminal in influencing the popular and historical understanding of the "cultural figure" Joymoti. It is noteworthy how the first three popular fictional representations are men-authored. The fourth text, Juri Borah Borgohain's novel *Naang-Faa* (2015), is a recent representation and, unlike the first three, happens to be by a woman writer. Thus, the thesis also attempts to examine if and how the first three texts are different from the fourth.

Moreover, Gohain Barua and Bezbaruah's plays were perhaps pertinent tools for raising anti-colonial nationalist sentiments amongst the common people of Assam. On the other hand, Agarawala's film, as the first one in the Assamese language, hinges on the icon of Joymoti for advocating not only an anti-colonial nationalist sentiment but also specifically a sense of

“Assamese” identity amongst the middle-class Assamese-speaking population. The contemporary fiction by Borgohain, unlike the previous three, perhaps finds the form of a novel appropriate to depict more contemporary, postcolonial feminist nuances vis-à-vis Joymoti’s personal choices and life.

Research Methodology

This thesis uses the theoretical framework of the French semiotician, post-structuralist and postmodernist Roland Barthes’ ideas on deconstruction and denaturalisation of myths. In his well-known text *Mythologies* (1957), Barthes talks about myths as a “second-order” signification (119, 126, 135). Meaning-making of signs and symbols is a socio-politico-cultural process influenced by spatio-temporality and subjectivities. Myths are ideologies indoctrinated in the social subjects to maintain the status quo of the social-political and economic hierarchies. Thus, they become naturalised concepts over the continuous reproduction of these myths. Barthes advocates for deconstructing myths and denaturalising them to understand the politics of their formation, thus, unpacking the underlying ideologies.

Using the Barthesian framework of denaturalising myths, this thesis aims to make meaning of the Virangana myth and critically examine its construction and perpetuation in society across varied socio-political and spatio-temporal locations. The seemingly natural figure of the Virangana, which has occupied historical and cultural texts in India, will be denaturalised to explore the trajectory and politics of its being.

Since the Virangana is so deeply embedded in history and memory, which accordingly influences its cultural significance, this thesis will also try to locate the figure within the theoretical framework of subaltern historiography and memory studies.

The positivist understanding of history as an academic discipline enables a professional historian to look at the past and interpret it entirely based on verifiable facts. There are, of course, possibilities of the historian's inclination towards certain ideologies and beliefs which reflect in their study. Therefore, such biased historical studies, if there are, also become subjects of study for subsequent historians and, thus, pave a pathway to possibilities of alternative readings of history. However, even these alternative readings have to be founded on a corpus of evidence.

Discussing the subjective nature of history, American historian Hayden White, in the study *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), states that the different ways in which history is constructed, understood and interpreted are dependent on variables like the historian's subjectivity, socio-politico-cultural context and the language and literature in which the historian chooses to express the narrative. This, as White terms, is known as the "poetics of history" (1, 81, 416)¹. Thus, history is not entirely the empirical truth as is deemed to be. Challenging the idea of unadulterated objectivity of history, White argues that historians rather choose to structure the narrative in a certain plot, the choice based on subjective variables, which therefore renders it as a form of storytelling. White stresses the idea of "metahistory," which accommodates the understanding that historical writing is a much more complex and subjective process and not simply a recording of facts.

Similar to history, memory also looks back at the past, but it does not necessarily depend on the kind of evidence positivist history seeks. Memory sustains the identity of an individual, a culture or a community. It is passed down through generations via stories, anecdotes, ideas, rituals and beliefs. These kinds of narratives are subject to alterations when passed across timelines. History and memory are perhaps entwined in the same web of reading the past. History has a significant impact on creating a memory. A historical event exists in individual or collective

memory. However, a professional historian would ideally forgo narratives without evidence and accordingly interpret the event. This is not to state that history does not consider memory essential or valid. Perhaps what drives traditional historical examination is the absolute necessity of verifiable evidence.

Paul Ricoeur, a twentieth-century French philosopher, discussed extensively the significant aspects of memory and forgetting. He argues that memory is narrative and consecutively reproduced through narrative processes. An individual or a community creates stories to perceive past experiences. In the process, individual and collective identities are formed. Thus, narrative memories of the past help shape the individual's/collective's present self. While exploring the process of forgetting, Ricoeur posits that it is an essential selective part of sustaining other relevant memories to the individual/collective. Thus, memory, forgetting and remembering are significant parts of the mnemonic process, which help the individual/collective to maintain a sense of the continuum².

A question naturally arises: If history creates memory, and the latter is narrative, can memory also affect history? Hayden White's "metahistory" incorporates this idea. However, since it is a study on cultural and literature studies, this thesis will not attempt to take the disciplinary approach of a traditional historian. Neither does it deny the credibility of academic history. However, through a critical engagement with cultural texts that reflect *histories* concerning the production of the Virangana myth and its subsequent redeployment, this thesis seeks to look at the archive of subjugated narratives and identity politics, which may also have the potential to affect dominant history. To do so, this thesis also borrows White's approach towards reading historical narratives and his understanding of the close relationship between history and literature.

A similar Whitean methodology towards interpreting history is also found in the theories posited by postmodernist Michel Foucault, in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), where he argues how power functions and is sustained in a particular society at a given point in time through the sanction as well as suppression of different forms of knowledge. Examining this ambit of *knowledges*, both dominant and suppressed and repressed, thus challenge the political machinery of their making and unmaking. This, in turn, reflects the socio-politico-historical and economic contexts. Thus, using the Foucauldian lens, the nexus between power and knowledge is explored through a critical study of the alternative narratives of the Virangana. In the process, poststructuralist Jacques Derrida's deconstructivist approach is also used to unsettle the hegemonic myth of the Virangana.

Sudipta Kaviraj, a distinguished Indian political scientist, discusses, in his book *The Imaginary Institution of India: Politics and Ideas* (2010), the inherent fluidity and permeability of the field of history especially in the context of countries with a colonised past. He argues that in a country like India which is characterised by its diversity and pluralism, and which also simultaneously shares a colonial legacy, history cannot be defined in the positivist sense. While the coloniser's history of India is Eurocentric and therefore biased, an anti-colonial and post-colonial history of India by Indian historians is mostly coloured with patriotic flourishes. In the process, "*history*" is entwined with "a parallel discourse" of memory, oral narratives, myths, folklore and also fiction. This, as Kaviraj terms it, is called "imaginary history" and it "sought empirically underdetermined episodes in the Indian past, counterfactualising them...or extending them, filling their interstices with narratives of defiance and patriotism." Thus, Kaviraj stresses the possibilities of subaltern dialogues which are seldom included in the "hegemonic history" of India. Therefore, Kaviraj believes that there can never be one hegemonic concept (as per Gramsci's

ideology) of history in India owing to the inherent and often contesting power hierarchy between the diverse castes, elite and the subaltern classes, regional identities, Hindu and non-Hindu identities and so forth (75, 81).

Kaviraj further discusses how such an extensive creative process of writing the “imaginary history” of the new India is not only limited to social scientists but is also extended vis-à-vis literature. He states:

Since most of the persuasion for the nationalist idea was done by a narrative rather than a theoretical discourse, historical novels which played out plots of patriotism in a transparently metaphorical past figured very significantly in the nationalist reading lists. (75)

One may note how Kaviraj’s idea seems to align with the Whitean idea of “metahistory” which portrays the close relationship between history and literature. Kaviraj specifically talks of the novel form which proved to be an appropriate medium to disseminate patriotism and an imagined sense of Indianness in the newly formed independent India. Although Kaviraj mentions only the form of the novel in this context, one may argue that poetry, plays and films would also prove to be very beneficial tools in conveying the ideology of a common past and mobilising masses to defend a nation. In any case, the content of these forms relies on an “imaginary history” and thus are types of historical fiction. Such historical fiction hinges on metahistorical figures, of which the Virangana, as already stated, seems to be a more advantageous metaphor for its obvious gendered associations with the idea of nation and nationalism.

This thesis attempts to examine the ways the Virangana has been used through (meta)historical fictional narratives to uphold the “imagined history” of India. To achieve this aim,

this thesis employs the various theoretical frameworks mentioned here and marries them with a postcolonial lens to reassess the heteropatriarchal historical and cultural narratives, both colonial and nationalist. Borrowing the methodology of subaltern historiography, the possibilities of alternative postcolonial feminist narratives around the Virangana will be explored. Like the disciplinary methods of subaltern historiography, this thesis chooses to also look at non-traditional historical sources, such as fiction, myths, oral narratives, songs and so forth, to explore the politics of the Virangana's voice and agency intersecting with her sexuality and desire.

A postcolonial feminist revisionist approach towards understanding the myth of the Virangana will definitely provide a critique of heteropatriarchal, colonial and male nationalist narratives. Borrowing Penrose's perspective about the masculine narratives concerning the Amazons, the hegemonic narratives around the Virangana can also be looked at as "a media of male ventriloquism" (16). In an attempt to entertain and sustain the construct of the gendered nation and the new Indian woman, these narratives seem to exaggerate and entertain, not necessarily provide a voice to the woman who is seen as a Virangana. Thus, male authors narrating these stories for the male gaze may be interrogated. While acknowledging the need for more women narrating women's stories, this thesis also attempts to examine if women-authored narratives of Virangana are any different and how.

Chapters

The following are the proposed chapters of the thesis:

Chapter One locates the figure of Virangana in the larger understanding of the warrior woman in global historical and cultural texts. Drawing from the general, this chapter then provides

a brief introduction to the warrior woman in the particular context of feminism and subaltern historiography in India.

Chapter Two attempts to provide a socio-historical and political overview of the making of the Virangana. It also traces the cultural continuity from the figure of the Hindu goddess to the personified nation, the production and redeployment of the figure via memory and cultural texts.

Chapter Three examines the figures of Lakshmibai and Jhalkaribai while deconstructing the hegemonic discourses of Indian history and culture. Through Mahasweta Devi's novel *Jhansir Rani* (1956), Jaishree Misra's novel *Rani* (2007), Michelle Moran's novel *Rebel Queen* (2015) and Moupia Basu's novel *The Queen's Last Salute* (2019), the chapter tries to reassess the subjectivity, voice and agency of Lakshmibai, who is dominantly raised to the pedestal of the nation-goddess. The chapter attempts to observe the politics of representation of Lakshmibai by the women writers and analyse the various factors involved in the evolution of Lakshmibai's fictional depiction. In the process, the chapter will try to demystify the popular nationalist symbol, Virangana Lakshmibai.

Moreover, hidden in Lakshmibai's narratives are other female characters who may also be considered Viranganas, thus challenging the ideal model. These alternative Viranganas found in the fictional narratives concerning Lakshmibai can not only unmake and consequently redefine the popularity of Rani Lakshmibai as a Virangana but also unsettle the very trope of the dominant Virangana in India. Thus, the chapter will also attempt to explore these subaltern voices in otherwise dominant narratives.

Chapter Four critically engages with the lesser-known and scarcely represented figure of the Muslim courtesan who also participated in the anti-colonial nationalist movement. Here, the

historical Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai are considered for examination through Kenize Mourad's novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) and Tripurari Sharma's play *San Sattavan Ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa* (1999). The courtesan's sexuality, agency and participation in arenas, both political and the battlefield, are explored in this chapter, thus arguing for the expansion of the traditional category of the Virangana to also include such Muslim courtesans of the anti-colonial nationalist movement.

Chapter Five attempts to analyse the narratives of the hyperbolised persona of Joymoti while trying to look at her corporeal self. The chapter specifically focuses on the politics of the gendered virtues of silence and forbearance and their nexus with the patriarchal nation. The fictional character Dalimi, who is concomitant with Joymoti's narratives, is also examined. Both these characters are located within the larger framework of the sub-nationalisms in the Northeastern region of India. The chapter considers Padmanath Gohain Barua's play *Joymoti* (1900), Lakshminath Bezbarua's play *Joymoti Kunwari* (1915), Jyoti Prasad Agarawala's film "Joymoti" (1935), Juri Borah Borgohain's novel *Naang-Faa* (2015)

Chapter Six briefly summarises the primary findings of the study while also suggesting the possible scope for further examination.

Notes

¹ White borrows the term from Giambattista Vico, a late seventeenth century-early eighteenth century Italian philosopher and historian. However, they discuss it from distinct perspectives. While Vico stresses that myth and language play a significant role in the ways history is constructed in a society at a given point in time, White is more focused on the narrative structure of historiography.

² For extensive debates on memory and history, you may look at W. Walter Menninger, M. I. Finley, Patrick Hutton, Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch and Paula Hamilton.

Chapter Two

Interrogating the Virangana Signifier:

Problematising Mythology, History and the Nation

The figure of the Virangana fighting for the “nation” resonates across mythology, historical narratives and popular culture of India. Such a view has its cultural origin in the myths of warriors and mother goddesses. Female figures also exist in Indian history who fought for their kingdoms at different points in time. However, from the nineteenth century to the current context of ideas of “nation” and “nationalism,” these warrior women began to be popularly referred to as the Virangana. Concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” related to this image are often religion-based. In a country constituting a myriad of religions and indigenous and folk cultures, the figure of a Virangana, problematically enough, is often represented only as a Hindu goddess in popular culture.

The previous chapter has discussed how often the Virangana represents brute “masculine” strength as well as, contradictorily, “feminine” sensuality. The chapter also throws light on the politics of identity with which the Virangana is associated with. The figure of the Virangana is, therefore, a complex one with layers of ideas woven into it—nation and nationalism, myths and history, masculinity and femininity and the Virangana’s dominant and marginalised representations.

Nation and Nationalism

“Nation” and “nationalism,” as already discussed in the previous chapter, are constructs dependent on variables like socio-politico-historical contexts and gendered notions. Nationalism is intricately connected to people’s understanding of the nation. In the academic discourse, the idea

of the nation finds various discussions by different theorists, thus leading to different concepts of nationalism. Theorists like Edward Shills (1957) and Clifford Geertz (1973) describe the idea of the nation as a primordial one¹. Accordingly, nation and nationalism are understood by these primordialists as preconceived and to exist from the “beginning;” the idea of “beginning” is not defined. Theorists like Jack David Eller and Reed M. Coughlan, in “The Poverty of Primordialism: The Demystification of Ethnic Attachments” (1993), argue against the theory of nationalism as a primordial emotional attachment. They justify that sentiments of ethnicity or nationalism are instead “born out of social interaction” (184). They suggest that the institutions of ethnicity and nationalism are like religion—they are driven by rituals which have such a substantial impact on their participants that they appear “natural” to them rather than socially constructed (193-94).

Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson are theorists who argue that ideas of nation and nationalism are modern. Gellner considers that modernisation and the introduction of institutionalised education enabled the possibility of social mobility, thus disintegrating the existing hierarchy of a group. Such standardisation also sustained a sense of belongingness among the members. Nationalism, according to Gellner, is this sentiment of belongingness that creates a nation; the nation does not evoke a sense of nationalism (55). Thomas Hylland Eriksen states that Gellner’s idea of a nation is “a state dominated by an ethnic group, whose markers of identity (such as language or religion) are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation” (119).

Benedict Anderson discusses the nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives an image of their community...” (85). Both Gellner and Anderson refer to the idea that “nations are ideological constructions seeking to forge a link

between the (self-defined) cultural group and state” (Eriksen 120). With the revival of socio-cultural traditions, nationalist sentiment is evoked. This sentiment creates the concept of the nation. Nationalism as a sentiment or a movement is based on the shared cultures of one or more communities. Ernest Renan, as discussed in the previous chapter, also elaborates on nation and nationalism similarly. However, most of these theorists suggest that such shared communal cultures conform to socio-political power mechanisms. Hence, sentiments of nationalism based on these cultures are also socio-political constructs sanctioned by the power structures.

Considering most theories on nation and nationalism developed by Western academics to be prejudiced against non-Western countries or communities, Partha Chatterjee, in his book *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post-Colonial Histories* (1993), provides a perspective that challenges the alleged Eurocentric bias of such theories. According to him, nationalism is a European concept. Anderson’s idea of nationalism, as Chatterjee states, is “confined almost exclusively to academic writings.” In the non-Western countries colonised by the Europeans, nationalism began as anti-colonial resistance. However, this idea of “anti-colonial nationalism” was conceived by the non-Europeans vis-à-vis the Western notion of nationalism. According to Chatterjee, Anderson’s concept of nationalism does not consider the modified forms of nationalism of non-Western countries (5). Chatterjee’s concept emphasises non-Western political and social context, thus providing a counter-hegemonic understanding of nationalism.

However, the similarity in these different philosophies of nation and nationalism may rest on two facts—(a) they emphasise the existence of shared cultures, including symbols, traditions, rituals, myths and narratives. These cultural elements can evoke unified nationalism irrespective of constituent identity differences. Consequently, this kind of nationalism gives birth to the idea

of the nation, and (b) these theories of nation and nationalism have been developed chiefly by male theorists who have not deconstructed the gendered notion of the nation.

The Gendered Nation

Gender, like the concept of nation, is also a socio-historical construct. “Femininity” and “masculinity” are not pre-determined, definite concepts. They are rather constructions of a particular power structure in a society at a given point in time. Judith Butler, in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988), extensively talks about the performativity of the social construct of gender (520). The hegemonic-defined gender roles serve as a base for the making of the nation. Simultaneously, they are also re-configured while propagating ideas of nation and nationalism. Thus, while drawing from traditional gender roles, the nationalist rhetoric symbolises the nation as a dutiful wife, a caring mother and a divine goddess.

On the contrary, male activity dominates the topography of the nation. Julia Kristeva, in *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993), observes how ethnic and national politics reduce citizens, in general, and women, in particular, to the mere “identification needs of their originary groups” (16). Establishing one’s identity, as Kristeva states, in the larger context of an ethnic group or a nation becomes the primary and the most significant requirement for the members of the group. This identity is emphasised in relation to the identities of other groups. For the end goal of establishing one ethnic or national identity as superior to another, the individuality of the members is lost. Since the constructs of nation and nationalism are dominantly men-made, masculine and heteropatriarchal, other subordinate groups like women, in the process, are objectified. Hence, they are more likely to be victimised.

The ideas of nation and nationalism are primarily dependent on gendered binary oppositions. Elleke Boehmer, in her book *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the*

Postcolonial Nation (2005), considers that most male theorists like Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith have defined the nation as a “male terrain, a masculine enterprise” (22-23). The nation is constructed as male typography but figuratively associated with female bodies. Nationalist narratives use women’s bodies both materially as well as figuratively. Women are associated with the “honour” of a nation’s men. Thus, sexual violence is inflicted on women to defile the “honour” of the nation, and this, in turn, gives rise to the need to control and regulate women’s sexuality within the group. While the woman’s body becomes a symbol used to reproduce and sustain the myths of a nation, the same body becomes a physical site which is violated to defeat the “Other.”

Boehmer (referring to Freud’s term) states that nationalism is a masculine “family drama.” The nation is a macrocosm of the bourgeois family where the home is considered “the private, feminine sphere” (31). Elisabeth List also discusses the structure of the masculine nation, which is modelled on the bourgeois family (36). The Home/Nation is led and controlled by male leaders, while women are expected to stay within the “private sphere” without any agency. Nationalism thus emerges vis-à-vis a contest between the men of a nation over the control of *their* women. It is paradoxical that although the woman embodies the nation, the same hegemonic heterosexual, patriarchal structure treats her as a submissive and passive object.

A woman’s national identity is primarily associated with her body. As an object of the hegemonic masculine nationalist structure, a woman has no individual identity. Her identity rests on several patriarchal factors. Ritu Menon discusses these factors and argues, “‘Belonging’ for women is also—and uniquely—linked to sexuality, honor, chastity; family, community and country must agree on both their acceptability and legitimacy, and their membership within the fold” (56). However, men are not similarly associated with a nation. D. Kandiyoti states, “The

integration of women into modern ‘nationhood’ epitomised by citizenship in a sovereign nation-state somehow follows a different trajectory from that of men” (429). Unlike heterosexual “masculine” men who play more active roles in the making of the nation, women are considered only as signifiers for reproducing nationalist myths and narratives.

Julie Mostov, while discussing the cases of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and post-partition India in her work *From Gender to Nation* (2004), argues that to symbolise a national territory as a woman, the associated “metaphors and images of ... glory and heroic struggle create a kind of eroticism, which is highly symbolic, abstract and seductive....” On the contrary, the “traditional national spokesman (clergy and national elites) espouse a politics of reproduction and demographic control, backed by de-eroticized images of chaste and faithful wives, patriotic mothers and pure, wholesome heroes” (90). Thus, the flesh-and-blood woman is sexually abused, whereas the symbolic woman is worshipped as the chaste wife, mother and goddess: both in an attempt to emphasise the power and identity of one masculine nation over another.

The “purity” of a territory is maintained through its lineage. Thus, the responsibility of keeping the nation’s “purity” falls on the women who are “biological bearers of children/people.” Sociologist Nira Yuval-Davis, in *Gender and Nation* (2004), discusses the role of women in making a nation. “Purity” of a nation, according to her, “assumes fixed, essential and unitary constructs of cultures, identities and groupings.” So “the burden of representation” falls on the nation’s women “as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity’s identity and honour, both personally and collectively” (26, 45). Since women’s wombs are considered national symbols and properties, it results in the “commodification of women’s reproductive powers, especially those women from lower economic and ethnic positions” (Davis 28). Jasodhara Bagchi deems the usage of the concept of motherhood in the context of the nation as the “privatization

and institutionalization of motherhood” (65). Women are reduced to their roles of procreating the nation’s legacies and indoctrinating patriarchal and masculine national chauvinist qualities in these future generations.

India as a Gendered Nation

The Indian nation is also gendered in most nationalist narratives. However, even before the concept of the Indian nation came into being as a part of anti-colonial nationalism, Indian women were mostly perceived as metaphorical keepers of the “purity” of the patriarchal family. In Indian culture, social practices like *sati* and *jawahar vrat* were observed to protect the “honour” of the man and his lineage. The wife was required to sacrifice her life by immolating herself in her husband’s funeral pyre to keep his lineage “pure.” During the nineteenth-century nationalist movement, the patriarchal Hindu nation became an extension of the patriarchal Hindu family for women. The woman’s “purity” defined the identity of the nation. In her book *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation* (2003), Tanika Sarkar talks about the woman’s physical body used to define the Hindu nation’s “purity.” Sarkar says, “The woman’s body was the ultimate site of the virtue of stability, the last refuge of freedom. Independence, like a hidden jewel, could be detached from the external surroundings that spelt defeat and yet be concealed in the very core of the woman’s body (235).” Probably, this explains the often-represented ritual of *sati* in early nationalist literature. “Through her own self-destruction [*sati*] preserves this concealed independence from being usurped.” Sarkar further notes,

Very often, an implied continuum is postulated between the hidden, innermost private space, chastity, almost the sanctity of the vagina, to political independence at state level: as if, through a steady process of regression, this independence selfhood has been folded back from the public domain to the interior space of the household, and then further pushed

back into the hidden depths of an inviolate, chaste, pure female body...the highest virtue of the Hindu woman; most powerfully demonstrated in *sati* and *jawahar vrat*². (Sarkar 265)

Thus, the practices mentioned above, as discussed by Sarkar, use the very body of the woman to emphasise the “purity” of India as a nation and its associated idea of masculine nationalism. It was considered that the vagina keeps the lineage of the masculine nation “pure.” Hence, the vagina is the inner sanctum sanctorum of the nation, protected from foreign invasion and violation. Therefore, it can be noted how the vagina is considered better sacrificed as *sati* in the name of the “pure” nation than being defiled by the “Other.”

Moreover, the nation’s “purity” protectors are not just men. Women are also the cultural reproducers of the nation. Yuval-Davis states, “Women are not just passive victims, or even objects, of the ideologies and policies aimed at controlling their reproduction. On the contrary, very often it is women, especially older women, who are given the roles of the cultural reproducers of ‘the nation’” and they propagate patriarchal codes of “‘appropriate’ behaviour and appearance” and “exert control over other women who might be constructed as ‘deviants’” (37).

Looking through the Foucauldian framework of the nexus between power and knowledge, the women of the Hindu nation, as cultural producers of masculine nationalism, can be seen as capillaries of patriarchal power (51). Foucault talks about the dissemination of knowledge as controlled by the power structure of a society at a given point in time in history. Using his methodology, one may observe that women as mothers are subjects of the patriarchal power structure. They are themselves ideologically imbued with the knowledge sanctioned by power. These women then become the capillaries who disseminate patriarchal cultures and traditions of the Hindu religion and Hindu nation institutions to their progeny. The position of women in a

patriarchal and masculine nationalist structure is paradoxical. They are both subjects playing their roles of mothers, daughters and wives who uphold the hegemonic discourse and objects of this very structure who are, in the process, marginalised by the same hegemony. This contradictory position of women in Hindu society clearly has a cultural continuity with the tradition of symbolically worshipping women as deities and subordinating them in practice.

Goddesses in Indian Mythology

Dominant Hindu mythology in India is replete with images of goddesses. Some are regarded as faithful wives, and others are seen as female warriors. However, owing to the layered complexities within the Hindu religion, beliefs and practices surrounding these images vary according to their time and place of origin. These mythological and traditional beliefs have been linked to the symbolic identity of the Hindu woman in society in general.

Art historian Vidya Dehejia states that irrespective of all the forms of the goddesses worshipped, they are considered to belong to the concept of the *Devi* or Great Goddess, whom the devotees also address as *Ma* or Mother. The *Devi Mahatmya* (Glory of the Goddess) text which is a poem composed somewhere between the fifth and the sixth century, describes “all women as portions of Devi” (16). Thus, the popularly known Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and Mahasarasvati in Hindu mythology are the three different aspects of the Devi (21, 23).

The Hindu nation is concerned chiefly with the images of the goddess as a warrior and a faithful wife. The nation is deified as these goddesses, but it does not assure liberty and equality to the corporeal women in society in general. The myths concerning these goddesses can also be problematised. Academicians like Dehejia and David R Kinsley have discussed in length the historical traces that, unlike the male gods, goddesses played minor roles in the *Rg-veda* (Kinsley 7; Dehejia 19). These goddesses occupied marginal positions in the “Vedic vision of the divine.”

They were not portrayed as contenders to the male gods. Myths of only a few of these Vedic goddesses continued in later Hinduism. Most goddesses did not entirely even exist in Vedic literature. Goddesses were associated with “battle or blood sacrifice” only later. Vedic literature neither mentioned any warrior goddess nor referred to any “one great goddess” (Kinsley 17). Post-Vedic literature originating in the fourth century B.C. saw an emergence of the goddesses’ relatively active presence in the dominant Hindu culture. However, the broader worldview remained male-dominant (Dehejia 19).

The nation and its women are recurrently associated with popular Hindu warrior goddesses, Durga and Kali. Such metaphors were created during the anti-colonial nationalist movement. However, depictions of these goddesses can be found in much earlier records. Dehejia observes that Durga has been mentioned in texts which date back to the early Kushana period (137). Kinsley also suggests that Vedic literature mentions Durga cursorily but does not associate her with warfare. Only after the sixth century did Durga come to be worshipped as a warrior goddess (95-96). This symbol of the goddess Durga is used as a metaphor for the Indian nation. However, this can be problematised because Durga is also a patriarchal creation from early and medieval Hinduism. Kinsley mentions *Devi Mahatmya*’s descriptions of Durga, which state that she was born from the male gods’s collective creation to defeat the demon, Mahisa. Durga displays “superior martial ability and superior power.” She creates fellow female warriors like Kali and the Matrkas to defeat the demon (97).

However, Kinsley also suggests that “in many respects, Durga violates the model of the Hindu woman. She is not submissive, she is not subordinated to a male deity, she does not fulfil household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle” (Kinsley 97). Although Durga symbolises the supreme warrior goddess subverting the normative

role of a Hindu woman, the very act of her creation by the male gods reinforces her eventual subordinate position to these gods of the Hindu religion.

The *Devi-Mahatmya* also describes Durga as an all-powerful fierce goddess drunk on liquor and blood on the battlefield. She does not have any male consort. However, the later phase of Hinduism domesticates her and represents her as Shiva's wife. She is portrayed executing her role as the household's wife and mother. She is associated with domestic characteristics. Since then, she has been worshipped during her autumnal festival as the mother of her children (Kinsley 95-96). Cornelia Mallerbrien, in her essay "Tribal and Local Deities: Assimilations and Transformations" (1999), mentions that the cult of Durga has existed since around the fifth century, which portrays her having "contrasting character traits; she is *saumya* (gentle and mild) as well as *ghora* (frightful and terrible)" (137). Mallerbrien further argues that myths of Durga belonged to the tribal and local communities, as well as to the higher social classes. Eventually, these myths are integrated into the broader Hindu culture and tradition (139).

Similarly, Kali has found original references in texts such as the *Agni-Purana* and *Garuda-Purana* in the early medieval period, where she is "located either on the battlefield or in situations on the periphery of Hindu society" (Kinsley 116-118). She is thus a goddess associated with the margins of society. Spivak, in her essay "Moving Devi" (1999), observes that the goddess Kali has "preserved some special aura of aboriginality" owing to her tribal roots of origin (192). Most texts represent her as "an independent deity, unassociated with any male deity;" however, sometimes she is also defined as Shiva's consort. Even when associated with Shiva, she "plays the role of inciting him to wild behavior" (Kinsley 104). Kali also appears in the myths of Sati and Sita. When Sati is enraged with her father, Daksa, for insulting Shiva, she transforms into ten goddesses, of which Kali is one. In the *Ramayana*, Kali is the transformed manifestation of Sita when she kills

a demon to protect her husband, Rama (Kinsley 119). In both cases, Kali is the personified wrath and terror of an otherwise docile and faithful wife. Kali becomes that wrathful female figure that a woman could be for her husband's safety and protection. Thus, the warrior goddess Kali also remains contained within the patriarchal boundaries. Myths and iconographies represent Shiva as calming Kali's wrath and destructive power, further reinforcing her subordination to him (Kinsley 122).

Kali is never represented in Hindu mythology as a mother, probably due to her associations with destruction, death and insatiable hunger. Unlike the conventional Mother goddess, Kali is not depicted as "heavy hipped and heavy breasted." She is instead represented as "emaciated, lean, and gaunt," with "her mouth, her lolling tongue, and her bloody cleaver" drawing attention. Kinsley suggests that she embodies the inevitable cycle of life and death (126, 130). Only the late medieval Bengali devotional literature popularised Kali as a mother. However, in this case, she is worshipped by devotees for her fearsome image. She is not depicted as a mother to other gods/goddesses but to her devotees. As Kinsley puts it, "the devotees...adopt the position of the helpless child when approaching Kali. Even the child's mother may be fearsome, at times even hostile, the child has little choice but to return to her mother" (125). These Puranic warrior goddesses are a part of the dominant Hindu traditions. Apart from them, however, other lesser-known warrior goddesses like the Matrkas are worshipped in different villages in India. Unlike those of the broader practices, these goddesses are only limited to villages where they are worshipped. Since they are only locally known, they are not used to represent the entire nation.

On the contrary, popular goddesses as faithful wives have also been considered the ideal tropes for Hindu women. The women are expected to emulate the goddesses and be the bearers of the traditions and culture of the Hindu nation. Goddess Sati has been elaborately portrayed in

Kalidasa's fifth-century epic *Kumārasambhava* and also in the *Puranas*. She is popularly known in Hindu mythology for sacrificing her life by climbing into the ritualistic fire to avenge the insult her husband Shiva suffered from her father (Kinsley 40-41). She epitomises a chaste and dutiful wife who sacrifices her life for her husband. Thus, the Hindu practice of a woman committing suicide by immolating herself into her husband's funeral pyre became known as *sati*. These corporeal women have been revered as the goddess herself. Goddesses like Sita and Lakshmi are also revered as the quintessential chaste and faithful wives in Hindu mythology.

The representations of the Indian nation as any of the Hindu Puranic goddesses differed depending upon contemporary socio-political circumstances. The Indian nation is symbolised as Durga and Kali when confronted by foreign threats; when it is necessary to preserve cultural traditions, the nation could be portrayed as Sati, Sita or Lakshmi for the preservation of Indian traditions. Irrespective of these varied representations, the nation-goddess is always signified as the Mother of her citizens/devotees. Such relations may also be drawn from the traditions of the mother goddess. The *Devi-Mahatmya*'s descriptions of such traditions have been discussed earlier in this chapter.

Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi, in his book *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (1962), states that the figure of a mother goddess may have origins in pre-Aryan cults. She had been an independent warrior woman who was not associated with any male counterpart (79-80). Kamala Ganesh and Vidya Dehejia discuss the mother goddess' ambiguous position in Indian society. This goddess may not be a physical mother but is still portrayed as one (Ganesh 58; Dehejia 17). The mother goddess figure does not express "the idea of physical motherhood but a world-view in which the creative power of femininity is central." The female biological ability to procreate is associated with this goddess. Hence, it may be considered that the

mother goddess holds this possibility of creativity; she may or may not portray physical motherhood. Amongst several interpretations of the “mother” in mother goddess, this figure is also used as a “modern iconography of India...for the end-goal of nationalism” (Ganesh 58).

Age-old traditions depict the mother goddess as a virgin who is self-creating on cosmic dimensions, thus making her the goddess of fertility and agriculture. This mother goddess did not have any relation to male gods. She was considered to have existed in mythology before goddesses came to be represented alongside male gods as their consorts. Ganesh argues, “The ambivalence of the goddess has been linked by many writers to the cultural evaluation of female sexuality as dangerous and disruptive if not harnessed appropriately” (60). The earlier image of the single independent mother goddess is related to the principle of regeneration, of which life, sex and death are all part of the process. These older traditions explicitly expressed sexuality, but these representations were devoid of any eroticism. However, in the later traditions, when the goddess is domesticated as a consort of a male god, only her fertility is associated with motherhood while “sublimat[ing] the [explicit] erotic.” Barring the aspect of motherhood, there are implicit or explicit erotic representations of the goddess’ femininity. In the earlier traditions, the goddess’ sexuality was not concentrated within a personal relationship but concerned the abstract universal (Ganesh 61-63). Therein lies the ambivalence of the earlier image of this mother goddess. Moreover, the same constructions and reinterpretations of the mother goddess myth can be challenged based on their socio-political locations. An analysis of myths not only reveals an ambivalence of the chastised and erotic mother goddess but also exposes how the mother goddess came to be.

If the existential location of the mother goddess can be challenged, her association with the nation can also be contested. The deification of the nation as the Mother desexualises her, but the representations of the gendered nation are often erotic. Kamala Ganesh observes that the figure of

the goddess, however, “inverted, neutralised, absorbed, mainstreamed,” subverts the normative patriarchal structure by her very existence within it (61, 63). Nevertheless, this existence may be further problematised as a construct of the patriarchal system, which helps reinforce the same power regime. Moreover, the nation’s associations with the mother goddess stand on grounds regulated by particular power structures. The mother goddess is moulded accordingly, which consequently aids in the nation’s making.

Bharatmata as a Goddess

Twentieth-century nationalism saw the emergence of a new female Hindu deity, *Bharatmata* or Mother India. As mentioned, this contemporary Hindu national tradition has continued since the age-old pre-Aryan cult of mother goddesses as a protector of their devotees. Also, it assimilates the idea of the earth as a goddess and symbolises the nation as a mother goddess. Bharatmata, like most other female goddesses, does not have any husband or male consort. However, in this context, her sons need to protect her from foreign rule.

The figure of Bharatmata was first used in Bhudeb’s *Unabimsa Purana* (*The Nineteenth Purana*), published anonymously in 1866. This text mentions Bharatmata as “Adhi-Bharati, the widow of Arya Swami.” Kiran Chandra Bandopadhyay’s play *Bharat Mata*, which was first performed in 1873, used the term as well as the figure to evoke the sentiment of nationalism amongst people. The most significant of all references to this nation-goddess has been Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s Bengali novel *Ananda Math* (1882), which is based on the eighteenth-century Sanyasi Rebellion in Bengal. The novel portrays the Sanyasis taking up arms against the “existing Muslim rulers and the emerging British East India Company.” In the novel, the past, present and future of Bharatmata were compared to Hindu goddesses Jagadhatri, Kali and Durga, respectively (Bhattacharya 68, 71). Abanindranath Tagore painted “Bharat Mata as Lakshmi, the

goddess of prosperity and wealth, clad in the apparel of a vaishnava nun” in 1905 (Jha 35-6). Tagore’s painting may probably be the first illustration of India personified as a goddess (Ramaswamy 60).

Iconographic representations of Bharatmata as the Mother goddess retained the latter’s divine qualities (Jha 36-37). Temples were built for this goddess, first in Banaras by Shiv Gupt in 1936, then by Swami Satyamitrananad Giri in Haridwar in 1983 and very recently in Kolkata in 2015. The first Bharatmata temple in Banaras did not have any anthropomorphic idols enshrined. The devotees worshipped “a large, coloured relief map of the Indian subcontinent” enclosed there (Kinsley 184). However, the temple in Haridwar contained an anthropomorphic deity who “holds a milk urn in one hand and sheaves of grain in the other...signifying the white and green revolution that India needs for progress and prosperity” (Jha 37). The temple in Kolkata named “Jatiya Shaktipeeth” also contains an idol of goddess Durga, symbolising Mother India (worldhindunews.com). Sadan Jha argues that constructing such temples of Mother India is “a process of the institutionalization of a particular form of nationalism.” While discussing the relationship such temples establish between the country and its citizens, he says, “The moment one enters a temple complex, the human body is, potentially at least, transformed into the body of devotee” (37, 38). Thus, the nation as a goddess is transformed into a particular socio-historical and political institution.

It may also be noted that the Hindu traditions and mythology from which the nationalists draw to represent the Indian nation as a dominant Hindu goddess are somewhat problematic. As products of the hegemonic Hindu patriarchal structure, the traditions and myths about the goddesses are manipulated and selectively used as a part of the nation-building process, thus suppressing several other non-dominant myths. Hence, the symbolism of the Indian nation as the

goddess, who serves as the ideal for the roles of the Hindu mother, female warrior or faithful wife, stands on debatable grounds.

Viranganas as Signifiers of the Nation

The cult of Bharatmata, as well as the myths of goddesses of the broader Hindu tradition, have also been associated with the corporeal female warrior figures in Indian history. These heroic female characters have been represented as dominant Hindu goddesses or the mother goddess in nationalist narratives since the late nineteenth-early twentieth century who, as has already been mentioned earlier, came to be known as Viranganas.

A Virangana occupies an interesting social position. She is neither entirely a quintessential chaste wife nor is she the archetypal dangerous, all-powerful goddess. Aligning with the traditional belief, Sumathi Ramaswamy, in her book *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India* (2009), also states that a Virangana is primarily a woman warrior described in patriarchal language as one who possesses the qualities of “viryam.” However, this attribute of “viryam,” as Ramaswamy notes, is conventionally also referred to as male heroism (347). Hence, although a woman warrior at any particular point in history manifests her physical strength and power to fight for her nation, she is pushed under the masculine umbrella of male freedom fighters. In the context of anti-colonial Hindu nationalism, the symbol of the Virangana was crucial in the making of the Indian nation. Figures such as that of the Virangana evoked nationalist sentiments among Indian citizens across all identities. These symbols thus attempted to unite all identity differences into one cohesive unit against the colonial power.

However, the idea of India as one nation, which the figure of Virangana was used to represent, did not develop until the late nineteenth century. The Revolt of 1857 may probably be considered a significant historical event which catalysed the making of the Indian nation. The

Revolt was the first of its kind when a larger scale of the Indian population fought against one common foe, the British East India Company. Before the Revolt, there were localised resistances only. The *sipahis* (or the *sepoys* as the British officers addressed them) started a revolt against the colonial administration. The immediate cause was the greasing of the bullets with cattle or pigs' fat, which had hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindus and Muslims (Pati 1686). However, historian Bipan Chandra suggests there were already rumbling discontents against the colonial officers amongst the Indian soldiers. Thus, the revolt that broke out attracted a large majority of Indian soldiers across the country. There was an absence of leaders among these soldiers. So, the leadership of this revolt fell into the hands of "the territorial aristocrats and feudal chiefs who had suffered at the hands of the British" (Chandra 1-5). Thus, the revolt gradually transformed into a large-scale popular one. For the first time in the history of India, the general population had shared political interests, and their enemy was common (1-5). This fight for freedom, in the process, probably built the idea of India as one nation.

Chandra further mentions that the Revolt of 1857 was a popular uprising as it consisted of rebels who belonged to all sections of society. However, there were still some sections like "the merchants, intelligentsia and [some] Indian rulers" who supported the British regime. The revolt failed as the British eliminated the rebels, but this revolt did kindle the nation's anti-colonial nationalist movement. Chandra states:

Despite the sepoy's limitations and weaknesses, their effort to emancipate the country from foreign rule was a patriotic act and a Progressive step. If the importance of a historical event is not limited to its immediate achievements the Revolt of 1857 was not a pure historical tragedy. Even in failure it served a grand purpose: a source of inspiration for the national liberation movement which later achieved what the Revolt could not. (10-11)

Chandra's remarks reflect his own nationalist sentiments. The "grand purpose" he mentions here may be interpreted as making the Indian nation a power opposing the colonial administration. This establishes how the Revolt of 1857 was the first historical event which paved the way for the birth of the idea of one nation.

Biswamoy Pati, in his essay "Historians and Historiography: Situating 1857" (2007), discusses how the Revolt further influenced "the first generation of the Indian nationalists." This historical event was "incorporated and appropriated as a part of nationalist imagery" (1686). One such detail from the Revolt of 1857, which the Indian nationalists used to forward their movement, was the narrative of Rani Lakshmibai. She fought against the British troops to safeguard her fort in Jhansi and eventually failed. Her struggle and possible death made her very popular among the Indian population. Bipan Chandra calls her "the most outstanding leader of the Revolt" (3). After 1857, she came to be addressed as Virangana, who had sacrificed her life for the nation's cause. Lakshmibai's figure as a Virangana was one of the nationalist imageries used during the anti-colonial Hindu nationalism.

The women who participated in this revolt were not addressed as Viranganas then. It was later, in the context of Hindu nationalism, that they came to be used as socio-political and cultural symbols. Since then, the term came to be primarily used to represent a woman in Indian history who offered either active or passive resistance against foreign dominion to safeguard *her nation*. Not all historical female figures resisted the British government. All of them did not necessarily fight for the Indian nation. The kingdoms or nation-states they belonged to represented *their* idea of the nation. Nineteenth-century Brahmin queen of Jhansi, Rani Lakshmibai, fought the British to safeguard *her* kingdom. Seventeenth-century Ahom princess Joymoti resisted the ruling kings in the then Assam to ensure the future of the Ahom kingdom. It was only during and after the anti-

colonial nationalist movement that these historical female figures came to be addressed as Viranganas in the context of different and grand ideas of nation, nationalism and sub-nationalism. Since the anti-colonial Hindu nationalist movement, the Virangana became the personified nation. However, what requires further examination is how constructing and evoking the Virangana myth became a necessity for anti-colonial Indian nationalism.

Recovering Indian Masculinity Through the Virangana Myth

The Virangana, like the figure of Bharatmata, was probably necessary for creating a unified notion of nationalism in India. It was used as the national figure of tradition against colonial modernity. The Indian ideas of masculinity and femininity were challenged by colonialism. This figure served to uphold the Indian nationalist ideas of gender stereotypes. The British notion of masculinity, which the colonial government had enforced on Indian culture, is rooted in the Western and modern concepts of nationalism and masculinity.

George L. Mosse, in *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (1998), describes the modern form of Western masculinity as the focal point of the contemporary ideas of nation and nationalism (7). Similarly, John Springhall, in his essay “Building Character in the British Boy: The Attempt to Extend Christian Manliness to Working Class Adolescents, 1880-1940” (1987), provides an account of the middle-class English society’s emphasis on the Christian ideals of masculinity and manliness. These attributes were institutionally imparted to English men, and consequently, they were required to join the English imperial force during the First World War (52). Joanne Nagel, in her article “Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations” (2010), states:

Given the close association between the nineteenth and twentieth-century nationalism, colonialism and imperialism, militarism and masculinity, given the fact that it was mainly

men who adhered to and enacted them, and given the power of those movements and institutions in the making of the world, it is not surprising that masculinity and nationalism seem stamped from the same mould—the mould which has shaped the important factors of the structure and culture of the nations and states in the modern state system. (251)

Of all the various notions of masculinity, the hegemonic patriarchal concept is associated with the ideas of nationalism and national identity. Such hegemonic ideas of hypermasculinity and masculine nationalism are practised and expressed vis-à-vis men's physical, sexual, and emotional dominion over “their”/ “Other” women. Accordingly, it justifies the cult of violence against women within this structure of masculine nationalism. David D. Gilmore, in *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (1990), observes that although there are no universal markers of masculinity, it still holds a similarity across cultures. This similarity lies vis-à-vis their self-claimed ownership of the women and family. Gilmore suggests that:

To be a man in most of the societies..., one must impregnate women, protect dependents from danger, and provision kith and kin. So although there may be no “Universal Male”, we may speak of a “Ubiquitous Male” based on these criteria of performance. We might call this quasi-global personage something like Man-the-Impregnator-Protector-Provider. (222-23)

The white Christian ideal of masculinity became the framework through which the British administration in India judged gender stereotypes and sexuality. The colonial power challenged the ideas of Indian masculinity by questioning the Indian men's ability to protect and provide for their women.

Ashis Nandy, in his book *Intimate Enemy* (2009), discusses how traditional Indian ideas of sexuality were relatively less rigid than the European Christian sexual stereotypes. According to

him, British colonisers followed Indian culture and traditions during the initial period. However, the impact of the colonial culture on Indian society influenced and re-ordered native notions of gender and sexuality. Nandy talks of this change in the Indian cultural consciousness and states:

The polarity defined by the antonymous *Purusatva* [the essence of masculinity] and *naritva* [the essence of femininity] was gradually supplanted, in the colonial culture of politics, by the antonyms of *purusatva* and *klibatva* [the essence of hermaphroditism]; femininity-in-masculinity was now perceived as the final negation of a man's political identity, a pathology more dangerous than femininity itself. (8)

As Nandy puts forward, *purusatva* and *naritva* were the two notions of sexuality in traditional culture in India. However, these ideas were not rigid and specific to any gender role. The more rigid and binary concepts of gender and sexuality of the Victorian Christian culture percolated into Indian culture and consciousness and thereby created the two antonymous compartments of *purusatva* and *klibatva* (8). It may be noted that such constructions do not regard the idea of femininity at all. It is either masculinity or the lack of it that defines one's sexuality.

Nandy observes the layered response of Indians to the politico-cultural colonisation by the British Raj. According to him, colonial modernity altered these traditional notions of masculinity to form a fixed British masculine self (44). Nandy's arguments can be challenged because it was the traditional caste system that had already foregrounded dichotomies of masculine/ feminine and martial/non-martial. However, colonial power used these same dichotomies to enforce their imperial motives.

Nandy further argues that the Indian male's notions of masculinity, which were now perceived through the framework of the fixed British masculine self, were challenged by the colonial masculine power regime. To oppose British Raj, the Indian nationalists revived the

traditional masculinity of kshatriyahood and declared it to be the need of the hour. This Indian ideal of hypermasculinity, which concerned the virile kshatriyas, was formed through the Western framework of gender and sexuality (52). Thus, nationalist imagery relating to men or women was predominantly masculine according to Western standards of sexual stereotypes.

Mrinalini Sinha, in her book *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly' Englishman and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1995), argues that Indian women became victims of the tussle between the masculine ideals propagated by British colonial power and Indian nationalists. Colonial modernity suggested that Bengali men were effeminate as opposed to the more virile British colonisers. Bengali men, in particular, and Indian men, in general, thus felt the need to recover their traditional masculinity. They expressed their masculinity by strengthening their hold over women (181). Borrowing from Nandy's arguments, irony may be noted in the fact that the traditional masculine self, which the Indian nationalists considered as a response against colonialism, was itself based on Western Christian ideals of gender and sexuality.

The British colonial regime further claimed that it considered the position of women as a marker of modernity and progress of any society. Thus, the British did not think India was a modern society because of rituals like *sati* and child marriage that were practised in India. The colonial government, therefore, highlighted the subordinate position of women in several Hindu scriptures to legitimise their political hold over the Hindu nation. Partha Chatterjee, in his article "Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonized Women" (1989), suggests that "the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country" (622). However, such attempts were more for political gains than for social reform. Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) is probably

the most significant of these attempts. It portrayed India in very stark terms, as a backward country needing the British government's intervention.

Woman's Question and Social Reform in India

Mrinalini Sinha, in her essay "Refashioning Mother India: Feminism and Nationalism in Late-Colonial India" (2000), argues that if Mayo's *Mother India* revealed the "evil" social practices of Brahmanical Hinduism, then Indian women took this as an opportunity to raise their voice demanding emancipation and social reform. As an immediate action, women's organisations demanded the passing of the Sarda Act (the restraint of child marriage). Such a demand unsettled the age-old Hindu tradition of child marriage, as depicted in the Brahmanical *Shastras*. The passing of the act would cost the British the support of the upper-class Brahmanical Hindu loyalists. However, the demand for the Sarda Act also grew popular not only among organised women groups but also among the nationalists. The women's question of emancipation was probably used as an agenda by the cultural nationalists to lead the independence movement against the British government. Due to popular demand, the British government passed the Act in 1929 (630).

The cultural nationalists supported the Sarda Act to restore the status of women in Indian society, which, according to the nationalists, the women had once enjoyed. However, liberal feminists rejected these ancient laws based on the Brahmanical *Shastras*, stating, "We have had enough of men's laws for us...we want to make laws for ourselves." In *Stri Dharma*, a popularly known early twentieth-century feminist journal in India, these feminists argued:

Our laws as ordained and drawn upon by the ancients...were satisfactory enough for men and women of the old days. But they do not satisfy us today. We must agitate and get them changed or get new laws introduced. (Sinha 632-3)

The organised women's groups denied the earlier Brahmanical Hindu laws. "In its vision of a reformed India," they demanded "equal pay for equal work, equal rights to divorce, and equal standards of morality." The early twentieth-century movement in America led by women who fought for their right to vote in public elections in the suffragette movement influenced women's groups in India. However, the Indian women who participated in this movement came from the upper-caste and upper-class group of Indian society (Sinha 634). Thus, women from all sections of society did not, or rather could not have a similar political voice.

Social reform in India gained momentum in the nineteenth century due to the contention between the colonial power regime and the Indian nationalists. The reform movements were not always based on religious factors; there were broader social issues, too, which these movements focused on. Charles H Heimsath, in his book *Indian Nationalism and Social Reform in India*, argues that the Bhakti cult (since part of the earlier reform movement focused on religion) was a response against orthodox Hinduism (135). On the other hand, modern social reforms were more dedicated to ushering in social emancipation in Indian society. British interventions in Indian culture and traditions influenced modern social reform in India. Heimsath suggests that the influence of British rule in India brought a radical shift in the Indian social perspective. Although modern social reform in India was influenced by the concept of social progress in the West, it was not organised in the Western framework. In this context, Vijay Nambiar, in his essay "Review: Nationalism and Social Reform in India" (1965), argues that, unlike the Western concept, modern Indian social reform did not primarily focus on "the alleviation of the conditions of the underprivileged." Social reform in India was initiated by the upper-class, who were English-educated and had access to "Western concepts of individualism, natural rights and social efficiency." Social reform initiated by the elite class instead focused on "rationalism and positive social ethics" to be

brought about by introducing English education and the emanation of Western knowledge to the Indians (1440-1).

Heimsath asserts that social reform in modern India can be broadly classified into different stages. In the first stage, reformers, constituted by the English-educated upper-class, worked to transform personal lives according to Western standards. Raja Rammohun Roy was a reformer who tried to combine ancient Hindu teachings with “the rational elements of the Christian and Islamic traditions.” Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar supported widow remarriage in Bengal. In West India, similar efforts were put in by reformers like Mahadev Govind Ranade, Balgangadhar Shastri Jambhekar, Mehtaji Mancharam and Jyotirao Phule, and in South India by reformers like Viresa Lingam Pantalu (163).

In the second stage, “sub-national groups” were formed, which inculcated, as Nambiar also suggests, “a new desire for unity between the scattered and culturally diverse social groups” (1441). During the second stage, nationalism as a political sentiment arose in India. Social protests were no longer individualised. Nambiar further states that factors like “a rapidly growing system of communication, the expansion of educational facilities and the increase in the number and circulation of newspapers” facilitated social mobility, thus giving rise to national consciousness among Indian intellectuals. Eventually, social reform focused on the “regeneration of the traditional spirit of the nation.” Ranade tried to recognise social reform as a part of the national movement by assimilating it with the ideology of the Indian National Congress (1441). Bal Gangadhar Tilak also sought to raise this national consciousness by reviving Hindu religious and cultural values. Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, in their book *A Concise History of Modern India* (2001), state that Tilak started organising traditional festivals celebrating Ganesha and Shivaji through which he attempted to bring together the youth for the cause of Hindu

nationalism. Tilak's cultural revival, however, was against the British ideas of social reform, especially those concerning women's empowerment (151-52). Nevertheless, social reform, intricately connected with national consciousness, was primarily and generally based on the woman's question.

There was an intense debate on the position of women in Indian society during the nineteenth century. Parimala V. Rao discusses these debates in her essay "Nationalism and the Visibility of Women in Public Space: Tilak's Criticism of Rakhmabai and Ramabai" (2008). She states that "the Reformers, the Orthodox and the Nationalists" were all a part of the debate on the woman's question. While a few reformers "approached the issue from the point of view of absolute equality of mankind," some others considered that "an improvement in the position of women was a necessary condition for constructing the Indian nation." The orthodoxy, on the other hand, was not against any changes in the matter, but they did not want to be the torchbearers of the movement (136).

The reformers who emphasised the improvement of women's position blamed the institution of child marriage as the reason for the increase in the number of widows. So, they worked for the promotion of education for women, which would eventually raise their awareness against institutions like child marriage. They emphasised the need to educate women as it would bring them individual freedom. Reformers like Jyotirao Phule spoke against the gender-biased *Dharmashastras*, which did not discuss women's liberty (Rao 97-102). Women reformers like Pandita Ramabai³ and Rakhmabai⁴ were also critics of Brahmanical patriarchy and the gendered biases of the *Dharmashastras*.

The Age of Consent Bill, which raised the official marriageable age of girls from 10 to 12, significantly transformed the idea of nationalism in India. After much debate, the bill was passed

in 1891. The passing of this Bill witnessed a transition from the elitist idea of nationalism propagated earlier to a popular mass movement. With the controversy of the Bill and its sanction by the British government, orthodox Hindu leaders like Tilak manipulated “indigenous cultural symbols” to portray a negative influence of the West over the East (Nambiar 1441-4). This new nationalist movement claimed that they protested against the social evils of the Hindu religion, but more than that, they condemned Western intervention in the hegemonic Hindu nation. The nationalists, thus, challenged Western influence over Indian tradition and countered the British questions on Indian masculinity by trying to defend India’s past and tradition.

The nationalist movement, which then emerged, was thus a consequence of the tussle between two sets of patriarchal socio-political structures. Anti-colonial nationalism in India was thus invented and sustained through various myths and symbols. Nambiar discusses Heimsath’s opinions in this context and states:

What developed as Indian nationalism was actually a myth based on consciously propagated ideas and one which was more a product of the personal preferences of the so-called nationalists than an enunciation of social realities...once this was done, through a process of rationalisation, an attempt was made to relate this myth to shared religious, linguistic and geographic identifications...there was nothing spontaneous about the appearance of nationalism in India; it was consciously and carefully contrived by an “eminent company of intellectuals.” (1442)

The broader idea of nationalism in India came to be emphasised using symbols and traditions of the Hindu religion. In contrast to the emerging idea of nationalism initiated by the Muslim League, Indian nationalism was dominantly portrayed as Hindu (Nambiar 1445). The more extensive section of the nationalists was Hindus, who probably expressed their political nationalism through

Hindu cultural and religious symbols. This probably created Hindu nationalism as one of the many strains of nationalism within the larger Indian nationalist movement.

Ashutosh Varshney, in his article “Contested Meanings: India’s National Identity, Hindu Nationalism, and the Politics of Anxiety” (1993), discusses anti-colonial Indian nationalism and the subsequent strains of nationalism which emerged. Mahatma Gandhi, as Varshney posits, was “a Hindu and a nationalist, not a Hindu nationalist.” Gandhian nationalism was more tolerant and inclusive (7). Jawaharlal Nehru, on the other hand, was not a believer in religion. He regarded “unity in culture, not in religion” (11). For Nehru, a solution to unite India as one nation was “modernity and economic development” (14). Like Gandhi, Nehruvian nationalism was also inclusive and secular. It was later, in the mid-1980s, that Hindu nationalism “acquired unprecedented political strength” (7). Since then, this more orthodox form of nationalism probably claims to have incorporated Gandhi’s ideals of Hinduism and nationalism, albeit only, to justify its supremacist nationalist ideologies.

Both Gandhi and Nehru, as Shakuntala Rao, in her article “Woman-as-symbol: The Intersections of Identity Politics, Gender, and Indian Nationalism” (1999), considered women integral parts of Indian nationalism. While Nehru was instrumental help in passing laws like the Hindu Marriage Act in 1955 and the Hindu Succession Act in 1956 in the Parliament (these laws allowed women “to inherit property and seek divorce or separation from their husbands”), Gandhi encouraged women to participate in the Swaraj movement actively. However, he envisioned women as prototypes of the Hindu goddesses Sati, Sita and Savitri: the quintessential non-violent suffering woman. Although Nehru did not comment on the representation of the nation and national identity vis-à-vis women, he neither expressed reservations against this discourse (Rao 4-5).

Lou Ratté, in her essay “Goddesses, Mothers, and Heroines: Hindu Women and the Feminine in the Early Nationalist Movement” (1985), discusses how Hindu anti-colonial nationalists used the stereotyped roles of goddesses, mothers and heroines as part of an ideal framework to establish women’s position, in general, and Hindu women’s position, in particular, in the overtly patriarchal nationalist movement. She states that although the Western-educated Indian men altered the social setup, the Hindu women’s traditional role as wives did not change. However, the British took an interest in women’s social reform and passed a law banning the practice of *sati* in 1828. This gave rise to political debates among the Indian men. As critics like Heimsath and Rao argue about the contestations over the implementation of outlawing the practice of *sati*, Ratté also discusses how the extremist nationalists voiced against the British government’s interference in Indian culture and traditions. The extremists did not separate the political from the cultural. They argued that if there was a need to regenerate, then Indian culture could do so without any foreign assistance. Ratté justifies the extremists’ position by stating that their concern was more religion-specific. As opposed to the polytheistic Hindu religion, the Christian missionaries portrayed Hindu women as “the abject victims of a decadent, priest-ridden system.” Hindu nationalists accepted the degraded status of women but also stressed “a golden-age theory of history to show that such had not always been the case; in the past, they argued, Hindu women had been men’s social equals and the religious system had been pure” (354-55).

Ratté further states that social reform continued, and some sections of women did benefit socially. However, they were also influenced by the nationalist movement after the Partition of Bengal in the 1890s and joined the struggle as revolutionaries. During this period, the nationalist movement took a turn where the extremists and the moderates merged in their socio-political views. The cultural movement in Bengal in the 1860s drew traditional images from the “golden-

age” of Indian society as weapons against the British government. Ratté observes that religion was an integral part of Hindu culture. So, women who entered the nationalist movement “at the symbolic level” were “preceded by the Hindu mother goddess” (358). Thus, Hindu goddesses entered the nationalist ideology and became ideal roles to which Hindu nationalist women needed to conform. This could be viewed as a patriarchal tool to contain the Hindu women, who had gained relatively more access to the world, within the social boundaries.

Moreover, as Ratté mentions, the images of the Hindu goddesses also served the purpose of offending and opposing the “monotheistic and patriarchal British” (358-9). The more sexually expressive images of the Hindu goddesses probably stood as an antithesis to the colonial Christian ideology. Hence, goddess mythology was used as nationalist imagery to make the Indian nation. The figure of the Virangana was a related nationalist imagery which drew from traditional history and asserted the self-regeneration capacity of the Indian society. The Virangana’s courage and martyrdom were significant exemplars for the Indian population, which would have inspired them to partake in the nationalist movement to uproot any foreign intervention and build their national identity. The Virangana was probably a more potent tool of Hindu nationalism depicting a synthesis of the mythological goddess as well as the historical heroine.

The Virangana as Bharatmata

Earlier in this chapter, Bharatmata was discussed as a goddess in Hindu mythology. Historical warrior women came to be raised on a pedestal as goddesses and, consequently, as Viranganas in the context of the nation. Thus, the figures of Bharatmata and Virangana came to be represented in one frame as a metaphor for the Indian nation at large. The anthropomorphic figure of Bharatmata as a Hindu goddess representing the nation was the most commonly used image to emphasise the identity of India as a Hindu nation. The idea of a Hindu woman as the

Hindu nation is reproduced vis-à-vis different symbols, myths, icons and other forms of knowledge. Cartography is one of the most common modes of representing the Indian nation, which uses the figure of Bharatmata. While discussing cartography as a mode of nationalist iconography of Mother India in her essay “Maps and Mother Goddesses in Modern India” (2001), Sumathi Ramaswamy suggests that the image of Bharatmata was used on Indian maps to portray the idea of the nation as a mother goddess. Ramaswamy calls these representations “bodyscapes.” Ramaswamy notes, despite socio-political differences, “the female body in its apparent singularity conferred unity, wholeness and stability, even as it subversively un-did the borders and boundaries so carefully reinforced by state (colonial and post-colonial) cartography” (98, 109).

Thus, the image of the Bharatmata was successfully used in the nation-building process during the anti-colonial nationalist movement. The Virangana is the reified figure of the deified nation. Such intricately woven associations of the Hindu goddess, the Hindu nation and Hindu female heroism have been relevant since anti-colonial nationalism till their contemporary interpretations. Kathryn Hansen observes the significance of the figure of the Virangana in the context of nationalism. She states that “reform movements ..., the nationalist movement in its many phases, and more radical political and social programmes have addressed the status of women, and in so doing have claimed the Virangana as a potent symbol, both to combat colonial domination and to overturn oppressive attitudes toward women within the society (29).” Although there are Viranganas in Indian mythology as well as Indian history who are considered to showcase female power, women in the patriarchal Indian society generally did/do not enjoy equality and freedom. As has already been discussed, mythological Viranganas were the creation of a patriarchal society, which were mostly used as symbols to reinforce the same hegemonic discourse.

However, a few historical heroic women like Rani Lakshmibai subvert certain upper-caste Hindu rituals like *sati*. As Hansen argues, “Several stories of such queens emphasise the decision to forego *sati*⁵, with its promise of earthly prestige and spiritual liberation, for the greater obligation of serving one’s family and one’s people in the face of hostile threats” (27). Their roles as weapons against the nation’s foes probably deify them as goddesses. This Virangana, as Hansen describes, is “not submissive...not subordinated to a male deity, she does not fulfil household duties, and she excels at what is traditionally a male function, fighting in battle” (28). However, the historical heroic woman is no less considered than the “pure” *sati*. As Hansen observes, *sati*, etymologically represents “sat” or “truth” which signifies “chastity.” But the upper-caste historical heroic woman escapes the rituals of *sati*. Moreover, evidence suggests that “little or no emphasis is placed on the sexual fidelity of the Virangana or her status as ‘wife’ or ‘widow’ (28).” This indicates that the sexuality of the Virangana is not a matter of concern in the broader context of the nation as long as it serves the purpose of a nationalist symbol. This does not suggest that this woman herself is desexualised, but she is portrayed so as a metaphor for the nation. In this case, the historical heroine and the *sati* probably lose agency over her own life. The masculine nation controls these women’s lives and stature. However problematic and layered this figure of the Virangana might be, it was woven into the myths of the goddess Bharatmata. These superimposed nationalist imageries established the nation’s sanctity and “purity.”

Virangana as the New Indian Woman

The image of the Virangana is also tied to the idea of the “new Indian woman.” It is a construct of the anti-colonial nationalist movement. A historical warrior woman is deified as a dominant Hindu goddess and associated with an everyday “new Indian woman.” Although this does not guarantee an ordinary woman any freedom from the hegemony of the traditional and

modern nationalist structure, the idea of a “new Indian woman” was still prevalent in Indian society.

The construct of the “new Indian woman” is a response to the white Western stereotypical image of a distressed “third world woman” in need of colonial protection, which works like Mayo’s *Mother India* propagated (Forbes 297). In this light, the Indian nationalists were looking at the nineteenth-century woman’s question but as constituted by and in the colonialist discourse. The colonial critics and the Indian nationalists contested the dichotomy of the West/material and the East/spiritual. The East would not unquestioningly ape the West but incorporate the material while retaining its spiritual strength to overcome the latter’s hegemony (Sinha 623). In theory, women were considered to be signifiers of this spiritual energy the East possessed.

Partha Chatterjee discusses the initial need for the modern Indian woman to symbolise their “Indianness,” differentiating the East from the West (622). However, he suggests that “nationalism was not simply about a political struggle for power.” India’s political independence was related to both its material and spiritual aspects. The Hindu nationalists believed that the former lies outside us and is not very significant; the latter lies inside us and is our true self. India, according to Chatterjee, needed to consider the spiritual aspects and the inner self to “adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity” (624).

The inner self metaphorically represents the “Home,” whereas the outer self signifies the “World.” Thus, the woman who constitutes the “Home” is generally considered the inner self, the “true identity” of the country. Hence, based on this assumption lies the masculine nationalist justification that women need protection from the material world. The nationalists asserted that the Europeans could not subjugate the “inner, essential identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture” (Chatterjee 624). The primary motive of the nationalist struggle

was to strengthen the inner sanctum of the country. However, in the process, the women—the inner sanctum—were only commodified for the broader context of masculine nationalism. The woman's question was related to the Home/World dichotomy. The nationalists stated that Western aspects need not be rejected entirely. Modernity was not dismissed but was incorporated within the project of nationalism (Chatterjee 625).

The “new Indian woman” was thus situated in a dichotomous position. The institution of masculine nationalism feared that access to Western education would corrupt the “new Indian woman.” Tanika Sarkar discusses “a large body of tracts and folk art [which] depicted the modern woman as a self-indulgent, spoilt and lazy creature who cared nothing for family or national fortune.” She further states, “Women were primarily responsible for deciding household purchases. They, therefore, served as the target of both nationalist appeal and blame...The archetypal evil woman of these times was not the immoral or the economically independent one, but one who inspired by modern education had exchanged sacred ritual objects (the conch shell bangle, the ritually pure fabric, sindur) for foreign luxury ones...” (35). Western influence on the Hindu woman was considered to do her evil and cost her “purity.”

The modern Indian woman was also required to remain chaste towards her husband despite her exposure to social reforms. The Hindu wife's chastity towards her husband implied chastity towards the nation. Thus, ascetic widowhood was given primary importance. While discussing the significance provided to ascetic widowhood, Sarkar states, “Strict ritual observances root the widow's body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination...Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood” (42). The Hindu widow is desexualised, thus epitomising her as the nation. However, it is the widow's/the nation's sexuality which needs protection from Western penetration. Like the symbol of the chaste widow, a sati is also portrayed

as “an adorable nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in oppositions of Hindu nationalism” (Sarkar 42).

Sarkar further argues that the institution of marriage was eventually considered flawed for the existence of marital violence within it. Since the imagery of the Hindu nation-Hindu wife would probably have threatened the more massive nationalist structure, the Hindu nation came to be symbolised as the Hindu mother instead (42). The mother was now revered as the Mother—Bharatmata or the reified image of the motherland. This new signifier broke away from and moved beyond the “Home and World” binary. Such a transition is a process of desexualising the woman personified.

Sarkar notes that “nationalism deploys the vocabulary of kinship (here, a matriarchal connection) or the vocabulary of the home, where again the figure of the Mother is dominant” (253). In this context, Sarkar probably refers to the Mother as the procreator and nurturer of the nation. This idea is, of course, a myth produced by the hegemonic patriarchal discourse to sustain itself. She further argues that “a violent desire to break out of colonialism’s iron frame” was “by a return to a past. This meant return to one’s mother, a reversion to the womb, to a state of innocence and pleasure, to a zone where the infant is as yet undifferentiated from the mother, as yet unaware of his own distinct self” (253).

The mother, thus, becomes that ultimate refuge to where her sons return to ignite their anti-colonial resistance. According to Elleke Boehmer, “the image of the mother invites connotations of origin—birth, hearth, roots, the umbilical cord...” These imageries are then associated with the macrocosm of the “beloved earth, the national territory and the first spoken language, the national tongue” (27). As already discussed, the mother’s reproductive ability makes her representable of the very idea of birth and its associated imageries. Thus, the image of the mother is overly

connected with the fertility of a nation's territory. This argument also ties in with Sumathi Ramaswamy's arguments, which have been discussed earlier, regarding the cartographic representations of Bharatmata as a fecund goddess.

Sarkar agrees with Partha Chatterjee's concept of the imagined nation and asserts, "As is usual with other nationalist discourses, the country is not just a piece of land with people living on it." Sarkar further develops this idea and talks explicitly about drawing an abstract nation "from the people" and personifying it as "the Mother goddess, the most recent and most sacred deity in the Hindu pantheon."⁶ The original Mother goddess cult was used as a metaphor in the nation's making. The nation comprises people who "are not the 'desh' itself but are sons of the Mother—detached from an imagined entity and put in a subordinate relation to it" (Chatterjee 251). So, the physical form of the dominant Hindu Mother goddess was used to lend more meaning to an otherwise abstract mother-son relationship.

The nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu nationalists consider the mother goddess a figure of "power, an image of resurgent and fearful strength, irrevocably associated in the Bengali Hindu mind with the concept of Shakti, on whose grace depends the success of the patriotic enterprise." The ideal Hindu mother was the "quintessentially neglected wife" who was then seen only as an all-suffering mother. Motherhood was seen as women's "ultimate identity" as opposed to the modern, Western-educated women. However, in the background of nationalism, the figure of the all-suffering mother gradually transformed into the paradoxical Mother goddess. This "mother image... projected by the anti-colonial uprising was a combination of the affective warmth of a quintessentially [all-suffering] Bengali mother and the [all-powerful] mother goddess Shakti...known in mainstream religious practices" (Bagchi 66). The image of the "new Indian woman" was founded on this paradoxical image of the Mother goddess.

Tanika Sarkar argues that irrespective of whether the nation was deified as Kali or Durga (or any other dominant Hindu goddess), the goddesses, in this context, were identified vis-à-vis their roles as the mothers of the nation's sons. She states, "Once the mother, whether through her wrath, or through her calm strength, arouses her sons, the struggle for leadership passes out of her hands into those of her sons: so, ultimately, the woman has a specific and limited role, and there is no final and absolute transgression" (257). Like Nira Yuval-Davis (whose ideas have been discussed earlier in this chapter), Sarkar also argues that women are considered merely biological and cultural reproducers of the nation. Otherwise, the woman has no other role in making the Hindu nation. The biological mothers, as well as the Mother goddess, have the same role—to regenerate the nation biologically or metaphorically. Hence, in both cases, the mother is denied individuality; she is only an object in making a nation and nationalism.

The everyday "new Indian woman" was also figuratively compared with the goddess in theory and domesticated in praxis even if she received a Western education. Women could not be entirely westernised such that they become equal to their male partners. Men could breach social and geographical boundaries to become the epitome of the Western-educated man. Western influence on Indian women was appropriated by the Indian patriarchal nationalist structure (Chatterjee 627).

Although the "new Indian woman" is provided access to Western education and can venture out of the Home to participate in political protests and organisations, she is not liberated from the holds of the patriarchal setup. She is subjugated to a new form of patriarchy. It allows her education and political engagement. This same patriarchal culture weaves together the figures of the mythological goddesses, the Viranganas and everyday women. However, this system uses women as a cultural symbol of nationalism. The "new Indian woman" is different from her modern

Western counterpart as well as from her older Indian counterpart. She is educated and can form socio-political organisations but is still a subject of masculine cultural nationalism (Chatterjee 627). The Virangana, as a cultural symbol, represents the theoretical idea of the “new Indian woman,” but in reality, everyday women were denied liberty and freedom, which the Viranganas selectively possessed.

The modern masculine framework of cultural nationalism imposed new social responsibilities on women. Their emancipation was associated with sovereign nationhood, which bound them to “a new, yet entirely legitimate subordination.” This form of coercive patriarchy implemented a subtle force of persuasion which engaged in the adulation of women as goddesses and mothers. The same institution of masculine nationalism also appropriates the historical narratives of warrior women who fought for their nation-states and recreates them as Viranganas. However, even these reconstructions are restrained within the normative structure without threatening the woman’s traditional femininity (Chatterjee 629-30).

It may be noted here that the gendered construct of the nation is then layered. The nation is considered male and a man’s property. However, it is represented as a woman. This ideology in making the Hindu nation, which continued since the late nineteenth century, also has resonances in the contemporary political situation. In a 1997 wall calendar of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu right-wing organisation, there is an Indian map with a figure of a goddess with her lion. Swami Ramtirth’s lines in Hindi, which were inscribed below this image, read:

*Main Bharat hoon. Bharatvarsh mera sharir hain....Jab main chalta hoon to sochta hoon
ki pura Bharavarsh chal raha hain. Jab bolta hoon to sochta hoon ki pura Bharat bol raha
hai...*

(I am India. The Indian nation is my body...When I walk, I sense all India moves with me. When I speak, India speaks with me...). (Jha 34-35)

It may be observed how the body of the Indian map is portrayed as a female, but the subtext below uses the male sex syntax. Thus, it may be argued that although the nation's body is figuratively considered female, the nation is male⁷.

Unlike the older form of Indian patriarchy and nationalist ideology, this new Indian patriarchy claims to deconstruct the symbolisation of women as sex objects in the nationalist ideology. The nationalist does not consider his own women as "sex objects" because they are not the Other, White Western women. However, it suggests that the nationalist ideology commodifies the Other woman as "sex objects" (Chatterjee 622-633). One may infer from his argument that the nation is desexualised, whereas the nation's women are sexualised and, hence, commodified.

Sumathi Ramaswamy offers an idea of the possible erotic relationship of the gendered nation with her male citizens. She states that "even as the nation appears as the ground on which filial bonds between the citizenry and the territory are erected, it also emerges as a field for the play of erotic desire, as a regime for regulating pleasure" (109). One may argue that possibly, Ramaswamy is not considering the nation as the Mother in this context. However, the figure of "the nation as the Mother" is an ambiguous one and, to borrow Kamala Ganesh's idea, open to varied interpretations. Hence, it may be inferred that this figure constitutes an alternate paradigm where the nation as the Mother is desexualised but sometimes eroticised in her representations for the same cause of nation and nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore's novel *Home and the World* portrays a romantic relationship between Sandeep and Bimala. He idolises Bimala as Bharatmata and expresses his love for both in sensual words. He says,

Have I not told you that, in you, I visualise the Shakti [power] of our country?... When I see you before me, then only do I realise how lovely my country is. (90-91)

He further expresses his love for Bimala and tells her that if he had to fight and die for the nation, It shall not be on the dust of some map-made land, but on a lovingly spread skirt—do you know what kind of skirt?—like that of the earthen-red sari you wore the other day, with a broad blood-red border. (91)

Tagore depicts how Sandip's love for his flesh-and-blood beloved woman/nation sensually exaggerates her physical beauty.

The “new Indian woman” was considered to belong to a legacy of mythological goddesses as well as historical and mythical Viranganas. While representing the nation as Virangana, nationalists were also attempting to revive the “golden past” of the country. It is similar to the necessity of employing the Mother figure to represent the nation. It refers to the way back to one's origin and past. Hansen remarks, “The Virangana ideal would not have been embraced had it only served as a refutation of British allegations. Much more was conveyed in this heroic model: the Virangana by extension became an emblem of the nation itself (Mother India) engaged in righteous struggle” (29).

Although Viranganas were evoked during anti-colonial nationalism in India, they came to be used later in the context of the Indian nation and its associated politics. A Virangana occupies an alternate paradigm of womanhood (Hansen 26). As mentioned, she subverts the normative structure yet reinforces it. She displays a “strong, positive, female identity” as a personified nation, but her symbolism does not guarantee similar conditions for the everyday “new Indian woman.” Her sexuality is not a matter of concern in the broader context of the nation. Instead, she is desexualised in her very symbolisation. However, representations of these Viranganas in literature,

films and other visual media tend to eroticise her (Hansen 31). The figure of the Virangana, much like the Hindu goddess, does not flout the normative gender norms. The historical female figure that the Virangana represents may have had relative physical and political power during her lifetime. However, as a cultural symbol evoked later by male nationalists, the Virangana loses her agency and authority.

Narratives of the Virangana in the Building of the Nation

The Virangana ideal is repeatedly evoked in the context of nationalism in India through narratives. The nationalist rhetoric almost mythicises the historical female figures represented in narratives. These women are portrayed in such narratives in larger-than-life frameworks. Otto Bauer, in “The Nation” (1996), states that “the Nation is a process of becoming” (63). This process is sustained through myths and narratives. Similar to Ernest Renan’s arguments regarding the significance of myths in the invention and sustenance of a nation (as discussed in the previous chapter), Tamar Mayer, in her essay “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage” (2000), also observes how myths are essential to the idea of a nation. It is through national myths that the nation’s members share their common origin, history and memories (Renan10; Mayer 3).

Myths of Viranganas have played a crucial role in the nation-building process in India. These myths and narratives have resonated across different spatio-temporal locations. People in India have connected to the idea of nation and nationalism vis-à-vis such narratives despite their identity differences. The hegemonic power structure weaves in different strata of people in India through these myths and narratives by creating for the people, (as Mayer articulates), “a common origin, history and memories.” However, the actuality of this origin and history may not be entirely factual. Foucault, in his essay “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977), criticises traditional history and argues that it “aims at dissolving the singular event into an ideal continuity—as a teleological

movement or a natural process” (88). When Virangana narratives are looked at through this framework, one may observe how singular events in official Indian history form a continuum of the heroic female ideal for the sustenance of the myth of the nation till the modern day. The Revolt of 1857 and seventeenth-century Ahom nationalism in Assam, for instance, form a part of an anachronistic historical narrative of the Virangana ideal.

Here is a “fictive ethnicity,” as Etienne Balibar calls it, between the individual members of a nation. Aligning with scholars like Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson, Balibar also believes that especially when the nation feels threatened by the Other, this “fictive ethnicity” proves essential in building a cohesive group to defend the nation. National myths are drawn upon, and nationalist narratives are created to celebrate the superiority of one’s national identity over the Other and consequently to call forth the “sons” of the nation in “her” defence (329-61). Narrations of the nation are thus essential, and so they are always under the scrutiny of the power structure.

Rada Ivekovic (in an interview with *Intellectual Cooperative Bastard*) observes how identities in the “nation” are invented through myths and narratives. She argues:

I understand ‘nation’ as an imaginary community based upon a particular narration, because one has to have a story; you have to give yourself auto representation, you have to present yourself and build your identity. (qtd. in Pavlović 132)

Similarly, the Virangana narratives also portray stories concerning the nation; part of the narratives are factual and part fictive. In the process of becoming, nation and nationalism are ideas which different identities have consistently contested across India at different points in time. The narratives of the Virangana have also been constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed by different identity groups based on their socio-political interests. Hence, alternative and suppressed narratives exist as corollaries to the dominant ones regarding the same female figure.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the dominant narratives of the Viranganas are mostly written by men. The Virangana narratives are necessitated for a masculine arena that the nation represents. These narratives portray a masculine stereotype of a female Virangana, which contains an image that is both desexualised as well as sensualised simultaneously, thus catering to nationalist men's needs. In *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1990), Cynthia Enloe observes how nationalism and masculinity are intricately linked. She argues, "Nationalism has typically sprung from masculinised memory, masculinised humiliation and masculinised hope" (44). The Virangana narratives, as part of the nationalist rhetoric, can also be considered to have such masculinised origins.

However, as Foucault opines, resistance is inevitable if there is power, there are also resistant narratives concerning the Virangana ideal (Foucault 95-96). They are from marginalised sections of society, and represent women, Dalits, Muslims, and under-represented ethnic and racial groups from the Northeastern region of India. These narratives dismember and deconstruct the dominant ideal of the Virangana. However, such narratives may also be analysed regarding their socio-political locations and ambitions.

Narratives of the Virangana written by women or from a feminist lens offer different perspectives of the already known, dominantly or otherwise, heroic female characters. Urvashi Butalia, in her essay "Gender and Nation: Some Reflections from India" (2004) suggests that:

When women narrate the nation they do so rather differently than men. In men's narratives of the nation, women are often seen as symbols of national and family honour. In women's narratives, the concerns are often different: the need to keep the family together, to contain grief, to put closures on unexplained deaths, to try and somehow contain the violence that such a situation inevitably unleashes. (111)

Similarly, narratives representing/from other marginalised sections of society offer alternative perspectives of female heroism and the nation she represents.

There is considerable erasure and silencing of marginal voices at particular points in creating the nation's narrations. Tatjana Pavlović, in her feminist work on the Croatian nation, raises a few issues which can be looked at in the context of any nation and national narratives in general. She discusses extensively the processes of "remembering/dismembering the nation," which are sanctioned/repressed by the hegemonic structure. "Collective memory and collective amnesia" are parts of the nation's making (142-9). Thus, narrations of the nation are manipulated to establish the superiority of one identity over another. In its process of becoming, the nation is invented, and it goes through a process of *dis-membering* by counter-hegemonic moves and *re-membering* by hegemonic structures. Every factual detail is not retained in the re-membered nations and their narrations.

Pavlovic further argues that "without this context of a common past, which is constantly being obliterated, there is a danger of losing the "historic specificity of national and gender construction" (149). Using Pavlovic's ideas in understanding Rani Lakshmibai's narrative, for instance, one may note how it lacks the historical specificity of her childhood. Lakshmibai became popular in Indian history only after her battle with the British troops (Singh 2). Most nationalist narratives mythicise her childhood to fit her narrative within the broader framework of the Bharatmata cult.

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay "Remembering 1857: An Introductory Note" (2007), also discusses the ideas of memorialising, memory and forgetting any historical event. He talks explicitly of the Revolt of 1857 and representations concerning it. According to him, immediate narratives expressing the grief of the loss in an event like the Revolt were not adequately

documented. The “forgetting” of such narratives “belongs to the memory function that challenges the very question of representation” (1693). This forgetting may have happened on a conscious and voluntary level, or it may have been involuntary and forced. Chakrabarty further argues that “all we have...is the politics of memorialising and memorising the event, that is to say, the politics, indeed, of representation, of metaphorical and metonymic use of the composite name ‘1857[in this case]’” (1693).

Similarly, the popular narratives of the Virangana are products of this politics inherent in memory and forgetting. The under-represented in these narratives and history concerning the Virangana figure challenge the popular ones. Chakrabarty observes that these marginal narratives offer “anti-elite history and alternative practices of celebrations and claims to the nation that challenge the official narrative of Indian nationalism” (1694). However, one cannot deny that the “anti-elite history,” so to speak, also gets incorporated into a deviant strand of politics and power.

In her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988), Gayatri Chakrabarty-Spivak also questions the dominant voices in narratives and history. Discussing the subaltern voices which are suppressed and repressed in the process by power politics, she states:

...it’s not because the subaltern cannot pronounce words or produce sentences. The subaltern “cannot speak” instead, because her speech falls short of fully authorised, political speech. Too much gets in the way of her message’s being heard, socially and politically. (21-78)

Thus, a specific event’s deconstruction reveals its historical and narratorial plurality. Of these, narratives sanctioned by the hegemonic structure appear or are made to appear like the absolute ones. The marginalised voices are silenced. Hence, these silences and absences hold meaning-making layers that add multiple perspectives to the same event.

Similarly, counter-hegemonic narratives of the Virangana may include voices from the marginalised gender and sexuality, caste and class, religion and race. The hegemonic narratives of the Virangana may also have absences of these marginalised voices. These different notions and debates only add to the hubbub around the figure of the Virangana per se,⁸ but this conflict is still contained within the broader context of nation and nationalism. The masculine symbol of the Virangana created by men belongs to the hegemonic heterosexual, patriarchal culture. Elisabeth List talks of such a culture, in general, and says it “uses violence in the name of peace, thereby silently reproducing what it pretends to ban” (39). The Virangana metaphor may represent a slightly more complicated figure—a Mother goddess/nation who symbolises violence as well as benevolence—in a nation-building process that claims peace. However, even this process is violent. Sometimes, it is represented, and sometimes not.

Anja Kovacs, in her essay “You Don't Understand, We are at War! Refashioning Durga in the Service of Hindu Nationalism” (2010), discusses how violence and heroism in Hindu nationalism are gendered. The Virangana metaphor is supposed to inspire Hindu nationalists, men as well as women, to fight for the nation. Hindu female nationalists primarily involved in violent activities are ideologically indoctrinated to consider themselves to belong to the myth of the Virangana. However, as Kovacs observes, the violence the women are involved in only accompanies the primary violent acts that the men perform. She states, “Most women will motivate, goad, cheer and support physical violence but not actually commit it.” Moreover, even women who “get involved in a physical confrontation” are “often admiringly said that [they] fought ‘like a man’.” Women’s roles as mostly passive perpetrators of physical violence are considered to be part of their “*stree* (women) *dharma*, their duties [as] good wives and mothers in the Hindu nation (381-82)⁹.

Thus, Kovacs rightly argues that the circulation of Hindu nationalist imageries of the heroic woman as inspirations to the female Hindu nationalists may seem to illustrate a feminist standpoint. However, the very patriarchal and masculine Hindu nationalist basis of such imageries erases any possibility of standalone female virility, involvement in physical violence and feminine heroism. Hence, any feminist claims to Hindu nationalist imageries concerning the heroic woman such as the Virangana can themselves be challenged from a feminist perspective (386). Moreover, even if there are any narratives of the virile heroic woman, they are probably erased from the metanarratives that make the Hindu nation.

The dominant and, especially, the deviant narratives may speak of such erasures, silences and the suppressed voices. However, these narratives are also in the process of becoming. So, the very ideas of the dominant and the deviant may be challenged based on socio-political-temporal variables. In his essay “Dominant, Residual, and the Emergent” (1977), Raymond Williams discusses the complex cultural web. He states that these complexities of a culture in flux reside in “its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formations—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements” (121). The culture circulating the myth of Virangana through various historical narratives also does not exist in isolation. At a particular spatio-temporal location, this myth undergoes influences of traditions that are then dominant, emerging, and contain residual elements of the past.

The residual consists of “certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation.” Some aspects of this residual past are incorporated into the

dominant culture for the latter to “make sense.” This incorporation takes place through “reinterpretation, dilution, projection, discriminating and exclusion.” The emergent is stated to be “oppositional to the dominant culture.” The emergent, as the very name suggests, is the next becoming dominant (Williams 124).

In this context, the historical narratives concerning the Virangana are also products of such a complicated culture in becoming. The myths of the Hindu female goddesses, reinterpreted mostly by the upper-caste male elites, make their way into the masculine nationalist rhetoric. The historical facts of heroic female figures from different locations in the history of India also undergo a similar process. The dominant narratives representing the Hindu Viranganas from the upper-caste, upper-class and powerful races are then challenged by counter-hegemonic narratives from the marginalised social sections; the latter belong to an emergent culture. In this process, history is mythicised, and myths are historicised. However, these counter-hegemonic narratives may or may not provide liberal grounds for the marginalised sections represented. They are also part of a culture in flux; they too are based on socio-political variables. Hence, one may only observe, explore and analyse the pluralities and the politics in the narratives of the figure of the Virangana.

Notes

¹ See Edward Shills' "Primordial, Personal, Sacred and Civil Ties: Some Particular Observations on the Relationships of Sociological Research and Theory" (1957) and Clifford Geertz's *The Interpretations of Cultures* (1973).

² Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

³ Pandita Ramabai was a late nineteenth-early twentieth-century social reformer in India. She was knowledgeable in the Hindu scriptures. She worked for the education and emancipation of Indian women. She vehemently opposed the Brahmanical patriarchal practices which oppressed women. Ramabai's "A Testimony in 1907" expresses "the suffering that she endured as a Hindu widow and a woman." Tilak was against her writings and activities. He called her "Testimony" a "libellous tract." Similarly, Tilak was also against the English suffragettes and their demand for the vote. Ramabai's book *Stri Dharma Niti* argues "the denial of the right to education [as] the root of childcare and children's health." The nationalists opposed her emancipatory ideas and activities (Rao 98, 134).

⁴ Rakmabai was another female social reformer who was the first woman to write in "The Times of India" under the pseudonym "A Hindu Lady" on women's education and child marriage. She "sensitively portrayed the [subordinate] position of women." She condemned Manu "for assigning a demeaning position to women and Hindu men for perpetuating it". Tilak was sceptical of the gendered authenticity of "The Hindu Lady" and considered the writings to be of a man posing as a woman (Rao 109).

⁵ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

⁶ It has been stated earlier how the figure of Mother goddess originated in the pre-Aryan period. In the later period of Hinduism, this tribal figure was Brahmanised and, thus, brought into the upper-caste Hindu pantheon.

⁷ Sumathi Ramaswamy, in her book *Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, describes maps of India that were circulated during the anti-colonial nationalist movements. Some maps depicted images of male leaders like Nehru, Gandhi and Bose. In this case, Ramaswamy argues, these male figures were represented as the epitome of good sons of the soil (Ramaswamy). Even these maps hinted that a female embodied the nation.

⁸ Harleen Singh discusses the noise around the figure of Rani Lakshmibai, in particular, in her book *The Rani* (28). I have used her idea as a framework to look at the figure of the Virangana.

⁹ Kovacs, in her essay, specifically discusses “refashioning Durga in the service of Hindu nationalism.” According to her, *Devi Mahatmya* describes Durga as a heroic as well as compassionate goddess. Durga is violent towards her enemies and motherly towards her children and devotees (379). Kovacs distinguishes the quality of *virya* in men and women as described in the *Devi Mahatmya*. Durga expresses female *virya*, whereas male *virya* encompasses brute violence alone. However, such binary dichotomies of expressions of male and female *virya* may be considered gender-specific and rigid constructions of the patriarchal society.

Kovacs further argues that the Hindu nationalists appropriated the myth and imagery of Durga for the end goal of their political aspirations (380). She also notes that the Virangana, in some sense, asserts the qualities of a violent and compassionate heroic figure as *Devi Mahatmya*’s Durga (384). However, this argument can be challenged similarly as the Virangana does not escape patriarchy. It is itself a patriarchal construction which portrays that a woman can be violent in

masculine ways while fighting the nation's foes. However, the woman does express her *stree dharma* in her compassionate roles towards her male consorts, children and devotees.



Chapter Three

“The Reluctant Rebel¹”: Unveiling the Nationalist Popular Virangana

“Fact and fiction, rationality and imagination, are so intertwined that it is impossible to separate them from the Rani’s life; fiction, in this case, has literally formed the historical.”

(Singh 4)

The several woman warriors who existed in Indian history, as discussed in the previous chapters, could easily fit within Kathryn Hansen’s definition of the Virangana. Nevertheless, when one speaks of the Virangana, one is immediately reminded of Rani Lakshmibai, the queen of Jhansi. Despite the existence of heroic women in the history in India, Lakshmibai probably became known as the first popular Virangana since she was associated intrinsically with the formation of the idea of India as one nation. She is etched in all representations as a beautiful and fearless warrior woman clad in a male soldier’s attire, on horseback, her son tied to her back and a sword in her hand, courageously fighting the British troops. Thus, in a thorough examination of the Virangana figure in cultural texts, the first name one has to acknowledge is the most dominant metaphor for female heroism in the context of the Indian nation and nationalism, Rani Lakshmibai.

The previous chapter discusses Lakshmibai as associated with the 1857 Rebellion. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his book *The Discovery of India* (1946), stated that the Rebellion was initially a “feudal outburst” (383). Indian historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee observes that the same Nehru as the first Prime Minister of independent India, in his speech at the Ramlila Maidan in 1957, called the Rebellion the “First War of Independence” (52). Thus, it is noteworthy how the national metanarrative eventually reappropriates a feudal rebellion of a time when the idea of India had not yet developed. Consequently, Rani Lakshmibai, a popular figure of the 1857 Rebellion, was later regarded as one of the most significant figures, as a Virangana, in the Indian nationalist narrative.

One may argue that her popularity in the Rebellion was probably because of the widely believed idea that she and her kingdom, Jhansi, were significant in the history of India. However, their political significance is debatable. Thus, the very foundations of creating a hyperbolised Virangana from the figure of a historical queen of a small kingdom become questionable. Hence, to seek further insights, the chapter begins with a discussion on a brief historical overview of Jhansi and Rani Lakshmibai, mainly in the context of the Rebellion, to understand whether they were at all significant in the history of India.

Brief Official History of Lakshmibai and Jhansi

The *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh: Jhansi* (1929) reports that Jhansi was a small principality under British sovereignty from 1804 to 1853, and it was thus not very politically significant until the Rebellion of 1857. Jhansi encompassed an area of less than 2,600 square miles. It was approximately 250 miles southeast of Delhi and roughly 190 miles southwest of Lucknow. Jhansi was part of a broader Bundelkhand region, “a stony plain criss-crossed by scattered outcroppings of rugged, rocky hills which was at that time covered by dry jungle. The infertile soil, marked by deep ravines and gorges due to erosion, only offered limited opportunities to grow crops.” Thus, Jhansi mostly relied on commerce for its economy. Jhansi was not as popularly known to Europe as the other Indian kingdoms like Mysore, Gwalior and Hyderabad, which made it “rather insignificant” (Drake-Brockman 1-2, 37, 73; Jerosch 22).

In this context, historian Rainer Jerosch notes there was only a “small number of British soldiers” stationed in Jhansi and that they were “not strong enough” (15). This fact further bolsters the idea that the British did not consider the city of Jhansi significant enough to require not more than a few British soldiers to be stationed there.

Jerosch further discusses Jhansi's relations with its neighbouring state, Orchha, and he states that "the territory [of Jhansi] had originally been part of the neighbouring state to the east, Orchha, whose capital of the same name was only ten miles south-east of Jhansi before it was moved to Tehri. The rulers of Orchha had used the fortress in Jhansi as a bulwark against invasions from the North, but in 1742 it was lost, without ever being regained, to the Marathas, who had become hegemonic by this time. From then on, the nominal rulers of Jhansi were governors of the Maratha Empire. In de facto terms, however, they soon became largely autonomous themselves." However, Jhansi soon passed into the hands of the British government. The governor of Jhansi "sign[ed] a treaty with the British Government in 1802 which, although it still mentioned the so-called 'Peshwa,' nonetheless, pledged 'loyalty and devotion' to the British." Thus, the relations with Orchha remained tense until Gangadhar Rao ruled, and it worsened when Lakshmibai fought for Jhansi during the 1857 Rebellion (23).

Lakshmibai was born around 1827 in Benares to her parents, Moropant Tambe and Bhagirathi Bai, who were then living the lives of exiles (Jerosch 15). C. A. Kincaid (who was a late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century British judge and author in India) states Moropant Tambe was originally a "Karhad Brahman from Wai in the Satara district" and was a part of the princely family of the Peshwas (100). The last of the Peshwas, Baji Rao II, had been banished from Poona by the British and due to political reasons, he settled in Bithur while his brother Chimaji Appa settled in Varanasi. Moropant remained the advisor to Chimaji Appa, and after the latter's death, Moropant went to Bithur to join the court of Peshwa Baji Rao II (Jerosch 18).

Lakshmibai's maiden name was Manikarnika Tambe. She was brought up along with the Peshwa's three adopted sons, one of whom was Nana Saheb. She "had a feisty temperament, and would have posed a problem for traditionally-minded parents." However, after her mother's death

when she was only four years old, Manikarnika did not receive much conventional “corrective influence.” Moreover, records suggest that her father probably “did not have an inordinate amount of influence on the development of his rather strong-willed daughter” (Jerosch 18). Manikarnika’s close relationship with Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope has been frequently portrayed in stories, but historian S.N Sen states they “were probably the stuff of legends invented at a later point in time” (270). Jerosch argues that both Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope belonged to different social statuses—“Nana [Saheb] was a prince, and Tantia Tope was more a member of the proletariat than anything else even though he was a member of the Brahman caste.” Jerosch further notes, “There was also a considerable difference in age between the two men and Manikarnika” (19). Thus, these factors probably intensified the differences between Manikarnika and, Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope. Jerosch describes how Manikarnika, as a young Brahmin girl, received an education which, according to him, was “highly unusual.” She also acquired horse riding skills along with her education in languages such as Persian (19).

Through Peshwa Baji Rao II’s “influence,” Manikarnika was married to a much older Gangadhar Rao Newalkar, a Brahmin and the Raja of Jhansi during the early 1800s. Following Indian customs, Manikarnika changed her name to Lakshmibai (Kincaid 100). Lakshmibai was his second wife; his first wife had died. Lakshmibai’s only son from her marriage died in infancy. So, after her husband died in 1853, she took charge of the kingdom with an adopted heir, Damodar Rao (Kincaid 100). Her family urged her to go to Varanasi to follow the rituals of widowhood in compliance with the normative Hindu traditions followed then. However, “for reasons still unknown, the British authorities intervened, sparing her the ordeal of this ritual” (Jerosch 28).

Jhansi was a small feudal state with loyalties to the East India Company, but after Gangadhar Rao’s death, “Lakshmibai lost her kingdom to the company under Lord Dalhousie’s

doctrine of lapse,” which stated that any princely state without a biological male heir, would be annexed by the British government. The East India Company did not accept Damodar Rao’s adoption under the doctrine of lapse, and hence, they planned to annex Jhansi. Rani Lakshmibai made several pleas to the higher British authorities to consider her case (Kincaid 100). Sir William Lee-Warner (a civil servant in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century colonial India) notes how the Rani sought the guidance of a lawyer, John Lang, to urge the East India Company to consider her case, but Lord Dalhousie rejected her pleas (166). After that, as Lang himself states, the Rani was offered a meagre sum as a pension in place of Jhansi’s annexation. She finally gave up pleading with the British authorities and refused to accept the conditions. She cried, “*Meri Jhansi nahin dungee* (I will not give up my Jhansi)” (95). This exclamation of the Rani’s became very popular in non-fiction and fiction alike. This outcry, which represented Lakshmibai’s patriotism towards her kingdom, Jhansi, probably fed the Hindu nationalist legend that the Rani came to be in Indian history and culture.

The East India Company laid a siege on Jhansi despite Lakshmibai’s consistent pleas and protests (Kincaid 100). At this point, as Jerosch notes, the Rani was finally contemplating leaving Jhansi for Varanasi to live the life of a widow. As her subjects loved the Rani, her leaving Jhansi would have sparked a public protest against the East India Company, which the latter feared. Thus, the Governor-General of Central India, Sir Robert Hamilton, was sent to Jhansi to consider matters (30-31). Lakshmibai’s decision to leave Jhansi for Varanasi may reveal the desperate act of a young widow who wanted to leave the political turmoil she found herself in. However, considering the possible repercussions of her decision, which Jerosch suggests, one may also consider the Rani’s decision as an instance of her political shrewdness.

The Lieutenant Governor of the North-West Provinces, John Russel Colvin, was assigned the charge of Jhansi after its annexation. For him, Rani Lakshmibai “could only figure as one among millions of subjects in the British-administered province” (Jerosch 34). Such facts substantiate the idea that before the Rebellion, the British considered Jhansi and Rani Lakshmibai only a small part of a larger province. Rani Lakshmibai, as Jerosch notes, insisted on offering her allegiance to the British only under the leadership of Hamilton and not Colvin. Unlike Colvin, who would not have considered Lakshmibai an exceptional case, Hamilton, who “had considerable dealings with semi-autonomous noble families,” would have probably considered her the queen of Jhansi and permitted her to maintain her status. Joyce Lebra-Chapman states that Hamilton himself thought the Rani, as young a widow as she was, had been honest enough in her requests to be assigned a British officer who would respect her social status. However, other British administrators only saw this as the Rani’s political scheming to eventually restore her rule in Jhansi (34). Finally, Lakshmibai was granted a pension, and the British kept her status as the queen. However, until Hamilton advised her, she had not availed of the pension. She readily obliged him, for she wished Hamilton to take up her case with Lord Dalhousie to restore Jhansi to her adopted son entirely (Jerosch 35). Thus, Lakshmibai was determined not to lose her social status as the queen of Jhansi and was firm in her attempts to reinstate Jhansi’s independence. However, she was not impulsive in her efforts but was vigilant in her political strategies. Jerosch further notes that the East India Company did not embrace Hamilton’s association with the Rani (38). This fact usually inspired most colonial and postcolonial fiction, which portray Lakshmibai’s romantic relationship with a British officer. However, no facts or records are available which confirm the truth in these stories.

There was a subterranean resentment among the rebels in the British army in India due to the introduction of cartridges greased with pig fat and cow fat. The British expected the soldiers to bite and tear off the paper from the cartridges before using them. Such an act defiled the orthodox religious faith of both Muslims and Hindus. The growing unrest among the soldiers ignited the first spark of the Rebellion in Meerut in 1857 (Jerosch 40-41). Hence, it was only a matter of time before the Rebellion broke out and spread across India's northern and central plains. S.N Sinha claims that the Rani knew of the Rebellion in Meerut which would soon engulf Delhi. Captain Skene, who was in Jhansi then, reported to his officer Dunlop that the Rani was, in fact, sceptical of the Rebellion and more concerned about Jhansi's safety (134). Skene was somewhat confident of Lakshmibai's friendly terms with the British and, thus, the soldiers' loyalty to Jhansi. He believed that Jhansi would not join the Rebellion (Lebra-Chapman 50). It is essential to mention here that a few British historical records have referred to Skene's inability to "resist the charm of the Rani," which they consider may have been the reason behind his confidence in her. However, most British records have refuted this claim. Eventually, the soldiers in Jhansi too started voicing their uneasiness against using greased cartridges (Jerosch 45).

Moreover, as S.N Sen points out, the rebels in the Bengal regiment threatened to outcast the Jhansi regiment if the latter did not join the revolt (271). Thus, historical records suggest that the soldiers stationed in Jhansi were loyal to the British to a great extent, which may also result from their queen's allegiance towards the British herself. It was only much later that these soldiers joined the Rebellion.

A significant fact is that before the outbreak of the Rebellion in Jhansi, the British restored Lakshmibai's power to rule over her kingdom and protect her subjects as well as the British stationed there as she seemed fit. One of the prominent historical records to state this fact is

Vishnubhat Godse's travelogue *Maza Pravas: Athrashesattavan Bandachi Hakikat* (1884). Godse was a Brahmin priest who claimed to have been in Jhansi in early 1858. He wrote his travelogue in Marathi. His narrative is one of the very few which includes first-hand information about the incidents in Jhansi during the Rebellion, thus making it one of the most authentic accounts of the event². Godse states that the resident British officer in Jhansi, Captain Gordon, sent a message to Lakshmibai on 9 June 1857 permitting her to "assume charge of Jhansi city and all the neighbouring areas that came under the principality [and]...of its revenues." The British expected the Rani to provide to all the British resident members of Jhansi and "till the trouble blew over...she would be the sole ruler" (n.p.). Contrary to this, M.L Bhargava and S.S.V Rizvi state that Captain Gordon sent a letter [on 8 June 1857] to the Rani only when the rebels' capacity gradually increased. He conferred "the rule of Jhansi to her," and "on behalf of all of the British in the fort," he declared that they were "willing to remove to a place of her choosing" (32).

Thus, there are two different contrasting accounts of the same event. Considering Godse's account, we can argue that the East India Company strategized in a hard-nosed way to manage the situation in order to safeguard its own position. As the Company was scared of the growing unrest among the soldiers, they schemed to offer Lakshmibai the sole power of Jhansi only during the Rebellion. It was probably due to her consistent allegiance towards the British that they granted her the offer. Moreover, through such an offer, the British could hold her responsible for the possible outcome, whatever it may be, of the Rebellion in Jhansi.

One may also note that once the Rebellion reached Jhansi, as R.C. Majumdar points out, Lakshmibai invited the British women and children to take refuge in her palace for their safety (281). Such acts prove Lakshmibai's humanity, which loomed larger than any political or national cause. Jerosch notes that Skene and his men also joined the women and children to take refuge in

the fortress in Jhansi as offered by Lakshmibai (46). Rani Lakshmibai found herself in a very delicate political position. While the British requested Lakshmibai to provide them refuge, the rebels looked forward to her support against the British.

The Rani did not comply with either side immediately. The rebels killed a few British officers who stayed in the army camp and the Indian men who attempted to protect the officers. Chaos and violence reigned everywhere when a few guards of Jhansi joined the rebels, and the prisoners were released (Jerosch 49). Meanwhile, as G.W. Forrest claims, the Rani “placed guards at her gate and shut herself up in her palace” (7). D. Hutchinson’s *Annals of the Indian Rebellion* (1857-58) also reports similarly (213). Thus, the Rani did not willingly play any part in the initial outburst of the Rebellion in Jhansi. Neither had she expressed any solidarity with the British except for her humanitarian act of offering the British women and children refuge in one of the forts in Jhansi.

A few records, of which most are British, state that the soldiers met the Rani the day before the Rebellion in Jhansi and discussed her position in the matter, threatening her right to the throne of Jhansi. The soldiers could not comprehend the Rani’s passivity in the event (Drake-Brockman 211). Thus, these facts may justify the Rani’s decision that followed, namely to ask the British refugees to vacate the fort as she wished to save her throne and Jhansi.

The Jhokan Bagh massacre occurred following the Rani’s orders and Captain Gordon’s death at the hands of the soldiers. This event was probably the focal point in history which altered Jhansi’s insignificant political status in the eyes of the British. Majumdar states that the soldiers negotiated with the British and offered them safe passage from Jhansi if they came out unarmed from the fort. Accordingly, the resident British officers, their women and their children gathered

in Jhokan Bagh. Unfortunately, the soldiers betrayed the negotiation, and shot and killed all the British men, women and children (279). D.V Tahmankar mentions a British officer, Captain Pinkney's report of the event, which presents a detailed account of the event:

Bakhshish Ali, jail *darogah*, first cut down Captain Skene with his own hand. Mrs. McEgan, attempting to save her husband, threw her arms round him, but was beaten and pushed aside and Dr. McEgan was cut down and killed. Mrs. McEgan cast herself on his body and was there killed also. Miss Browne fell on her knees before a sepoy, and begged for her life, but was immediately cut down by him. I have no particulars regarding the deaths of the rest of our unfortunate countrymen and their wives and children, but all were put to death in the Jokhan [sic] Bagh, with the exception of Mrs. Mutlow [an Anglo-Indian], who had concealed herself in the town, disguised in native apparel. (63)

Such a horrific massacre redefines the significance of Jhansi and Rani Lakshmibai in Indian history. This incident, for apparent reasons, infuriated the East India Company; hence, Jhansi and the Rani gained limelight even in Europe.

Interestingly, Godse's travelogue offers an entirely different trajectory of the abovementioned events. According to him, the Rani met the soldiers on the day of the Rebellion and not before that. She valiantly announced her restored power as the queen of Jhansi. Moreover, she "told them to be ready for a bigger battle" and ordered them to prepare the arms and ammunition and to be prepared for the big conflict (n.p). It indicates that the Rani supported the cause of the Rebellion directly from the time of its outbreak in Jhansi. Furthermore, Godse does not make the slightest mention of the Jhokan Bagh massacre in his account. With the omission of such a significant event in the history of Jhansi, Godse's travelogue tends to lose its apparent authenticity. However, it is

noteworthy that his account was edited by one of his clients, Rai Bahadur Chintamani Vinayak Vaidya, after the former died in 1903 before publishing it. In the process, Vaidya omitted “some portions he considered unnecessary,” thus rendering the original eyewitness account questionable (n.p). Therefore, there are possibilities that the editor willingly overlooked the Jhokan Bagh massacre from the travelogue and published it more as an early twentieth-century nationalist narrative, only glorifying the Rani. The massacre’s inclusion would have opened up grounds for debate, which the editor probably did not wish to risk.

Rani Lakshmibai gained a name after the Jhokan Bagh massacre among both the British and the Indians. While British records, such as the 1958 publication of the *Oxford History of India*, state that the massacre at Jhansi was the Rani’s revenge on the British for denying her adopted son the legal inheritance to Jhansi’s throne (659), on the other hand, most Indian historical accounts attempt to exonerate the Rani from being involved in the massacre (Jerosch 58). However, there were also individual Indian accounts that hinged onto the British perspective of Lakshmibai’s involvement in the massacre but as evidence of her “patriotic and national sentiments” towards Jhansi and the Indian nation (Majumdar 288). Lakshmibai’s alleged conspiracies with Nana Saheb and Tantia Tope in Jhansi before the Rebellion are also debatable because most historical records do not offer any shred of evidence to this effect (Sen 129).

Moreover, the soldiers who initially rebelled in Jhansi were not its inhabitants; they came there from other places to further the Rebellion and to extort money and ammunition from Lakshmibai. The Rani was also capable enough to fathom that Jhansi’s army alone did not stand any chance before the mighty British army (Jerosch 61). Thus, there were almost negligible possibilities of Lakshmibai being an active part of the Rebellion in Jhansi. Jerosch clarifies her political position and states:

Rani Lakshmibai, as it turns out, is neither a sinister conspirator nor an ardent freedom fighter at this early point in time. She is a noble, but in crisis situations helpless, widow with a deeply held grudge against the British rulers. This raises the question, however, as to whether she became more swayed by these emotions as the [Rebellion] proceeded and whether she was one of the masterminds behind the bloody events in Jhansi. (61)

Historical records on the whole suggest, however, that the Rani was not involved in the outbreak of the Rebellion in Jhansi. The Rani herself stressed her innocence in the massacre in a letter she had written to the District Commissioner of Sagar (Sen 298). Based on the letters the Rani consequently wrote to the British authorities and the records of the officers such as Major Erskine and Major Ellis, Sir Robert Hamilton closed his investigation on the massacre and stated that he did not find any evidence of the Rani's active involvement in it. Nonetheless, most British historical records did blame the Rani for the bloody massacre at Jhokan Bagh (Jerosch 73).

Despite all odds, the British let Rani Lakshmibai continue her reign over Jhansi, but of course, under their control. However, Orchha's prime minister, Nathe Khan, and Sadashiv Rao, Gangadhar Rao's nephew, attacked Jhansi, taking advantage of Lakshmibai's weakened political position (Jerosch 76, 83). Records even state that Nathe Khan provoked the British authorities against the Rani, accusing her of cooperating with the rebels in the Jhokan Bagh massacre (Lebra-Chapman 77, Tahmankar 82). Rani Lakshmibai's military career began with Jhansi's battle with Orchha. However, there are conflicting reports on Lakshmibai's aggressive moves in this battle. Brigadier Sir John Smyth claims that Lakshmibai rode out from the safety of the forts of Jhansi, heading her troops, to meet the enemy. However, the British record portrays this as her impractical war strategy and further states that she retreated immediately (78). On the contrary, Tahmankar depicts the same incident as evidence of her cunning political tactics. He states:

When the news came that [Nathe] Khan's army was approaching the city the [Rani] assembled her noblemen and with an eye for the spectacular rode in front of the militia taking their salute. Suddenly she stopped, called Diwan Jawahar Singh, and tied his wrists with an orange silk string, the traditional sign of her entrusting the nobleman with the command of the army and charging to win victory. To be so honoured on the eve of battle and in the presence of his peers and men was a mark of the [Rani's] faith in his capacity as a soldier and a commander. Diwan Jawahar Singh placed his sword at the [Rani's] feet to show his allegiance to her. She picked it up and returned it to him ceremoniously. The men and officers loudly cheered, the drums rumbled and the trumpets blew to salute their new military leader. (81)

The Rani's deft political strategies on the battlefield may be noted here. Handing her military leadership to her nobleman, she returned to the safety of her palace. It seems Lakshmibai was herself aware of her symbolic influence over her subjects and soldiers, and she used it to fight the battle at Orchha without having to fight it herself. This incident, however, may question Lakshmibai's legendary bravery on the battlefield, which echoes across Indian history and culture.

Jhansi won against Orchha in this battle, where Lakshmibai only played a passive role. Nonetheless, she showcased her maternal emotions towards her soldiers, who fought for her without fearing for their lives. D.B. Parasnis states that Lakshmibai's "very presence" among the wounded soldiers "soothed their pain." She "grieved at their grief, gave them ornaments and medals, patted them, and showed such sympathy that... [everyone present there] felt that they could give up their lives for the sake of the [Rani]" (qtd. in Savarkar 460). Rani Lakshmibai, as Jhansi personified, who was a protective, caring "mother" to her subjects and for whom her sons

lay down their lives on the battlefield, was thus formulated as a symbol probably since the Rebellion itself.

However, the British officer Sir Hugh Rose, still considering Lakshmibai the mastermind behind the Jhokan Bagh massacre and the Rebellion, attacked Jhansi with a large British army at the end of March 1858 (Jerosch 121). Initially, the Rani wanted to avoid fighting the British, which disappointed most of her soldiers and guards. She wished to negotiate with the British by handing them all the districts under her possession (Bhargava and Rizvi 218). That Lakshmibai did not hesitate to fight with her neighbouring kingdoms but avoided battle with the British suggests her rightful estimation of the vast British army. However, when Hamilton appeared before the walls of Jhansi with a British force, she “was not able to prevent a bloodbath by means of negotiation.” The Jhansi troops she prepared were expansive and more numerous than Hamilton’s. National Archive of India contains records stating that the Rani had ordered her soldiers to clear all the trees and foliage around the walls and fort of Jhansi so that direct sunlight threatened the British troops (Jerosch 121, 137). Such records are evidence of her skilled political strategies.

The British attacked Jhansi on 21 March 1857 (Jerosch 144). Lakshmibai led the army herself. She was actively engaged in marshalling her army and “was to be found everywhere inspiring heroism even in the coldest hearts” (Savarkar 464). However, she was contemplating the idea of handing over Jhansi to the British. She probably wished to prove her innocence in the Rebellion, but more than that, she perhaps wanted to spare the citizens of Jhansi the horrors of the impending war with the British. Notably, Lakshmibai’s army against the British included the soldiers who had earlier rebelled in Jhansi. Records indicate that Lakshmibai tried hard to resolve matters peacefully but was also worried about the rebels’ desire for war.

Moreover, Sir Hugh Rose intended to avenge the massacre of British officers and civilians after the siege of Jhansi (Jerosch 144, 160-61). Thus, weighing the conditions, she realised that war with the British was inevitable. She ordered her soldiers to open fire first at the British troops (Bhargava and Rizvi 299). This decision established her loyalty towards Jhansi, particularly before its soldiers. Indian records justify her decision to fight for Jhansi as her “dharma” (Tahmankar 165).

Nevertheless, the British successfully put Jhansi under siege on 22 March 1858 (Jerosch 143). The facts portray Lakshmibai as a ruler who dared to fight wars for the safety of her kingdom, but she was more rational than idealistically jingoist. She contemplated her options before making any definite political decisions.

Stating the possible facts that both the British and the Jhansi army “made serious attempts to avoid unspeakable suffering and bloodshed,” Jerosch further suggests that if these attempts had been successful and Lakshmibai would have surrendered to the British, it “would probably have spelled the end of the rebel’s major military operations.” The Rani continued her fight for Jhansi, “kept the flame of the conflict alive,” and she “now ascended the stage of Indian history” (164-65). Thus, Rani Lakshmibai eventually became the icon and leader of the Revolt of 1857.

The British siege of Jhansi was followed by inhuman atrocities on the city’s civilians; the women and children were spared their lives. However, they were widowed, childless or orphaned (Tahmankar 122; Jerosch 198). Such violence perpetrated by the British was not any different from the Jhokan Bagh massacre by the rebels, thus illustrating the futilities and mindlessness of wars.

Lakshmibai had few options in her hands: she could think of leaving the city or killing herself. She contemplated choosing the latter to preserve her honour. However, an elderly adviser instructed her against it (Tahmankar 116). It is noteworthy how the male officers of Jhansi tried to

preserve the honour of Lakshmibai, a personification of the nation-state herself, from being defiled by the enemy. Thus, as records state, Lakshmibai chose to escape the city with her son tied to her back, and more than three hundred men accompanied her (Jerosch 202). Lakshmibai's flight from Jhansi is frequently debated, and rightly so. Most Indian historians justify her choice to escape Jhansi, leaving the city to its fate to save her own life, as a choice to (a) preserve herself and hence, Jhansi's honour and (b) as a part of the larger cause of the Rebellion for which she wished to continue fighting even when she was away from Jhansi. However, it may also be seen as a helpless young widow's desperate choice to live and save her son's life from the approaching violence in Jhansi. However, a reason like this would not complement the larger-than-life nationalist symbol which she eventually becomes.

Lakshmibai rode to Kalpi, where both Rao Saheb, Nana Saheb's nephew, and Tantia Tope were already there. Most significantly, Nana Saheb was not present in Kalpi as he had escaped after the massacres at Kanpur, and Rao Saheb was instead acting as the second-in-command. Contrary to popular belief that Lakshmibai had written to Nana Saheb for help, the meeting at Kalpi was unplanned; the men were somewhat surprised to see Lakshmibai but welcomed her when she reached there (Jerosch 217). There were tensions between the men and Lakshmibai, more between her and Tantia Tope. G.B. Malleson claims that the Rani was willing to fight the British and urged Rao Saheb to "give her an army" (119). However, despite her requests and Tantia Tope's incompetence on the battlefield, Rao Saheb bestowed the army's leadership on Tantia Tope, not Lakshmibai (Jerosch 218). Notably, both the men disliked her popularity with the soldiers and her disciplined nature, which they lacked (Sen XV). However, the apparent fact that she was a woman in warfare, which the men considered as their domain, probably led to this treatment by the male leaders of the Rebellion.

The British lost the battle at Kunch, located near Kalpi. As Tantia Tope, in his usual way, abandoned the battlefield without warning Lakshmibai, she had to take leadership of the confused army. Under her command, the rebels won against the British in this small town. It is noteworthy that after the battle at Kunch, not much reliable information on the Rani is available. Considering the few available facts, sketchy narratives concerning Rani Lakshmibai were probably woven together. In Jhansi, Sir Hugh Rose prepared his troops to attack Lakshmibai's army and, thus, left for Kalpi (Jerosch 221-222). Godse reports his meeting with Lakshmibai on her way to Kalpi from Kunch when she had warned him of the upcoming battle at Kalpi (n.p). During the battle there, Tantia Tope once again left prematurely. Lakshmibai ordered her defeated army to retreat but in an orderly fashion, thus showcasing her discipline and martial abilities (Jerosch 224). The rebels then rode to Gwalior. Although there are contradictions, most historical records state that Tantia Tope had incited the Gwalior army for a civil war against the Maharaja of Sindhia (Sen 234). The rebels were victorious in their efforts, and under Rao Saheb's commands, they celebrated their victory in Gwalior on 3 June 1858. However, the Rani did not support the revelry when they knew another attack by the British army was looming ahead (Jerosch 260; Tahmankar 157).

There are a few points to be noted in the context of the event in Gwalior. First, since the "Peshwa Army" had almost dwindled by the time of the war in Gwalior, Tantia Tope used Lakshmibai's popularity with the rebels and incited the Rebellion there in her name (Tahmankar 98). Thus, Rao Saheb and Tantia Tope, despite their dislike towards the Rani, used the symbolism of the Virangana for the larger cause of the Rebellion. Hence, one can argue that the warrior woman's symbolic significance did not assure her respect in the opinion of the male leaders. Second, British records mention that "Gujja Raja", who was "Maharaja Sindhia's mother in law" with a sword in her hand, rode to the battlefield to his aid (Bhargava and Rizvi 456). Thus, this

incident proves that there were female contemporaries of Lakshmibai who were warrior queens as well. However, they are lesser known, for they do not play very significant roles in the making of the nationalist narrative of the 1857 Rebellion. Third, the Rani played an active role on the battlefield in Gwalior. Most historical records elaborate on this in vivid detail, almost to the extent of romanticising her appearance:

...we see the Rani, drenched in sweat in the red, dust-covered uniform of a cavalry officer. She gallops along before the line of cavalry, turns and draws her sword. She brandishes it high above her turbaned head for several seconds. Then she lowers it again, setting her horse and the entire cavalry behind her in motion. Huge quantities of dust are kicked up into the air, with the rear ranks soon disappearing in an impenetrable cloud of dust. The troops of Maharaja Sindhia, drawn up in a long line, observed the cavalry descending upon them, uneasy at the approaching sound of thunder from thousands of horse hooves pounding the ground. The musketry and cannons await the order to fire. As they take aim, a name is suddenly heard being murmured through the ranks. This does not escape the attention of the commanding officers, who regard with growing apprehension the rapidly advancing cavalry formation led by the small figure in red on the unmistakable dapple-grey horse in front. Yes, it must be her, Lakshmibai, the Rani, the Rani of Jhansi!

... To the shock of the Maharaja, no salvos are fired, only a few scattered shots. The rebel cavalry reaches the artillery almost unscathed. They sound out the battle cry of the Muslims: “Din!” and the army of the Maharaja Sindhia answers with a thunderous “Din!” (Smyth 179; Lebra-Chapman 109; Sen 292).

It is noteworthy that the historical records mentioned above influence the popular image of Virangana Rani Lakshmibai in history and culture. As stated, her charisma also influenced the British soldiers. The romanticised records are, however, debatable. Nonetheless, even these records are considered reliable as they add to the small body of historical information on the Rani.

Sir Hugh Rose attacked the rebels at Morar, four miles from Gwalior, on 16 June 1858. Rao Saheb had ignored Lakshmibai's warnings and wasted his time in revelry, resulting in the Morar rebels retreating hastily to Gwalior. The British set their base in Fort Kotah-ki-Serai, from where they attacked Gwalior under the command of Brigadier Smith on 17 June 1858. Following the defeat at Morar, Rao Saheb, who had realised his mistake, bequeathed the army's command under Lakshmibai. She met the British troops at Kotah-ki-Serai but was defeated. Many rebels were slain, of whom, as reported, Rani Lakshmibai was one (Jerosch 264-65).

The immediate British records of the Rani's death were straightforward, short, and without emotions. Brigadier Smith reported: "... the [Rani] of Jhansi being amongst the slain" (Bhargava and Rizvi 438). Sir Robert Hamilton's telegram to the Governor-General, found in the National Archive of India, reported: "The Rani of Jhansi was killed." He further elaborated, "It was reported by several individuals that the Rani was stuck by a musket or rifle ball and killed on the spot, that her body was burnt at 'Gungadass Ki Bag'" (Jerosch 264). If the British records, which were immediate responses to the event and, hence, probably more accurate, are to be considered, Lakshmibai's death was a casualty of war and not as glorious as mentioned in the legends.

On the other hand, Indian accounts mostly glorified Lakshmibai's death. Ramachandra Vinayak, a representative of the Maharaja of Indore present in the camp of Sir Robert Hamilton, reported: "At the time of engagement... [the Rani] was present on the battlefield where she

received a sabre blow which killed her. All the people call her the bravest fighter.” Hari Trymbak, another representative of the Maharaja of Indore present there, stated: “At the time of her death, [the Rani] used her sword to the utmost” (Tahmankar 155). One may argue that although those mentioned above were Indian accounts, they were reports by men allied with the British. Thus, they did not have a pressing need to glorify the Rani if it was invalid. However, Indian historians did paint the Rani heroically dying on the battlefield, “in the thick of the fight, using her sword with both hands and holding the reins in her mouth” (Tahmankar 150). Later, a few British historians, like Malleson, also eulogised the Rani’s death on the battlefield (182). Likewise, there were considerable contestations over Rani Lakshmibai’s death.

Notably, she had already become a popular hero for the rebels. Thus, her death could not be reported as a mere casualty of war. Hence, it justifies the perspective of Indian historical accounts. However, in Victorian England, there was an idealised perception of women as sacred; also, among the soldiers. This aligns with the Victorian ideals which women were expected to uphold such as virtuousness, modesty, moral uprightness, purity and domesticity. Therefore, Lakshmibai’s death at the hands of a British soldier was not taken well (Lebra-Chapman 117). Thus, later British historical records probably had reasons to glorify the Rani’s death. However, there are reports, by the Indians and the British alike, which genuinely revere her bravery.

Lakshmibai’s death caused chaos amongst the rebels. The British won the battle at Gwalior. Tantia Tope, who fought as a guerrilla leader for nine months, was caught and executed in April 1859. The British caught Rao Saheb in 1862. However, they could not arrest Nana Saheb, who remained in disguise. He probably died of a fever in Nepal in 1859. The Rebellion was officially announced over in July 1859 by Lord Canning (Jerosch 271). Thus, Rani Lakshmibai’s trajectory from a queen in allegiance with the East India Company to a warrior woman who actively fought

the British and died on the battlefield is noteworthy. Despite her initial innocence in the Jhokan Bagh massacre at Jhansi, she was forced by circumstances to be a part of the 1857 Rebellion. Historical records, as stated earlier, suggest how she came to be revered as a leader by hundreds of rebels during the Rebellion itself. No records indicate Lakshmibai's deliberate wish to be named a leader. However, the circumstances ascended her to a Virangana, with or without her choice, in the history of India.

There is a dearth of material on Rani Lakshmibai. The little available to us “are fraught with voids and gaps, only offering, as it were, ‘snapshots’ of certain moments” (Jerosch 278). One of the first Indian accounts on Lakshmibai, as claimed by Mukherjee in his book *A Begum and a Rani* (2021), was Rabindranath Tagore's essay “Jhansir Rani” (Rani of Jhansi) published in 1877. Tagore admits the influence of British accounts on the Rani by John Kaye in his writing. However, Tagore further bolstered the Rani's image as a Virangana “before whom we must bow our heads in reverence” (xiv-xv). Although Mukherjee does state that Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, “without knowing what Tagore had written,” also wrote similarly about the Rani in his writings around the same time, Mukherjee still believes that it was “young Tagore [who had] unwittingly initiated a trend that has stayed on—to regard Lakshmibai as an object of devotion” (xvi). Moreover, the writings of Tagore and Savarkar came in an era of, as Ranajit Guha says, “pulling away” from the coloniser's historical discourses and thus, writing a new history for the idea of India (45).

Nevertheless, most resources seem to romanticise many aspects of her life and personality to weave a continuum. Since she is very popular and significant in the idea of India and Hindu nationalism, much has been written on Lakshmibai, historical as well as fictional. Because the authenticity of the resources available is questionable, the narratives written may blur the line between the fictional and factual. Alternatively, as Harleen Singh believes, “fiction, in [the Rani's

case], has literally formed the historical” (4). Thus, the fictional narratives are considerably significant in making the historical representations of the Rani.

Fictional Narratives on Rani Lakshmibai

This section discusses the various fictional representations present on Rani Lakshmibai. Based on the authorial perspectives and socio-politico-historical locations, this section is divided into three sub-sections—(i) colonial representations, (ii) Indian representations, and (iii) contemporary representations. The colonial writers’ fictional narratives on Lakshmibai are largely depicted from an imperialist framework. The Indian writers and filmmakers who belonged to a time before or immediately after India’s independence, portray the Rani from an anti-colonial nationalist perspective. This chapter will attempt to examine the innovative thematic directions of contemporary narratives on the Rani when compared with the earlier colonial and Indian representations. Contemporary narratives are therefore examined separately.

(i) Colonial Representations of the Rani

Rani Lakshmibai has been the subject of both British and Indian fictional narratives. Most nineteenth-century British fiction on India is based on the 1857 rebellion, thus creating the genre of the “Mutiny Novel.” Hilda Greg states, “Of all the great events in this century as they are reflected in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination” (218). A few fictional narratives deify the Rani; a few depict her as a femme fatale; a few are romances of her with a British man.

Alexander Rogers’ play *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 *Flow Red the Ganges* (1972) are colonial “Mutiny novels” which valorise Rani Lakshmibai as a

skilled and brave warrior queen. However, these novels do so by portraying the Rani as an Aryan who would consequently belong to “a larger European hagiography in which race is determined as much by valour and leadership as by religion, language and skin colour” (Singh 25). Notably, “Mutiny novels” assigning any merit to the Rani ground themselves on historical evidence of the British’s recognition of Lakshmibai’s bravery and martial abilities in the Rebellion. However, the novels seem to dislocate her from her Indian nationality by Aryanising her and, hence, making her one of their own to valorise the Rani.

On the other hand, Gillean’s *The Rane: A Legend of the Indian Mutiny* (1887), Hume Nisbet’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) demonise the Rani. Fictional narratives such as these probably align with the popular colonial belief that the Rani was involved in the Jhokan Bagh massacre and that she was, in fact, one of the masterminds of the Rebellion. These narratives altered the perspective of the famous “rape scripts” of the nineteenth-century British colonial novel.

The “rape scripts” depict hypersexual Orient men sexually violating an English woman written from the white Christian European male coloniser’s perspective. On the contrary, the narratives above portray Lakshmibai as a sexually licentious and dangerous woman who seduced and raped British men. Harleen Singh argues that the colonial stereotypes of Indian masculinity consisting of the “effeminate and heterosexual Bengali versus excessively masculine but homosexual Punjabi and Pathan” were contrasted with “sexualised representations of the colonial woman.” The “rape scripts,” thus, depict how the sexually licentious warrior woman considered British masculinity superior, which is why she is shown pursuing British men instead of Indian ones. Hence, vis-à-vis such depictions, the “rape scripts” attempt to establish the dominance of

British masculinity over both “inertly feminine Indian masculinity” as well as “a sexually aggressive Indian femininity” (25). Jenny Sharpe claims that the Rani was instead represented “in a decidedly masculine role” (75). However, Indrani Sen argues that rather than locating the Rani within the rigid compartments of masculinity, “it would perhaps be more accurate to locate [her] within the more complicated trope of androgyny, where alluring female sexuality and powers of seduction seamlessly fuse with masculine physical prowess and martial skills” (1758). It is noteworthy that Sen’s description of the trope of androgyny resonates with Hansen’s definition of the figure of Virangana. Though Hansen does not talk of the Virangana as a seductress, the Virangana, as it is popularly known, possesses conventional masculine martial abilities and conventional feminine beauty and elegance. Sen further notes that the portrayal of the Rani in the “rape scripts” as a dangerous and cunning seductress not only “feeds into the stereotypes of the cruel Asiatic ruler” but at the same time, these fiction also depict the stereotypical Hindu Brahmins (since Lakshmibai was a Maratha Brahmin) as “highly intelligent, duplicitous, wily and treacherous” (1758).

While most of the “rape scripts” also portray erotic fantasy romances between the Rani and a British officer, thus disempowering her racially and sexually, Philip Meadow Taylor’s *Seeta* (1872), on the other hand, is a romance which valorises the Rani and does not depict her negatively. Taylor’s *Seeta* is a love story between the brave but widowed warrior queen and a British administrator against the backdrop of the Rebellion. His novel describes the Rani as a noble queen who is in allegiance with the British authorities. However, the latter’s injustice towards her transforms her into “a very tigress at heart.” She takes revenge for the wrongs done to Jhansi by the British by killing the innocent at Jhokan Bagh (411-12). Nevertheless, the novel celebrates her bravery at the battlefield and paints her as a product of Jhansi's nineteenth-century colonial social

structure. Sen states that Taylor's perspective, which "was not a standard colonial one," seems to fuse "the paradigm of the [Virangana]...from Indian history with a strand drawn from contemporary imperial historiography which saluted the [Rani's] valor" (1757). Unlike Taylor's novel, most colonial narratives indeed looked at the Rani from a negative perspective. Famous nineteenth-century British poet Christina Rossetti's poem "In the Round Tower at Jhansi, June 8, 1857" (1859) offers a similar colonial perspective of the Jhokan Bagh massacre, emphasising the pain suffered then by the British official Major Skene and his wife.

(ii) Indian Representations of the Rani

One cannot discuss the Indian representations of Rani Lakshmibai without considering Vishnubhat Godse's travelogue. It may not be fiction in the strictest sense, but, as mentioned earlier, one of his clients edited the original travelogue to "reshape...and make it seem like a work of fiction" (Pande n.p). The Rani described in Godse's travelogue is not the epitome of womanhood. She is an ordinary woman who happens to be a queen and carries out her duties well. Godse's travelogue speaks more of the Peshwa rule and the casteist society. Since Godse himself was a Brahmin, his travelogue is from an upper-caste Brahmanical perspective. It describes the efficiency of the Peshwa Brahmins-turned-warriors more than the marginalised lower caste in the society of the times.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem "Jhansi ki Rani" (1930) is an overtly romanticised nationalist representation of the Rani's courage. The poem became so popular that it came to be included in the curriculum in Indian schools as part of Hindi literature. Harleen Singh observes that the poem "personifies the promise of independence in the figure of the Rani of Jhansi, crafts a litany of towns and regions crucial to the nationalist struggle and is a deft negotiation between

the masculine and feminine attributes of the queen” (105). While the poem masculinises the queen’s bravery, she is also deified as the Goddess Durga and Lakshmi. The poem portrays her as the ideal modern Indian warrior woman — brave on the battlefield and chaste to her husband and country. Chauhan’s Rani is an amalgamation of Indian tradition and modernity.

Vrindavanlal Varma’s novel *Jhansi ki Rani* (1946) is another significant nationalist novel on Lakshmibai written in Hindi. The novel portrays Lakshmibai as a national heroine and places her within an array of other such women. Contrary to the historical records, she is depicted in Varma’s novel as actively and willingly fighting in the Rebellion for a larger national cause.

Sandhya Rao’s *The Story of Rani of Jhansi* (1899), Mahasweta Devi’s *Jhansir Rani* (1956), Amar Chitra Katha’s publication of Mala Singh’s graphic narrative *Rani of Jhansi* (1974), Shyam Narain Sinha’s *Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi* (1980), Bhawan Singh Rana’s *Rani of Jhansi* (2005), Tapti Roy’s *Raj of the Rani* (2006) and Deepa Agarwal’s *Rani Lakshmibai* (2009) are a few of the several narratives on Lakshmibai which dwell between the blurred spaces of fiction and the historical, all celebrating her bravery and patriotism.

Sohrab Modi’s film *Jhansi ki Rani* (1953), a cinematic representation of Lakshmibai’s story, is the first Indian Technicolour film. The film was released in Hindi as well as in English. The latter was titled *The Tiger and the Flame* (1956). Modi himself played the role of Rajguru, an adviser to Lakshmibai, while Modi’s wife, Mehtab, played the female lead. Though the film valorises the Rani, more significant importance is given to Rajguru’s character (Singh 124). Thus, a film celebrating a woman actually depicts the story of the man who makes this woman a monarch. It is Rajguru who recognises Manikarnika and describes her as, “Bhagya mein Lakshmi, gyan mein Saraswati, Shakti mein Durga” (*She is Lakshmi, the bringer of prosperity and fate, Saraswati in*

knowledge and Durga in Shakti) (Modi; Singh 124). The film's pre-production began in 1947, the year of India's independence (Ramnath 5). Hence, the anti-colonial nationalist ethos must have significantly influenced the making of the film. It portrays "the revolutionary spirit" of the Revolt of 1857 (Singh 126).

The film also depicts Jhansi's armed forces as a secular army, fighting for the same nationalist cause against the British. The film shows both Muslim and Hindu soldiers eager to sacrifice their lives for Lakshmibai and Jhansi (Modi). Harleen Singh suggests, "The iteration of the good Indian Muslim subject, a disciplined minority necessary for national cohesion, is especially pertinent as it comes in 1953 only six years after the traumatic partition" (127). Modi's film, thus, attempts to capture this idea of the secular nation post-1947.

(iii) Contemporary Representations of the Rani

While this chapter has already referred to a few contemporary narratives, another significant and contemporary cinematic representation of Lakshmibai that needs consideration is *Manikarnika: The Queen of Jhansi* (2019), directed by Krish and Kangana Ranaut. Unlike Modi's film, *Manikarnika* does not portray Rajguru as the active agent and instead primarily focuses on Lakshmibai, played by Kangana Ranaut herself. The 2019 film seems to valorise not only the Rani but also romanticise her portrayal, fusing her femininity and masculinity within the broader framework of overt Hindu national chauvinism. The film probably inclines towards contemporary socio-political Hindutva nationalist ideologies to the effect that Lakshmibai's death for the Hindu nation is fictionalised vis-à-vis her act of committing *sati* towards the narrative's closure. It is also noteworthy that the film explicitly vilifies the Muslim community. Moreover, the film's visual tone is dominantly saffronised; one cannot ignore the association of the colour saffron with the

contemporary political upholders of orthodox Hindutva jingoist ideologies. Thus, the film seems to adhere to and justify Islamophobic Hindu nationalist chauvinism in overt and insidious ways.

Most contemporary fiction on Lakshmibai experiments with the politics of representation of the characters in their narratives. Jaishree Misra's *Rani* (2007) seems to reify the legendary icon Lakshmibai, depicting her romantic relationship with the British officer Major Ellis. Christopher Nicole's *Manu and Emma* (2011) and *Queen of Glory* (2012) depict the friendship of Lakshmibai with a British woman named Emma with the Rebellion as the backdrop. Michelle Moran's *Rebel Queen* (2015) and Moupia Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute* (2019), while portraying Lakshmibai's story, primarily focus on two of Lakshmibai's warrior women, Sita in Moran's novel and Chandraki in Basu's.

Thus, Rani Lakshmibai's significance in Indian history, culture and the nationalist narrative is evident in the fact that despite the paucity of authentic historical sources on the Rani, there is, interestingly, quite a large body of work representing her. The historical and political making of the legends on the Rani have been discussed. As mentioned earlier, the various narratives on Lakshmibai depict her in different ways according to different socio-politico-historical contexts. Factors like the broader literary and cinematic market and the politics of representation within it also influence the narratives. Thus, the legend of Lakshmibai continues to interest authors and filmmakers. There is a revival of the myth of the Virangana and Lakshmibai in the current socio-political milieu in India. As mentioned above, Lakshmibai has often been used as a symbol of Hindu jingoist ideologies, and the contemporary majoritarian politics continues this trend in the present day. Lakshmibai is also a popular feminist icon in contemporary times. She has been used as a feminist epitome of the warrior woman in Indian as well as international literary and cinematic

productions. However, the nature of the feminist representation of the Rani needs to be examined in the present socio-political context.

To challenge the hegemonic myth of Rani Lakshmibai despite the historical debates in which she is ensconced, this chapter examines four narratives on Lakshmibai—(a) Mahasweta Devi's *Jhansir Rani* (1956), (b) Jaishree Misra's *Rani* (2007), (c) Michelle Moran's *Rebel Queen* (2015), and (d) Moupia Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute* (2019). The latter three works are fictional, whereas Devi's text is more of a biographical narrative history, which reads like fiction. The latter three works are recent novels, and hence, not much engaged with academically. They have been chosen to supplement the existing academic work available on the Rani.

This discussion is divided into four sections. The first section discusses Mahasweta Devi's biographical narrative history, *Jhansir Rani*. Since it was published in 1956, not many years after India's independence, Devi's narrative echoes the anti-colonial nationalist spirit prevalent in India. The second section discusses Jaishree Misra's *Rani*. Misra's novel, published in 2007, focuses on Lakshmibai as a woman who expresses her romantic desires for a British man. The third section discusses Michelle Moran's *Rebel Queen*. While Devi and Misra portray the narratives of the complementing but marginalized Virangana figures only cursorily, Moran's novel depicts the story of such a fictional marginalised warrior woman. Moran's novel showcases the historical warrior women's group in Lakshmibai's army and the nature of the women's companionship. The fourth section discusses Moupia Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute*. Basu's novel also tells the story of another fictional marginalised Virangana from Lakshmibai's warrior women group. An analysis of her novel reveals the repressed Virangana as an alter-ego of the dominant one. Thus, the publications of the chosen texts range across different spatio-temporal and socio-political locations, which influence the identity politics in the narratives. The chapter will examine if these

postmodern, postcolonial, subaltern feminist representations of the Rani successfully transgress the dominant archive or if they eventually fail to break the shackles of the traditional norms.

Mahasweta Devi's *Jhansir Rani* (1956)

A decade after Vrindavanlal Varma's famous novel *Jhansi ki Rani* was made available, Mahasweta Devi's Bengali biographical narrative history *Jhansir Rani* was published in 1956. Devi's narrative is her first literary work and thus, lesser-known within her extraordinary oeuvre. *Jhansir Rani* was translated into English by Mandira and Sagaree Sengupta as *The Queen of Jhansi* (2000)³.

Devi's *Queen of Jhansi* provides a biography of Lakshmibai based on historical narratives and other sources in the form of a fictional account. Devi reveals the difficulty of finding authentic sources of Lakshmibai's story. She claims that a complete knowledge of the Rani's truth will never be available (Preface x). She acknowledges the "sheer dearth of authentic documents on the [Revolt] of 1857 or on the Queen of Jhansi." Devi refers to the folk songs, rhymes, ballads and stories representing how the local people of Jhansi remember the Rebellion and the Rani (Preface x).

Notably, Devi's narrative history mirrors folk and oral traditions of the marginalised, though she also refers to some British historical records for her research. However, it is essential to note that although Devi refers extensively to marginalised historiography, her narrative is representative of the larger anti-colonial nationalist epoch of its time. She does not deviate from valorising the Rani for her bravery and active participation in the Rebellion. Devi "writes India and Rani Lakshmi Bai interchangeably" (Singh 140). Thus, she also portrays Lakshmibai as the nation personified. In her biographical narrative, Devi claims:

If the essence of our land could be personified, that embodiment would be Rani Lakshmi Bai. If for a hundred years ordinary people have known that in her hands, soil turned into brave soldiers, wood became swords and mountains got transformed to speedy horses, what kind of woman could she have been? (xv)

Hence, Devi's narrative and the representation of the marginalised section also align with the larger nationalist idea of Lakshmibai as one of the forerunners of the Indian independence movement.

However, Devi's narrative is not merely a hagiography of the Rani. Unlike the hegemonic nationalist ideology, which reduces Lakshmibai in particular, and women in general, to mere symbolism of the Mother nation, Devi's narrative attempts to create a separate space for Lakshmibai to exist as a feminist icon coexisting with several other socio-political identities. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that woman is only incorporated as a "copulative metaphor" and as an "instrument" under the umbrella of categories of class, caste, region, tribe and nation. The space created by Devi vis-à-vis her narrative is what Spivak considers the "subaltern" (31).

Unlike most other contemporary narratives like Varma's novel, which only valorise the Rani as a national symbol inscribed within the hegemonic historiography, Devi's narrative instead rescues Lakshmibai from the dominant and rigid upper-caste, upper-class patriarchal moulds. Unlike contemporary dominant narratives like Varma's, which portrays Lakshmibai as a dominant Brahmanical Hindu, patriarchal, nationalist symbol, Devi specifically places Lakshmibai in the regional context of Jhansi and the Rebellion, thus associating the queen with the subaltern. In this context, Harleen Singh states:

Mahasweta presents a biography that extols the Rani's virtues and corroborates her esteemed position in the anti-colonial struggle, yet the expected mutation into a

hagiography is prevented by anchoring the narrative in regional details and by turning the biography into a larger project of recovering history and critiquing the postcolonial state. Mahasweta supplements the frame of colonial relations with a network of patriarchy, caste, religion and language and resists recasting the gendered subject as a supplicant to male, upper-caste historiography. (135)

Devi's sources for recreating a famous historical figure belong to the marginalised section of the society. Singh further states, "As the personification of India, the Rani is not reduced here to the rhetoric of nationalist symbolism, but instead rearticulated to embody the very distance 'ordinary people' experience from history" (141). Devi, in her narrative, alludes to a Bengali folk song which describes the Rani:

From clay and stones
 She moulded her army.
 From mere wood
 She made swords
 And the mountain she transformed
 Into a steed.
 Thus she marched to Gwalior. (xiv)

Rani's army, arms and ammunition built from the roots of India represent the marginalised ordinary people in making the hegemonic historiography. Through the unusual usage of folklore,

memory and personal tones, Devi's narrative attempts to deconstruct the very canon of history and historical narratives.

Her biographical narrative is feminist in describing Rani's story since her childhood, thus portraying the unknown nuances. Devi depicts Lakshmibai's unconventional choices of dismissing *sati* and the elaborate rituals of widowhood, thus painting the Rani from a feminist lens. However, these choices are not seen as reflecting the Rani's privileged socio-political position. Moreover, the biography portrays Lakshmibai as a "good wife" who embraces her role of "subhasini" during religious functions. "Among the brahmins of Maharashtra, married women of good fortune enjoyed a special place of honour at religious functions. They were called "subhasini." When the Rani received an invitation to play this role at a ceremony, she rarely refused" (Devi 27). Devi's biography does not explicitly depict Lakshmibai's difficult marriage with Gangadhar Rao. One may refer to Godse's travelogue in this context as evidence of an almost authentic historical account. The travelogue bluntly states that Lakshmibai's "was not a happy marriage. As a husband, Gangadhar Baba [referring to the king] was a stern and suspicious man who allowed his wife very little freedom. [She] was confined within the palace's walls and was mostly kept under lock and key, with her chambers guarded day and night by armed women. No male was allowed to enter her quarters" (n.p).

Thus, it is noteworthy how Devi's biography represents Lakshmibai's loving relationship with her husband, contrary to Godse's historical account (67). It may be argued that Devi's biography simply portrays Lakshmibai's position in an upper-caste, patriarchal society but does not challenge it in any way. It contrasts with Devi's later works, which primarily focus on the caste politics prevalent in society, thus voicing her concerns for the subaltern. As a biographical narrative history, Devi in *The Queen of Jhansi* probably only mirrors how the common people

remember Lakshmibai, so Devi does not lend her own interpretation to it. Moreover, one may also note that perhaps Devi's strong socio-political voice against caste politics is not yet fully developed in this biography, which is her very first literary work.

As far as the British representation is concerned, Devi's biography paints them negatively. Major Skene, along with Captain Gordon, "confiscated the two villages endowed for the purpose of defraying the cost of maintenance for the Mahalakshmi temple" and "opened a slaughterhouse [of pigs and cows] in the middle of the city" (Devi 69). Both these incidents gravely upset the religious sentiments of the people in Jhansi. The biography portrays these incidents from a hegemonic anti-colonial perspective without considering the contesting historical records available on either the resident British officers or the political situation in Jhansi. Elaborating on her idea of history, Devi claims:

If history is about people, then I would say that the history created on the roads of Jhansi that day is unparalleled. The history that was made that day by thousands of Indians is the real history of India. In comparison to that, what the English did for us or gave us during their rule of 200 years is negligible. (177)

However, we cannot ignore that Devi used only few British historical records for her narrative on Lakshmibai. Hence, her selective choice of sources for her narrative may then speak of her political ideologies concerning history.

Devi's biography does not provide any alternative retelling of the Rebellion or Lakshmibai's involvement. It describes Lakshmibai as a patriotic woman who does not hesitate to participate in the Rebellion. However, the biography paints her as innocent in the Jhokan Bagh massacre. In Devi's biography, it is Major Skene who wants to move to Sagar when the Rani

disagrees with providing them shelter in her fort. The massacre takes place without the Rani's knowledge. She is "not directly or indirectly involved in it." Devi further provides proof of Colonel Martin's letter to Damodar Rao, stating Lakshmibai's innocence in the massacre (93). Thus, the biography portrays Lakshmibai as a warrior woman who is not so inhuman as to kill innocent people but is sufficiently courageous to fight in the Rebellion against the East India Company actively. However, this Lakshmibai, as Devi describes, is the "true" leader of the marginalised and not the upper-class, upper-caste nationalist regime.

Devi begins her literary journey of giving a voice to the Dalits and their history with *The Queen of Jhansi*. As mentioned, this biographical narrative does not focus on Dalit representation as she does in her later works. Nevertheless, the recreation of Lakshmibai's story from the oral and folk traditions of the marginalised, *The Queen of Jhansi* may be set apart as a work of postcolonial Dalit feminism. Although Devi's biography gives voice to the marginalised historical perspective of the Rani, it still portrays the Rani as an anti-colonial nationalist symbol. However, Devi, as has been mentioned earlier, does not align with the dominant patriarchal, upper-caste Hindu hagiography of the Rani. Devi's biography is sourced from the marginalised section of society. It may not be an alternative retelling of the dominant narrative, but it still dislocates the Rani from the dominant construction and places her within the subaltern space.

However, Devi's biographical narrative may still be criticised because the few historical facts available from the British and Indian records and archives, as stated earlier, open the possibility of a helpless young widow who is forced by circumstances to join the Rebellion. However, Devi's biography neither deals with such possibilities nor attempts to deconstruct this aspect of the popularly known narrative.

Devi claims that the people of Jhansi believe the Rani is alive, “Rani margay na houni, abhi to jinda hou” (The Queen isn’t dead, she still lives) (xvi). Devi seems to align herself with this same belief, just like the upper-caste, upper-class patriarchal Indian nationalists. Harleen Singh states, “Mahasweta is not referring here to a mythical sense of nationalist immortality but is instead reaffirming the people’s continued need for a symbol of resistance” (141). Considering Singh’s argument, one may note that Devi is probably portraying Lakshmibai not as a hegemonic symbol of nationalism but as a symbol of resistance significant for the Dalits. Badri Narayan states that the Dalits “mostly imagined their nation in the historical biographies of their national heroes and freedom fighters and developing the nation than the conventional heroes of the nationalist movement” (92). Similarly, by inscribing Lakshmibai within the subaltern narrative, Devi perhaps tries to create a nationalist narrative inclusive of the Dalits.

Narayan further notes:

But with developments in Indian democracy and the changing political arena in which Dalits and subalterns have become the principal actors, the distinction between a myth and a verifiable fact is becoming blurred...Here, the past is not merely a bygone past. It is, instead built into the present. In this condition, the past not only appears as the professional historian’s past, which is claimed to be ‘rational history’ based on empirical and positivistic notions of the past. It also appears as the past that helps the Dalits in their ongoing struggle for craving their future against the oppressive present. (88)

The Dalits continue to voice their resistance against the oppressors vis-à-vis the icon of Lakshmibai, thus immortalising her. Based on the arguments in this context, one may conclude that although the story of Lakshmibai in Devi’s biography is not very different from the hegemonic

one, it is the origin of its historiography which matters more than the content itself, and therein lies Devi's deconstruction of the nexus between power and history.

Contrary to Devi's biography, which does not weaponize the feminist icon for political assertion, Dalit politics fall into the same trap as Brahmanical Hindu politics in doing so. Several narratives on Lakshmibai mention a Dalit warrior woman, Jhalkaribai, who fought in the Rani's army. Varma's novel first mentioned Jhalkaribai as Lakshmibai's maid. Devi's biographical narrative also mentions Jhalkaribai as a minor character in the larger narrative. The historical records mentioned in this chapter refer to warrior women being present in the Rani's army, but they do not name any. Using fictional narratives such as those by Varma and Devi, Dalit activists recreated Jhalkaribai as the national hero of the Rebellion. Thus, the Dalit activists challenged the dominant historiography and replaced Lakshmibai from the available legends with Jhalkaribai, originally a fictional character.

Subhadra Kumari Chauhan's poem "Jhansi ki Rani" was replaced by Archana Verma's poem on Jhalkaribai, published in 1997:

Macha Jhansi mein ghamasan, chahunaur machee killkaree thee

Angrezon se loha lenein, ran mein kudee Jhalkari thee

(Amidst the sound and fury of battle at Jhansi

Plunges Jhalkari Bai to confront the British). (Narayan 122)

Jaganath Prasad Shakya cites another famous alternative poem on the Dalit hero:

Khub lari Jhalkari tu tau, teri ek jawani thi

dur firangi ko karne mein, veeron mein mardani thi

har bolon ke munh se sun hum teri yeh kahani thi

(Jhalkari you really fought, your youthfulness was unique

You were a man among the brave in ousting the British

We heard your story from the mouth of warriors). (qtd. in Gupta 1742)

Although Dalit politics recreated these warrior women from hegemonic history to establish alternative Dalit history, these feminist icons are reduced to patriarchal feminine symbols to further larger political purposes.

Dalit politics eventually entirely rejected the Brahmanical heroine Lakshmibai. Since the historical lapses and silences concerning Jhalkaribai are only filled with fiction and myths, Jhalkaribai is thus mythicised as the real hero of the Revolt of 1857 to establish an alternative history. Historian Charu Gupta also presents a case concerning the alternative Dalit history of 1857 and the Viranganas who fought it. According to Dalit historians, “In reality the Rani escaped the colonial army with the help of the Maharaja of Pratapgarh, entered into the dense forest of Nepal Tarai and went underground. In fact, she lived a long life and died at the age of 80” (Narayan 124).

Thus, the Dalit narrative portrays Lakshmibai as a coward queen who flees the British as opposed to Jhalkaribai, who actively participates in the Rebellion and becomes a martyr. The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) subscribes to these Dalit narratives and celebrates Jhalkaribai in annual festivals in Uttar Pradesh, thus weaponizing her as a feminist icon but for patriarchal political purposes (Singh 157). It is noteworthy that Brahmanical Hindu politics led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) treats the icon of Lakshmibai similarly to assert their political

ideologies. Thus, in both cases, the figure of the warrior woman is used as a patriarchal feminine metaphor for asserting caste identity politics. It may be noted that Devi's biographical narrative, which recognises Lakshmibai as a national hero representing the subaltern, inspires further Dalit narratives which exclusively claim Jhalkaribai as the ideal Virangana of the Rebellion. However, in the process, Lakshmibai is also commodified to assert caste identity politics. The woman whom Devi, vis-à-vis her narrative, rescues from the larger socio-political patriarchal umbrella and places her in the space of the subaltern is once again subsumed and stifled under a gendered hegemony.

Jaishree Misra's *Rani* (2007)

London-based Indian author Jaishree Misra's *Rani* (2007) is a romance set in nineteenth-century India and England with the Revolt of 1857 as its backdrop. Misra's novel depicts a romantic relationship between Lakshmibai and the resident British administrator, Robert Ellis. The novel is a twenty-first-century recreation of the popular Rebellion, which portrays Lakshmibai as a brave warrior woman in love with a British officer.

Misra's novel opens with Manikarnika's happy childhood. She has a close familial relationship with Nana Saheb⁴ and Tantia Tope, unlike most historical records which suggest otherwise. However, the novel depicts Nana Saheb as a pompous child who expresses his superiority over both Manikarnika and Tantia. Manikarnika is smart and intelligent. She is better than the boys at skills like horse riding. She enjoys reading. She is painted as free, independent, and, thus, an unconventional girl. However, her unconventional nature is not portrayed in the novel as threatening societal norms. Her "Baba's occasional rebukes, so mildly delivered, could never really worry her" (6-7, 10). Thus, Manikarnika's "tomboyishness" is portrayed as a young girl's

childlike nature, which is indulged by her family. When expressed as a grown woman, the same unconventional masculinity is considered threatening to the hegemonic social structure.

In the context of tomboyism, Judith Halberstam points out:

[It] generally describes as extended childhood period of female masculinity.... tomboyism is quite common for girls and does not necessarily give rise to parental fears. Because comparable cross-identification behaviours in boys do often give rise to quite hysterical responses, we tend to believe that female gender deviance is much more tolerated than male gender deviance....Tomboyism is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood and into adolescence...tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent; as soon as puberty begins, however, the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl. (5-6)

Similarly, in Misra's novel, once Lakshmibai attains puberty, she is seen as the conventional patriarchal woman whose primary duty is to procreate. The novel portrays her female masculinity as threatening as soon as puberty hits her. Asharfi Bua, the only maternal influence in Lakshmibai's life after her mother's death, insists that she marry King Gangadhar Rao as it is considered a substantial offer. Asharfi Bua believes, "Girls who are allowed to grow too much before marriage only grow into trouble...Especially when they are brought up not knowing if they are girl or boy" (30). Thus, female masculinity is not considered acceptable and needs to be corrected by forcing a woman into conventional roles.

However, Lakshmibai does not willingly and entirely transform into the good woman of patriarchy when she comes of age. When Gangadhar Rao's elderly ministers visit Varanasi to

“examine” her before her marriage to the king, Lakshmibai not only feels “embarrassed” but also “violated” by this treatment (27). Through this scene, Misra portrays a patriarchal pre-marital ritual in India when the groom’s family examines and commodifies potential brides. Vis-à-vis Lakshmibai’s response towards such objectification of women, Misra tries to develop Lakshmibai’s feminist stance from an early age. The novel further depicts Lakshmibai as a woman who does not believe in the normative standards of sexuality and beauty. Misra describes, “Even as a little girl [Lakshmibai] had never particularly enjoyed dressing up, preferring to join Nana and Tantia in their boyish pursuits of gillidanda and pitthoo” (32). As stated earlier in the chapter, since Lakshmibai’s childhood is not documented sufficiently in historical terms, most narratives tend to fictionalise it. Misra seems to follow suit. Lakshmibai’s childhood scenes, which Misra depicts, hint at Lakshmibai’s latent feminist position against societal standards. Thus, through such a portrayal, Misra builds material for the eventual feminist icon which Lakshmibai is shown to become in the narrative.

The vast age gap between Gangadhar Rao and Lakshmibai does not matter to Manikarnika’s family because a marriage to the king of Jhansi is a respectable offer in social and economic terms. Moreover, Asharfi Bua considers the prospect of marrying an old king a better choice for a woman than marrying a lascivious young man “who cannot keep his hands off the palace maids and courtesans” (Misra 34). Thus, Misra’s novel shows that society normalises young men’s libidinous liaisons as part of their nature. Apart from all the other reasons for Lakshmibai’s marriage with Gangadhar, the most significant one is establishing a political alliance between the Peshwa and Jhansi (39).

The woman is a victim in either case. She has no choice or voice in the institution of marriage. Lakshmibai sees her husband only during her wedding, not before that. It is noteworthy

how Lakshmibai's family almost forces her into a marriage with old Gangadhar Rao. Consequently, one may also wonder that her future, which makes her a Virangana, is in the very beginning, built on this forceful political marital alliance.

Misra portrays the transformation of Lakshmibai from being an individual to being a secondary subject to the king through symbols. For instance, the recurring images of free-flowing, life-giving rivers probably depict the procreating woman. The rivers also represent the ever-changing life of Lakshmibai—from being a daughter to being the king's wife, from a mortal woman to the sacred, deified nationalist symbol. In one instance, Manikarnika dresses for her wedding in Jhansi style, looks at her reflection in the river Betwa. Sadly, it is her saree from Jhansi, which is distinct, "her face a mere blur" (48). This image is a foretelling of her impending marriage, which would eventually subsume her subjectivity under the authority of Gangadhar and, thus, Jhansi. Because of this forced marriage, Lakshmibai's future is tied to Jhansi's without her choice. Lakshmibai's marriage to Gangadhar and, hence, to Jhansi is compared to her heavy wedding jewellery; both are bestowed upon her by the men concerned in this exchange—Peshwa Saheb and the king of Jhansi (70, 75).

Misra's novel sketches a casteist, patriarchal society in nineteenth-century Jhansi. Brahmin women were expected to change their maiden names once they married, thus losing their original identity completely. The process of "naming represents the power of definition, and name changing confers the power to reimagine identity, place, relation, and even gender" (Halberstam 8). Manikarnika is renamed Lakshmibai by Gangadhar Rao, the king's wife, thus entirely stripping her of her original individuality. Although she is named after the town goddess Mahalakshmi, Lakshmibai is still redefined by a man in the mould of the goddess, who is the ideal wife of patriarchy. A similar transformation is also shown in the colonial Christian institution when the

British missionary woman in Jhansi, Amy Johnson, needs to change her name to Sister Agnes once she joins the institution of Christian missionaries (Misra 6, 89-90). Thus, the novel implicitly criticises marriage and religion as constituents of the same patriarchal institutions marginalising women.

Despite her inherent feminist nature, as Misra paints her, Lakshmibai's ideological indoctrinations by Asharfi-bua lead her to behave as an ideal wife. Even before her marriage, Lakshmibai realises that "as queen of Jhansi, she would have no choice but to heed the advice that Asharfi-bua had tried to instil in her from babyhood, which was to *think* before opening her mouth to speak and to consider *all* options before taking any decisions—habits that never come easily to Mani" (60)⁵.

Simone de Beauvoir's significant work, *The Second Sex* (1949), discusses the process of becoming a woman in a patriarchal society. Based on Beauvoir's ideas, Iris Marion Young, in her essay "Throwing Like a Girl" (1980) elaborates that it is not only the patriarchal society that conditions a woman's body to behave like physically inferior. Women are also indoctrinated to embody this oppression. Young does not deny that there are biological differences in both sexes, but she states that the differences are not "specifically anatomical." Instead, women are conditioned to behave in a stereotypically "feminine" manner, which in turn affects the women to embody this difference in their lived bodily experiences. Thus, the woman's "bodily comportment, motility, and spatiality" are all influenced by this ideological and cultural conditioning. Young states:

The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are

dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile.

Thus, in this cultural and ideological conditioning, the woman eventually starts objectifying herself (Young 137-155).

Considering this discussion, it may be noted how women like Asharfi-bua perpetuate the patriarchal law to bring up girls like Lakshmibai. Asharfi-bua and Lakshmibai are both subjects and objects in the patriarchal society. They are already objectified in society. Moreover, as subjects of the same society, Asharfi-bua conditions Lakshmibai to treat herself as an object to be looked at by men.

Misra portrays Jhansi as a small British principality that is not wealthy or politically significant. The novel describes Gangadhar Rao as an efficient king who brought stability and peace to Jhansi and nearby regions, although British historical records state that Gangadhar ruled “neither very wisely nor very well” (Misra 55; Malleson 180). However, Godse mentions him as “a good ruler who hated sloth and injustice” (n.p). Misra’s novel portrays Gangadhar as a capable king beloved by the people of Jhansi. Accordingly, so is Lakshmibai, the wife of the king. The subjects of Jhansi “already loved her, merely for being their raja’s wife” (70). Thus, Lakshmibai’s popular status in Jhansi as its queen, also found in the available historical records, is more by her role as the king’s wife than by her own abilities. The king is rendered sacred by his subjects; thus, so is his wife. However, she is still secondary to him, even in the eyes of the subjects. Analogous to recorded history, Misra’s *Rani* portrays Gangadhar maintaining friendly and peaceful terms with the British. Although Lakshmibai does not unthinkingly vilify the British, she does not appreciate her husband’s meek subjugation under them. Nevertheless, after his death, she continues sustaining

the peaceful relationship with the British authorities her husband has established, only to be later circumstantially forced into the Rebellion (134, 227, 243).

Misra's *Rani* also touches upon Gangadhar Rao's conventional femininity, an aspect of contention. It portrays him as a man with rather "ostentatious" tastes and attributes it to his femininity. The novel describes his chamber thus:

[His] large chamber was very unlike the spartan comforts of her father's quarters back at Saturday House [in Varanasi], every wall and corner softened by brocaded cushions and long damask drapes. It was—Mani searched for the unfamiliar word in her head—it was how she had imagined women with loose morals might live, a sort of boudoir, a *kotha*⁶. There was something faintly immodest about the opulence of her surroundings... (75)

Gangadhar's chamber reflects his personality, which does not align with conventional notions of masculinity. He is unlike the men Lakshmibai has always known. His chamber reminds her of a prostitute's *kotha* (quarters). Thus, her ideologies perceive him as an embodiment of the forbidden but bold. However, the novel suggests that this "effrontery" of flouting the norms fascinates Lakshmibai (75). Perhaps Misra's novel tries to build a cordial relationship between Gangadhar and Lakshmibai, as Devi does in her biographical narrative *The Queen of Jhansi*. However, unlike Devi's Lakshmibai, who reveres her husband as an ideal wife, Misra's more modern depiction suggests that Lakshmibai's liking for her husband probably develops because both are unconventional in their own ways.

The novel shows Gangadhar's passion towards theatre in which he engages himself as an attribute of his apparent conventional femininity:

Theatre appeared to be Gangadhar's great passion and Lakshmibai had watched, amused, as one evening, seeming utterly inspired by the actors, he had sprung up from the cushions on which they had been reclining, and insisted on playing a part himself. A few seconds later, he had emerged from the wings, dressed in the garb of a woman, much to the hilarity and appreciation of the actor's troupe and the audience. (Misra 101)

Gangadhar's performances in the theatre cross-dressed as a woman, are seen as his expression of his femininity, which is unconventional in nineteenth-century Jhansi. Indian historical sources also mention these feminine performances of Gangadhar. The records further state that he generally also wore ornaments conventionally worn by women to symbolise their subjugation. However, the records justify these features by alluding to an instance where Gangadhar reveals that he expresses his helplessness under British authority by symbolically wearing womanly ornaments (Tahmankar 20). Notably, records such as these negate the possibility of Gangadhar's queer sexuality by painting his apparent femininity as a patriotic expression towards Jhansi instead.

However, the same records also mention the "disturbing rumours [spreading in Jhansi] about Gangadhar's private life," which hint at the king's sexual preferences towards the same sex (Tahmankar 28). It would, however, also provide possible reasons why he had no children from his first marriage and had almost no sexual relations with his second wife, Lakshmibai. Misra's novel elaborates extensively on Gangadhar's apparent queer personality. It vividly describes Gangadhar's love for dressing up as a woman:

He took a pinch of surmai from a tiny silver box and smeared it first into one eye and then the other. Blinking slightly from the sudden cooling sharpness, he sat back a minute before leaning forward again. Opening another miniature silver box carefully, so as not to spill its

contents, he dipped his forefinger into it and smeared a little pink powder over his left cheekbone. Rubbing it into the flesh, he angled his face slightly to see if it was visible. Satisfied with the subtle tone it cast over his cheek, he repeated the procedure on the other side of his face and then on his lips, first the top, then the bottom, spreading a little extra rouge beyond the lipline to make the mouth seem fuller, more feminine. (104)

Misra's description of this elaborate process of Gangadhar applying makeup on his face probably wishes to suggest his queer sexuality. However, such an essentialist reduction also reveals the author's ideologies rooted in gender binaries. Misra, perhaps herself stereotypes such a process of wearing makeup and associates it with conventional femininity. Thus, she hints towards Gangadhar's queerness. However, one may argue that men in India usually wear makeup and ornaments; this practice was more prevalent in pre-colonial and colonial times. These cosmetics and jewellery vary across social categories such as gender, class, caste, race, and tribal affiliation, these being mostly identity markers. There are historical references to the usage of cosmetics by men and women alike since ancient India (Patkar 134). Even Misra mentions the prevalence of this standard practice in her novel, "Gangadhar sat back and gazed at his reflection. He knew his subjects expected members of the royal family, even the men, to look fairer and more beautiful than their appearance when going out in public" (104). Thus, Misra suggests that Gangadhar is required by customs to wear makeup and ornaments.

However, as opposed to Victorian ideals of rigid gender and sexuality binaries, Indian men wearing makeup and ornaments were perhaps blanketed under the expressions of effeminacy. The colonisers considered the Victorian masculinity ideal against which they perceived and judged colonised masculinity. Based on this consideration, there may be a faint possibility that Gangadhar's much-debated masculinity is, in reality, looked through the Victorian framework of

rigid gender binaries. It further suggests that Gangadhar may not have been a non-normative gender at all. Alternatively, he may have expressed conventional feminine attributes but was not necessarily homosexual.

It brings us to the third possibility—Gangadhar as homosexual in nineteenth-century Jhansi. Homosexuality was seen as a threat to the Victorian ideal of masculinity. While discussing colonial methods of sexual policing, Suparna Bhaskaran mentions the British anti-sodomy law passed in Britain in 1860. It states that anyone engaging in sexual intercourse “against nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life...or for a term... [of] ten years” (15). Hence, the nineteenth-century British colonisers in India would have similar ideas regarding homosexuality. It justifies their historical records problematising Gangadhar’s queer personality. The British administrators in Jhansi, as portrayed in Misra’s novel, also consider Gangadhar, an otherwise “decent chap,” to be “a queer,” “a pederast” (138).

Moreover, most twentieth-century Indian historians relied extensively on British historical records for writing their narratives. Thus, Indian historians refer to Gangadhar’s queer sexuality probably based on these nineteenth-century British historical records. In any case, it is once again Victorian ideas of masculinity which dominate historical records, both British and Indian. Ruth Vanita states that “at most times and places in pre-nineteenth century India, love between men and women, even when disapproved of, was not persecuted” (“Same-sex Love” xviii). Notably, the British colonisers attributed homosexuality in India as “a special oriental vice” (Bhaskaran 17). Thus, colonialism’s sexual regulation in India vehemently demonised queer sexuality, and it has probably also redefined colonial and postcolonial Indian perspectives of looking at queer identity.

Based on these arguments, one may argue that Misra is also guilty of stereotyping Gangadhar from the perspective of the colonial framework of Victorian gender binaries. Hence, her portrayal of Gangadhar wearing makeup is probably ideologically suggestive of Victorian patriarchal femininity. Such a portrayal reveals the authorial intention of depicting Gangadhar's queer identity. In her description, Gangadhar who is initially required to follow the Indian custom of wearing makeup and ornaments, starts to "enjoy" the "nightly ritual" (104). Gangadhar's transcendence of normative sexuality, thus, takes place "shielded from public gaze in the soothing solitude of his chambers [when he can] take on whichever guise suited his fancy for the night" (104).

Misra's *Rani* may portray Gangadhar as an unconventionally effeminate king who is more interested in theatre than political matters, but she does not depict him as an inefficient ruler. Despite not devoting much time to courtly matters, the novel shows him as the supreme authority. Lakshmibai is shown taking the political responsibilities of Jhansi instead of the king, and she is shown performing them better than him. However, Misra portrays that it is Gangadhar who *allows*⁷ his wife to take on the political decision-making responsibilities, which is an expression of his "kind and respectful" nature (10). Lakshmibai owes her political and administrative abilities to Gangadhar's able tutelage:

Gangadhar was...so good at explaining things to her in simple and understandable terms, that of late she hardly ever stopped to miss her dearest father and [Peshwa-Saheb] any more. How lucky she was to have gained from her husband the kind of protection and love that she had been so anxious about losing when she had left her father's home. (119)

Thus, the Virangana's qualities are only bestowed upon her by more skilled men—her husband Gangadhar Rao, her father Moropant Tambe and her guardian Peshwa-Saheb. She exists because she is *permitted*⁸ to and moulded by the men in her life. The novel shows her respecting this blessing, which renders her an ideal wife, a daughter and a queen.

Moreover, Jhansi's society then exempts Lakshmibai from following purdah, which elite women were otherwise expected to follow. However, she still needs to follow this practice in the presence of the British. It suggests that all her liberties are permitted by a man but only within the hegemonic limits. The husband perceives the British as the Other unknown man from whose gaze the native woman needs to be protected. Such an idea aligns with the concept of the gendered nation (as discussed in the previous chapters) and the necessity to secure it from being defiled by the male enemy to preserve the nation's "pure" lineage. However, after her husband's death, Lakshmibai stops following the purdah completely, thus, exposing herself confidently even to the British administrators (Misra 207). It is noteworthy how widowhood seems to liberate her from her husband's authority.

The novel portrays Lakshmibai as a mother to not only Jhansi but also Gangadhar (Misra 108). Motherhood, in her case, is intricately intertwined with Jhansi's future, so much so that her marriage to a much older man takes place on this supposition that she must provide Jhansi with a legal biological male heir to safeguard its future. Society normalises marital rape in the name of conventional feminine duties. To further the feudal and patriarchal lineage, Asharfi-bua "had even wept as she had instructed her little Mani to allow Raja Gangadhar to do whatever he had to do to her, even if it hurt, as it was so imperative for a queen to produce a healthy heir quickly" for Jhansi's safe future (125).

A pregnant Lakshmibai “step[s] out into the ramparts above the main entrance to the fort.” At this, “people craned their necks to see if her pregnancy was visible and a sigh went up from the crowds amassed below as they saw their young queen resplendent in a gold-ochre sari, her swelling belly signifying a whole new era for Jhansi” (Misra 161). Lakshmibai’s literal and visible pregnancy bolsters her image as the Mother to Jhansi’s body politic. Here, a pregnant Lakshmibai, as the symbol of abundance, is the goddess Lakshmi personified. Jhansi is also elated because the wife to their king is finally fulfilling her duty by being able to provide an heir to secure its future.

Misra also plays with the idea of motherhood to depict complex human subjectivities. Lakshmibai realises at several points in the novel that she is not a “good mother” to her infant son. She wonders if motherhood will grow upon her as it does not come to her “naturally.” When she sees her female friends caring for her son, she thinks:

How patient these girls are... [Lakshmibai] feeling faintly guilty at her own lack of maternal instinct. Perhaps it’s because I cannot remember my own mother, she thought. Perhaps it will grow on me, like all other things have—being queen, being Gangadhar’s wife. (173-4)

Tragically, Lakshmibai’s son dies when he is only an infant. She is overcome by grief, considering her son’s death due to her lack of maternal spirit. Lakshmibai compares herself to Ganga, a Hindu river goddess who kills all her children. She laments at her inability to be a “good woman.” When Gangadhar is bedridden, she cannot help but feel angry and frustrated at times at “his abject dependency” (176, 201-11).

Although Misra depicts Lakshmibai as a woman who is not an ideal mother or a wife, Lakshmibai stands on the threshold of the hegemonic structure but does not transgress it. Being

ideologically indoctrinated in patriarchy, she believes in the model of the ideal woman. However, Lakshmibai realises her inability to fulfil her duties as one. However, this inability is not evidence of her defiance of the norms; instead, she considers this inability as her feminine lack. Misra's Lakshmibai wishes to perform the role of a "good woman," and this desire is rooted in her patriarchal subjectivity.

Moreover, the novel again showcases Lakshmibai's personification as the Mother nation when the infant Damodar's death brings sorrow to both Lakshmibai and Jhansi. Both Lakshmibai and Jhansi "shut themselves away" in their grief when they lose their male child's death. Misra's novel is itself rooted in the normative ideal, which is evident when it associates Damodar's death with the "death of motherhood, the death of hope, of a future line of kings, of Jhansi's expectations....a death of life itself." However, when Lakshmibai adopts another male child, her motherhood is revived. She learns to be a "good mother" to her adopted son, "She [smiles] ruefully as she [thinks] of motherhood's ability to make all else seem facile" (Misra 177, 201).

Misra's novel portrays the adoption of Damodar Rao as another opportunity offered to Lakshmibai by the hegemonic structure so that she organically develops into an ideal mother. When Lakshmibai succeeds, she acknowledges motherhood as the essential quality a woman can ever possess. Notably, Lakshmibai eventually rises as a mother to Jhansi itself, "I too have tried reminding myself that my people are like my children... That I may have been deprived of my baby in order to learn to love them more" (183). Although to rise as the macrocosmic Mother, she must sacrifice her biological child. However, *Rani* suggests that even the desire to be a "good mother" can salvage Lakshmibai from damnation. It is also telling of the author's ideologies woven into the novel.

Lakshmibai's marriage with Gangadhar, as depicted in *Rani*, is sexually troubled. The novel portrays Gangadhar as gay, so he has no sexual feelings towards his wife. A young Lakshmibai's continuous attempts to sexually attract her husband do not prove successful. Eventually, she approaches him one night while he is sick and bedridden, and she initiates sexual intimacy with him. Later, one night, she plays an active role in consummating her marriage with Gangadhar and conceives a child (128, 158). It is noteworthy how the novel paints Lakshmibai as a sexually forward woman in this context. Since it is unconventional of an ideal woman to be sexually bold, Misra probably justifies Lakshmibai's act as rather patriotic, for she only wants a legal biological heir from Gangadhar to safeguard Jhansi's future; it is not Lakshmibai's sexual desire which drives her to express her active sexuality (127).

However, Misra also indicates how abandoned Lakshmibai feels in that loveless sexual intercourse with her husband:

As she later disengage[s] herself from her husband's supine body, she turn[s] her back on him, curling herself up tightly and wrapping her arms around her shoulders to keep away the sudden chill. She squeeze[s] her eyes shut, trying to keep her despair at bay, but finally, witness[e]d only by the tranquil moonlight pouring ceaselessly through an open window, she wept for the very first time at the loneliness of her married life. (159)

It is also interesting to note that the novel not only depicts Lakshmibai's desperation in this circumstance but also showcases how Gangadhar feels sexually violated. The unwelcome sexual relationship with his wife frustrates him. In the very first intimate encounter Lakshmibai initiates with Gangadhar, he responds thus:

[He] had his...eyes tightly squeezed. But it was as though something was hurting him. [Lakshmibai] could see no pleasure on his face. The corners of his mouth had turned white, his lips were pale and clenched...Gangadhar's eyes flew open and Lakshmibai could see, alarmingly, that tears had welled up in them...She did not see the expression of utter desolation come across her husband's face... (Misra 129)

Thus, both Gangadhar and Lakshmibai need to sacrifice their sexual needs and suffer for the “greater good” of Jhansi. Their patriotism towards Jhansi can be expressed only at the cost of their sexuality.

Lakshmibai asserts her sexual desire not only in her relationship with Gangadhar but also with the resident British administrator Robert Ellis. Like other earlier colonial fiction, *Rani* romanticises the relationship between Lakshmibai and Ellis. However, neither of these characters in the novel acknowledges their love at any point. The early colonial writers' fascination for weaving a romantic tale between the Rani and a British administrator may probably echo the Western, Christian, White man's fascination to exoticise and thus access the “Oriental” woman. In *Rani*, showcasing a similar romantic subplot in contemporary times may have been Misra's attempt to portray a warrior woman's assertion of her sexuality. However, this objective of hers may be problematised.

Misra's Lakshmibai does not hesitate to experiment with love, but she does so only after her husband's death. As stated earlier, Lakshmibai comes out of the purdah in front of the British after Gangadhar's death. It symbolises her ability to own her individuality sans the husband's authority. From this point in time, Ellis notices her, and an unsaid but not unexpressed romantic relationship grows between them. At her husband's funeral, she sees Ellis' admiring gaze towards

her. Lakshmibai blushes and feels “her pulse quicken instantly”. Although she is first ashamed of her response, she comes to terms with her sexuality and concludes that there is “no reason at all to feel guilty in enjoying the pleasure of a man’s admiring glance” (Misra 208). Thus, the Rani is seen gradually attempting to break away from the normative social structure.

Misra’s descriptions of Lakshmibai acknowledging her sexuality are not entirely unfounded in history. There have been historical references to the Rani’s bold encounters with British officers. Since such forward behaviour of a queen was unconventional in nineteenth-century society in India, most British officers of that time considered them “erotic” and hence deemed Lakshmibai a lascivious woman (Hibbert 378). John Lang, for instance, who visited Lakshmibai in Jhansi, catches a glimpse of her when “whether...by accident, or...by design on the [Rani’s] part,” the curtain behind which veiled her “was drawn aside” by her little adopted son. Lang elaborately compliments her beauty, to which she positively responds “good humouredly” (92). Jerosch argues, “The erotic charms of the Rani, however, which she no doubt possesses, apparently sufficed in the Victorian era to incite the fantasies of British contemporaries to overly interpret her feminine coquettishness” (6). No Indian historical records ever mention the “erotic charms of the Rani” of course.

Misra’s *Rani* probably relies on British historical records like the ones mentioned above while painting Lakshmibai as a liberal woman. In *Rani*, she is not guilty of developing a friendship with Ellis. Instead, she enjoys her early morning encounters with him. “She was determined not to feel guilty, having instructed herself many times since her husband’s funeral to take the meagre delights that may now come to her, newly freed from the shackles that had been cast on her by matrimony and by Gangadhar’s illness,” another evidence of her liberating widowhood (216).

However, the very fact that her clandestine relationship with Ellis takes place “outside the confines of her court” amidst the wilderness suggests that Lakshmibai cannot entirely transgress the normative. Her act of transgression thus takes place in a different place as well as space⁹ within limitless wild nature. Moreover, Lakshmibai still seeks approval from her dead husband for her friendship with Ellis. Accordingly, she tries to reason out her transgression within the hegemonic structure, resituating her subjectivity. To understand how a dead husband plays a disciplining role in this context, Foucault’s concept of the “panopticon gaze” may be used as an analytical framework. Based on Jeremy Bentham’s “panopticon” architectural model of a prison, Foucault uses the model as a framework to examine the power structure in society. He considers this “apparatus should be a machine to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” The omnipresence of authority is conditioned into human subjectivity to render seamless social functioning of power (195-228). When one looks at Gangadhar’s role in disciplining his wife’s sexuality through the Foucauldian framework of the “panopticon,” one may note that Lakshmibai still seeks permission and approval from the patriarchal authority, who is dead but whose gaze is still omnipresent in her social conditioning. Thus, her claim of not feeling any guilt about her act of transgression seems shallow. She is still subjected to the idea of the “good woman” and cannot shed it altogether.

It brings us to the problematic authorial intentions of depicting Lakshmibai as a woman who asserts her sexuality in Misra’s *Rani*. The novel is probably not very different from the colonial narratives exoticising the “Oriental” woman; one may use the symbolism of the purdah to point this out. While coming out of the purdah liberates Lakshmibai, the same purdah also mystifies the exotic “Oriental.” When she is in the purdah before her husband’s death, Ellis, an embodiment of the imperialist power, finds the “Oriental” woman’s body “tantalising” and

sexually provoking. The need to explore this woman's body symbolises the coloniser's urges to explore and master the colony.

In this context, one must consider the postcolonial theorist Edward Said, who has worked extensively on the body politics of imperialism and colonialism. While he describes imperialism as “the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory,” colonialism, on the other hand, is defined as “the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (8). In both cases, the power dynamics between the coloniser and colonised resonate with a sexual act of penetration and dominance. Based on Said's definitions, Gerald Doherty further states that “the woman's body thematises these relations of power, configuring the contours of an ‘Emperie’ that incites male desire to enter it.” From a postcolonial analytical framework, British colonialism is thus looked at as “an erotic activity” designed by the powerful, a “heterosexual penetration and conquest” (208).

Thus, the sexual politics of British colonialism objectifies the body—which belongs to a woman, a colonised land, and more so, a colonised woman. In this case, the colonised woman's body would be doubly marginalised. Misra's *Rani* seems to portray Lakshmibai as this woman, a metaphor for Jhansi's colonised land. Hence, Ellis, the male coloniser, finds it “strange and pleasurable to see all of [Lakshmibai's body],” which only appeared fleetingly earlier under the purdah. Thus, in this context, the act of coming out of the purdah sexually teases him, hence inverting its previous feminist signification.

Perhaps Ellis finds Lakshmibai's sexuality, unlike that of Victorian women, accentuating her “exotic” nature. He notices that Lakshmibai is “wearing jodhpurs and silken tunic and, from [the] distance, could have been mistaken for men, sitting astride as they were, rather than side-

saddle in the manner of English ladies” (Misra 210-12). Lakshmibai’s masculinity, perceived against the binary standards of Victorian sexuality, appeals to Ellis. Though Misra may have tried to represent Lakshmibai as a feminist icon, from a postcolonial perspective, one cannot ignore that Ellis’ romantic and sexual interest in Lakshmibai is rooted in the essential imperialist policy of exploring the unknown Other.

Furthermore, the novel extends Ellis’ fascination towards Lakshmibai to his similar interest in Jhansi. The relationship between Lakshmibai and Ellis is founded upon their shared love for Jhansi. The novel shows that the former’s love is rooted in her patriotism; the latter’s love is an organic experience at his place of work. However, the “Oriental” woman’s body, which becomes a signifier for the colonised land, may echo Ellis’ desire to access both Jhansi and Lakshmibai. Misra uses both Jhansi and Lakshmibai interchangeably in the novel. Nevertheless, the novel weaves the unrequited forbidden love story vis-à-vis Jhansi, the motherland.

Although *Rani* portrays Lakshmibai’s romantic relationship with Ellis, the novel does not further it towards closure. Their relationship has been politically and ideologically forbidden from its very inception:

They were not lovers, although what lay between them, so still and so deep, could only have been love. Yet, like their two countries whose deepest roots lay entwined as one, they were to remain separate in the eyes of the world, parted by their own unspoken fear. (253)

Thus, *Rani* succumbs to the hegemonic narrative structure when Lakshmibai realises her duties as a “good queen” and distances herself from Ellis. He is torn between his imperialist responsibilities and his love for the Rani, though as pointed out earlier, Misra perhaps unwittingly integrates both. For his illicit affair with Lakshmibai, the “licentious adulteress,” Ellis is rejected by his British

society. It condemns his relationship with the Rani as “most shameful, most deplorable” (255). Misra portrays that the only outcome of their relationship could be war:

As he mounted his horse and galloped after her, unable to gain on her beautiful chestnut mare, he thought for one fleeting moment that the combined beating of their horses’ hooves on the parched earth sounded like the warning drums of war. (220)

She denies their romantic relationship from this very moment. Ellis fails in the pursuit of her. Through imageries of horses’ hooves reverberating like war drums, Misra probably indicates (a) that the relationship is forbidden and, hence, cannot be peacefully fulfilled in nineteenth-century Jhansi and (b) that the actual Rebellion was soon to begin. It is noteworthy that from a postcolonial perspective, this imagery of the warring drums may also be seen as the point when the colonised subject finally rejects the seductive colonial power. Thus, repressive power play substitutes the ideological. Lakshmibai’s rejection of Ellis’ romantic relationship may signify the Orient’s rejection of colonial power policies. It is followed by the first native resistance against the East India Company.

After this incident, Misra’s novel seems to hurry along to secure itself within the hegemonic narrative structure. Lakshmibai reassures herself as the “good woman” and prepares to follow the duties required of her. As an embodiment of British imperialism, Ellis is at a loss when he realises that Lakshmibai “did not really need his support or his friendship” (255). However, Misra probably paints this more like a lover’s squabble than an imperialist metaphor.

Thus, Misra’s novel portrays the Rani as an able administrator as well as a “good wife” who looks after her sick husband till his death. It emphasises Lakshmibai’s ability as a “good queen” when she is shown carrying on her duties with consistent fervour even when she is

traumatised by her child's death or needs to care for her ever-sickly husband regularly. She remarks, "My duties keep me so busy I fall into bed at night with no energy left to dwell on selfish sorrows" (177, 183). In the process, the woman's personal life is suppressed.

However, Misra suggests that Lakshmibai never wanted a queen's life. Lakshmibai only becomes the scapegoat in a political alliance. Misra describes Lakshmibai's loneliness thus:

...she was in fact one of the loneliest people she knew, someone who had none of the really important things in life...the love of a mother, the passion of a husband, a child to call one's own, not forgetting love and companionship and peace. All her wealth and queenliness could not buy her those things; those...were the only things she wanted anymore. (Misra 204).

She is only forced to play the role of the queen, during which she finds herself metamorphosing into a larger-than-life figure. However, she still inherently desires the ordinary:

Standing before her mirror, she brushed out the night-time braids from her hair, imagining everyone's shock if she suddenly announced how much she too hungered sometimes for the small, mundane. Everyday preoccupations that other women were so blessed with; the chance to choose pretty trinkets and bangles for herself from the bazaar stalls, buy favorite foods for her dear ones...even, indeed beautify herself while awaiting a lover's footfall in the night. (Misra 218)

Thus, *Rani* attempts to rescue the flesh-and-blood woman from the symbolic warrior queen Lakshmibai, or at least Misra claims to do so. In her foreword to the novel, Misra reveals that her purpose is to depict "the woman behind the warrior" (vii).

Based on this consideration, one may note that an ordinary woman, Lakshmibai, finds herself dragged into the 1857 Rebellion by circumstances. However, when on the battlefield, she fights courageously, thus feeding the halo of myths already surrounding her status. Once she tears herself away from Ellis' love and friendship, Lakshmibai metamorphoses into a warrior goddess as she is popularly known:

Ellis was taken aback at this sudden militancy in her voice. He had never heard her speak in such a strident tone before and it felt so incongruous emanating from the feminine figure sitting before him, her skin glowing golden in the candlelight, dark curls flowing gracefully to her waist. (Misra 264)

Lakshmibai, the warrior goddess, frightens Ellis. At the same time, Misra's novel portrays that the British officer General Hugh Rose also exoticizes this warrior woman:

Against the backdrop of a burning building, he had caught a sudden glimpse of the figure of a petite young soldier, eerily beautiful, silhouetted against glowing fires as her chestnut horse reared up against the flames. The jewelled scabbard of the talwar she was brandishing looked like molten gold, the expression on her face full of fearless hauteur. This was, he said, the infamous queen of Jhansi... (Misra 373).

Notably, this description is probably more of Misra's romanticisation, aligning with the ideal Indian legends, thus mythologising Lakshmibai in her novel. Accordingly, the novel sculpts Lakshmibai in the same conventional paradigm of the Virangana from which Misra claims to rescue her. The fact that the novel eventually shows Lakshmibai transfiguring into this warrior woman who grows to love Jhansi as a queen perhaps contradicts Misra's proclaimed purpose. Lakshmibai's patriotic consciousness of Jhansi towards the novel's closure is rendered in very

genuine terms. She wonders how “an act of marriage create[s] a love and duty towards a land and a people that suddenly transcended all else,” where the “all else” is perhaps inclusive of her individuality, sexuality and desires (27).

Misra’s novel, aligned with the Indian perspective of recorded history, shows that for Lakshmibai, Jhansi’s safety mattered more than anything else. She is not concerned about the Rebellion beginning in Kanpur. She determines to see that “whatever was happening in other parts of the country...none of it would touch the peace of Jhansi” (299). She has no initial intentions to support or join the Rebellion if it comes to Jhansi. However, when it does come, her “first task [would be] to protect her own people from it.” It is not as if she is against the Rebellion’s purpose, but she does not believe in taking the mindlessly violent route to achieve freedom from the East India Company. Misra’s Lakshmibai is not guilty of the Jhokan Bagh massacre. Instead, she condemns the heinous crime committed by the rebels against the British. Moreover, she helps the stranded and helpless British women and children by giving them refuge at her palace. In this context, to emphasise Lakshmibai’s humanity, Misra also depoliticises the innocent British women and children in Jhansi (Misra 309-12, 314, 317, 329).

Misra’s Lakshmibai is not entirely a progressive woman. She is not only a subject of patriarchy but also a casteist. Unlike Devi’s Rani, who is portrayed as a heroic woman for the subaltern, ordinary people of society, Misra’s Rani believes in and practices Brahmin supremacy. When the East India Company opens a slaughterhouse of cows and pigs in a dominantly Hindu Brahmin area, she is utterly disturbed, for it was a sacrilege against the Hindu Brahmins (Misra 266).

Moreover, Misra also briefly mentions the Dalit woman Jhalkaribai being used as a decoy by Lakshmibai to escape Jhansi but justifies it as an act done for a larger patriotic purpose (375). However, Misra humanises Lakshmibai's action and depicts how the Rani is not only concerned about Jhalkaribai's safety, but the latter also survives the British attack on Jhansi (383-4). Although Misra's novel is not explicitly like Devi's in painting Lakshmibai as a queen of the subaltern, the *Rani* still seems to cast the queen as one of the common people. The same magnificent Virangana, otherwise clad in a male fighter's attire, is also seen "clad in white...riding down the hillside...followed by her small contingent of soldiers in a cloud of dark dust" (Misra 383).

Misra recurrently and elaborately describes Lakshmibai as a beautiful queen whose beauty is appreciated even during her death by the British. On the battlefield:

[The British soldier's] horrified gaze took in the sight of her body lying bleeding and draped across her horse, eyes already glazing in a pale and beautiful face. (398)

Immediate historical records available do not mention Lakshmibai as an extraordinary conventional beauty. After his first meeting with Lakshmibai, the British officer John Lang does not deny the possibility that Lakshmibai could have been "very handsome when she was younger." However, the woman he meets is still in her early twenties, and she appears to him "rather stout, but not too stout." According to his "idea of beauty," she is "too round...The eyes were particularly fine, and the nose very delicately shaped ... a remarkable fine figure she had. What spoilt her was her voice" (93). Lord Canning, on the other hand, states the Rani is "not pretty" but possessed "beautiful eyes and figure" (Hibbert 385).

Although these British records do not specify, Lakshmibai's beauty in Indian folklore as well as in the colonial "rape scripts" is legendary; of course, these narratives wield considerable

political power. It is interesting to note how Misra's recurrent description of Lakshmibai's beauty probably resonates with the Indian legends of the queen, thus once again positioning *Rani* as yet another novel valorising the mythical warrior woman. The novel romanticises her death and depicts her as a martyr. Misra, however, may have also played with the idea of forced martyrdom in this regard. The Virangana needs to sacrifice her life for the survival of the motherland. The land is rendered thirsty for the woman's blood. Lakshmibai "was still losing blood, the earth beneath her soaking it up, possessed by an insatiable greed for it" (402).

Misra's *Rani* has an open-ended closure that suggests in the novel that perhaps Lakshmibai did not die in the Revolt of 1857. Years after the Rebellion, Ellis embarks on a nostalgic journey to Jhansi when he possibly sees Lakshmibai clad in a burkha. There is no closure to their encounter or love story, but the possibility of the Rani being alive probably signifies her immortal existence across Indian myths and legends. Misra tries to historicise this popular Indian belief.

Thus, the novel may be seen as a contemporary feminist approach towards humanising the symbolic Rani Lakshmibai, which Misra depicts through a detailed analysis of the Rani's relationships. However, the novel does not break away from the hegemonic standards entirely. She still falls prey to colonial, patriarchal and, at times, Hindu nationalist ideals of symbolising the Rani. Misra's Lakshmibai initiates her transgressions from the dominant social structure only to return to its confined limits. Thus, Misra is perhaps like Lakshmibai; they both oscillate in their inner conflict. The symbolism of the purdah, which the novel seems to reiterate, also describes Lakshmibai's (as well as Misra's) internal conflict. Misra paints Lakshmibai as a feminist icon who begins her emancipatory journey by coming out of the purdah only to return to it eventually—the burkha she wears towards the novel's closure represents the purdah then—to survive in the

socio-political hegemony. Ellis contemplates, “Maybe there had been solace in being able to retreat again to a world of purdah” (Misra 411).

Misra acknowledges the dearth of authentic historical material on Lakshmibai. Thus, she claims that her fiction is her interpretation of the legendary warrior woman, like most historical writing. Discussing the binary representation of the Rani in the British and Indian narratives, Misra states in her foreword:

I felt caught between British chronicles of the time, who loathed and scapegoated Lakshmibai for the part she played in the 1857 massacres and uprising—a nasty blot on Victorian imperialist ideals—and Indian nationalist writers who, emerging a few years later, eulogised her, almost as *undeservingly*¹⁰, in order to use her as an energizing and necessary inspiration to the freedom movement that would follow. (vi)

She then justifies her separate position in telling the Rani’s story as “a fascinatingly modern woman, with passions and relationships that were completely recognizable” (vi). Misra considers Lakshmibai’s story equally appealing in the twenty-first century and, thus, undertakes explicit liberty to retell the Rani’s story from a very contemporary perspective. Undoubtedly, being an Indian author based in London, Misra has the privilege to take these liberties to depict the Rani as a sexually bold woman. However, considering this, Misra also acknowledges the risks that follow in her endeavour. She knew she “would be upsetting...Indian sentiments that have been carefully schooled into seeing Rani Lakshmibai as virtuous and valiant and no more” (vii). The novel faced quite a protest in India and was banned in Mayawati-administered Uttar Pradesh in 2008. On similar grounds, Karni Sena and Brahmo Samaj also opposed the shooting of the film *Manikarnika* (Roychowdhuri). The director was required to sign a clarification stating that the film was not

based on Misra's novel and did not portray any romantic relationship between the Rani and any British soldier, after which the film's shooting was allowed to be resumed.

Michelle Moran's *Rebel Queen* (2015)

Rebel Queen is a historical novel by the American author Michelle Moran, published in 2015. The novel is predominantly set in nineteenth-century Jhansi, a small village known as Barwa Sagar in Uttar Pradesh, and partially in London. It primarily depicts the story of Sita, a member of the women warrior group in Rani Lakshmibai's army, against the backdrop of the Revolt of 1857. Through Sita's first-person narrative, Moran's novel revisits Rani Lakshmibai's history while specifically exploring the women warrior group.

Moran's *Rebel Queen* opens with the protagonist Sita Bhosale's narrative. Sita hails from a small village called Barwa Sagar in the district of Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh. She loses her mother when her younger sister Anuja is born. Her father, Nihal Singh, who has been an ex-army man, is now deaf. However, he looks after his two daughters and stepmother. Sita's grandmother is like Asharfi-bua in Misra's *Rani*. As mentioned earlier, women like the grandmother culturally condition young girls like Sita to be ideal subjects and objects of a patriarchal society. The grandmother does not want the girls to live; as such their education does not cross her mind (11). However, Sita's father insists on her training for selection in the women warrior group. The novel refers to this group as the Durga Dal. Sita undergoes aggressive training in martial abilities as well as languages and literature. Lakshmibai's officials select Sita as the tenth member of the Durga Dal, and Sita leaves for the kingdom of Jhansi. Before returning to a detailed analysis of the Durga Dal and its relation to Lakshmibai, Moran's representation of recorded history in her novel shall be examined first.

Moran's *Rebel Queen* does not devote much space to Lakshmibai's life before her marriage to Gangadhar. The novel offers a brief history of Lakshmibai's childhood concerning the Peshwa Baji Rao II, Nana Saheb¹¹ and Tantia Tope. However, from the little that the novel mentions of the Rani's earlier life, it is stated that her father "had no sons, so he raised her like one," thus depicting the patriarchal society in which she is raised. Lakshmibai is described as an able ruler whom Jhansi loves. She is a popular queen among her subjects. She worships the goddess Lakshmi, the epitome of the ideal woman. Such depictions of the Rani's patriarchal ideologies are similar across all four narratives analysed in this chapter. However, unlike Misra's *Rani*, Moran's novel portrays Lakshmibai as a highly progressive woman who never marginalises Jhalkaribai for her lower caste identity. Like all the other narratives except Devi's *The Queen of Jhansi*, Moran's *Rebel Queen* superimposes Lakshmibai's humanity over a blind patriotic consciousness. The novel exonerates Lakshmibai from any responsibility for the Jhokan Bagh massacre. However, the novel's closure portrays how British records still depict the Rani negatively. The British mention the 1857 Rebellion as a mutiny and Lakshmibai as its leader, the rebel queen (Moran 86, 91, 100, 127, 229, 265, 284, 292).

Lakshmibai's liberties as a queen, as have been discussed in the other narratives, also find a place in Moran's novel. However, the novel portrays Lakshmibai following the purdah in the court because the king believes it would lend mystery to the court's atmosphere (108). In any case, it establishes that Lakshmibai is still a patriarchal subject despite the relative liberty available to her.

Motherhood is a recurrent theme in all four texts in this chapter. The narratives showcase Lakshmibai's maternal relationship with her son and the nation, but her motherhood is not limited to that. Moran's novel, similar to Misra's *Rani*, portrays Lakshmibai's relationship with her

husband Gangadhar, which is more maternal than conjugal (217). The adoption of the male child is described differently in Moran's novel. Misra's *Rani* portrays a process of adoption wherein the boy's biological parents are only too eager to give up their son for adoption to Jhansi's throne and future. *Rebel Queen*, however, depicts that the parents and the child are forced into it. The adopted male child cries at being separated from his biological mother. Moran describes how "the childless [Rani] had made another woman childless" (212). The adoption is probably deemed unfair for the biological parents and the child, but it is carried on for the larger concern of Jhansi's security and stability. Lakshmibai in Misra's *Rani* facilitates frequent visits for her adopted son with his biological parents, thus showcasing her kindness. Since *Rebel Queen* does not dwell on such details, the adoption in this novel demonstrates Lakshmibai's stoic nature in concern for the larger interest of Jhansi.

Referring to specific records in the National Archives of India, Rainer Jerosch mentions that Lakshmibai's "top priority...was assigned to *raison d'état*. She did not hesitate, for instance, to impose considerable burdens on the populace of Jhansi to finance the war, to restrict their mobility, if not prevent it entirely, and to chase unwanted elements out of the city if such appeared to be in the interest of the state" (89). Thus, Moran's description of Lakshmibai as a pragmatic and stern ruler may be rooted in such recorded history. Moupia Basu also perhaps refers to this history in her novel *The Queen's Last Salute*, portraying how Lakshmibai banishes her best military officer, Riyaz Khan, from Jhansi based on his misbehaviour towards women. This point will be discussed at length later in the chapter.

Rebel Queen problematises motherhood when it does not depict Lakshmibai as the conventional mother to her son. Misra's *Rani* explicitly deals with Lakshmibai's amicable relationship with her adopted son after her biological son dies. However, the adopted son in *Rebel*

Queen complains about Lakshmibai's lack of maternal abilities (305). Nevertheless, Lakshmibai channelises her maternal nature for Jhansi, and thus, her subjects seem to justify her lack of motherly love for her adopted son.

Unlike the popularly known Indian folklore of Lakshmibai fighting the British in Jhansi on a horse with her son strapped to her back, Moran's novel depicts how the Rani plans to escape Jhansi with few of her Durgavasis and her son (320). In a note towards the closure of the novel, Moran also states that Lakshmibai's "famous jump from the fortress walls while mounted on her horse and carrying her son certainly never happened" (345). In her novel, Moran instead paints Lakshmibai not as a coward who flees the battlefield but as an able queen who decides to escape the chaos of the British attack on Jhansi only to counter-attack them later (320). However, one may still argue that contrary to the larger-than-life symbol that Lakshmibai becomes, she does initially leave her kingdom and its subjects when the British attack, as depicted in the novel.

Lakshmibai's plan to escape from Jhansi during the British attack is considerably dependent on and connected to Jhalkaribai in Moran's narrative. Lakshmibai uses Jhalkaribai as a decoy while she flees to safety from Jhansi. In *Rebel Queen*, Jhalkaribai volunteers to do so (322). Thus, the novel once more exempts Lakshmibai from using a Dalit woman as a scapegoat for her political and military plans.

Lakshmibai's death in *Rebel Queen* is not as glorious as it is popularly known in Indian folklore and legends. While trying to cross a river in Kotah-ki-Serai, the Rani is shot dead by a British soldier (341). Perhaps Moran draws from the British historical record of the Rani's death. Unlike Misra's novel, there is no detailed and romanticised description of Lakshmibai's death in *Rebel Queen*.

Gangadhar's femininity is generally mentioned or described in all four narratives analysed in this chapter. Moran's *Rebel Queen* depicts Gangadhar as a man with "long hair that flowed past his shoulders and curled around heavy gold chains that he wore on his chest. Jewels shimmered from his thin hands, slender wrists, ears, turban—even his waist. And he was dressed in the most elaborate kurta." One of the British officers mistakes him to be a woman (108, 110). The king's elaborately decorated feminine chamber is a recurrent imagery described in both Misra's *Rani* as well as in Moran's *Rebel Queen*. Describing his style as "grandiose," the Moran's novel states:

The walls were red, the color so glossy that I knew the painters had employed a trick women use in Barwa Sagar, rubbing hibiscus flower over them to make them shine. An ostentatious chandelier hung from a gold and yellow star-patterned ceiling. The furniture was silver. The padding on the couches and cushions was bright blue. It was an assault on the eyes. (Moran 210)

However, unlike Misra's Lakshmibai, who seems to embrace this unconventionality, Moran's Lakshmibai finds this revolting. Thus, the king's tastes showcased through his chamber are compared to a woman's and simultaneously criticised for being distasteful and garish. Such caricatures may reveal the novelist's own ideological inclination towards the king's supposed femininity. The chamber's distasteful décor is probably described more to vilify the king for his femininity.

Moran's novel is the only one among the four narratives which dwell considerably on Gangadhar's sexuality in the conventional sense. *Rebel Queen* depicts the king almost always engaged in his theatres and performances where he cross-dresses as a woman. He is physically very expressive while showing affection towards his fellow actor and friend Adesh. The society

depicted in the novel considers him to be a man “for whom female company is not enough, so [he seeks] close friendships with men who have similar interests and tastes” (137, 139, 140). Notably, the novel’s most explicit references to Gangadhar’s possible queer sexuality may be associated with the author’s twenty-first-century American location. The author’s narratorial voice in historical fiction is significant in the ways a particular event in history is depicted to the readers. Thus, the author’s spatio-temporal location and ideologies are also principal in the formation of both the narratorial voice and the narrative. In the case of this novel, for instance, Moran’s privileged socio-political footing makes it possible for her to provide an overt association of queer sexuality with Virangana Lakshmibai’s husband.

However, Misra, who is a London-based author may also be seen in a similar context. As illustrated earlier in the chapter, the author’s narratorial voice in the *Rani* is also significantly influenced by her twenty-first-century, London-based location.

In Moran’s novel, Lakshmibai is portrayed as tolerant of Gangadhar’s sexuality. She never questions the king’s interests. Towards the latter part of his life, while he is bedridden, the king candidly remarks to his wife, “If life had been fair, I would have been born a [Rani] and you would have been born a [Raja].” Eventually, to sustain Jhansi’s legacy, the Rani dresses as a British soldier the night she almost forces the king to consummate their marriage (139, 213). Notably, (a) Lakshmibai, who is initially revolted by the king’s tastes (referring to the chamber scene), is shown to be tolerant towards his sexuality. It suggests that she is subordinate to the king. Hence, she is not given any choice in the matter, and (b) Lakshmibai’s relationship with Gangadhar is a transaction rooted in the sustenance of Jhansi’s legacy.

Gangadhar's friendly relationship with the British is another recurrent detail in the narratives. However, Moran's novel also portrays Gangadhar's rigid anti-colonial sentiments when he does not allow an English doctor to tend to him during his illness (211). Contrary to this, Misra's novel mentions Gangadhar being treated by an English doctor without any objection. Lakshmibai, in both instances, however, does not resent that an English doctor treats the king. On one hand, this may suggest the lack of Lakshmibai's antagonism towards the British, which is otherwise very popularly portrayed. On the other hand, this may also be construed as an illustration of Lakshmibai's adherence to the traditional role of a wife wherein her primary concern is the recovery of her husband at any cost.

Unlike Misra's *Rani*, which portrays Lakshmibai's relationship with the resident British officer Major Ellis, Moran's novel makes only a few passing references. In a particular instance, Ellis compliments Lakshmibai for her beauty. He says, "Even without jewels...her Highness shines as brightly as that star." When burdened with the problems generated by Lord Dalhousie's commands, Lakshmibai seeks Ellis's help to appeal to the Company in Calcutta to consider her right to rule Jhansi. Moreover, Ellis eagerly follows her wishes (135, 217). Did Moran's *Rebel Queen* also hint at a romantic relationship between Lakshmibai and Ellis as Misra does in her novel? Speculating this from the handful of instances showcased in Moran's novel is unrealistic. However, these instances concerning Ellis' behaviour towards Lakshmibai may suggest his fondness for her. This novel's focus is on Sita and the Durga Dal, and does not dwell on any romantic narrative concerning the Rani.

Now, the discussion focuses on the Durga Dal, which consists of the primary narrative of Moran's *Rebel Queen*. There is already a paucity of historical records on Lakshmibai. Thus, these records would have far fewer references to the women warrior group in her army. Jerosch mentions

the British sightings of “women on the battlements of Jhansi.” These women “followed the call of the Rani to repair the damage from the cannonade, carrying up ammunition, caring for the wounded and bringing food and water to the defenders.” He further points out that the Rani’s “female aides-de-camp” also accompanied her to battles and fought alongside her “dressed as men” (224). As stated earlier, Vishnubhat Godse’s travelogue mentions a group of armed women appointed by Gangadhar Rao to guard the chambers of his wife Lakshmibai, within which he forcefully confined her (n.p). In another record, Joyce Lebra-Chapman also alludes to this women warrior group and states,

[Lakshmibai] not only enjoyed these pastimes [which included horse riding and swordplay]; she enlisted her female palace attendants and trained them in these skills.

She spent time in the fort before the English took it and organised parades of her women on horseback, impressing both Jhansi residents and some English observers. Perhaps she had an inkling of how significant her woman’s unit would become later. (4)

Thus, there are minimal historical records of a woman group associated with Lakshmibai. Based on different facts, this group may have been her attendants, military women soldiers, caretakers, and guards. However, no available historical records mention its name as the Durga Dal.

Historian Rana Safvi, in her article “The Forgotten Women of 1857” (2018), is probably the first to discuss Lakshmibai’s women warrior group, the Durga Dal at length. According to Safvi, some women who belonged to the Durga Dal and fought alongside Lakshmibai to safeguard their kingdom were Jhalkaribai, Sundari Bai, Mundari Bai, Mandar, and Moti Bai.¹² Though Misra’s *Rani* barely mentions Sundar, Lakshmibai’s female attendant joining the fight against the British, it does not refer to her as a warrior or belonging to any women warrior group. Moupia

Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute* also talks about the group but only concerning Chandraki, who is one of its members. However, neither of them names the group. Moran's *Rebel Queen*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the story of this group and names it the Durga Dal. Apart from Sita, Sundari, Moti, Kahini, and Jhalkaribai are some of its members (78). Notably, the Durga Dal includes women from all sections of society. Both Sita and Jhalkaribai are lower-class village women; Jhalkaribai also belongs to a marginal caste. Jerosch states that there are historical records of a woman named Moti Bai, who belonged to the group. She was "a famous Muslim dancer at the court in Jhansi" (173). Moti in *Rebel Queen* may refer to the historical Moti Bai, which suggests that Lakshmibai's Durga Dal also includes Muslim women and courtesans (a similar fictional warrior woman in Lakshmibai's group, Chandraki is also the daughter of a courtesan in Basu's novel, which will be discussed at length later in the chapter). Thus, it is noteworthy how the Durga Dal symbolises an egalitarian female institution.

Since the Durga Dal does not have considerable historical veracity, it is interesting to note Moran's primary focus on it in her novel. As the women warrior group represents a feminist structure, Moran probably uses it to establish her novel in the contemporary literary market, which trends in accounts celebrating feminism and queer identities. One may argue that in this regard, the novelist's choice to write about a warrior women group possibly showcasing homoerotic desire towards one another may be challenged. Whether the novel genuinely aims to portray a strong feminist structure or whether it strives to capitalize on contemporary literary trends can be debated.

Moreover, the Durga Dal in Moran's novel may be problematised based on Sita's decision to join this women warrior group in nineteenth-century Jhansi. The society in Barwa Sagar, as portrayed in *Rebel Queen*, is overtly patriarchal. Women are denied the fundamental right to live. If they do survive, they are not allowed an education. Moreover, they must remain in purdah, thus

limiting their social mobility. The rituals of child marriage, dowry fortune and *sati* are prevalent in this society portrayed in the novel. Moran describes the effects of such rituals on women through the female characters in her novel. Avani is a widow who foregoes the practice of *sati*. She helps with the household chores in Sita's home. The woman who refuses to "commit *sati*¹³ by burning in [her] husband's flames brings dishonor to [her] family. But even worse than this, it brings great disrespect to [her] father-in-law's house." Avani has the only option to leave her family and find work. However, except for Sita's grandmother, no other family wants to employ Avani as a house help. Sita concludes that her grandmother probably does this as an "act of charity" because Avani's condition reminds her grandmother of her own escape from the ritual of *sati* (5, 6, 11, 16).

The need to find husbands for girls like Sita when they are only little children is a pressing burden on their families. Sita's father, moreover, is concerned that "there is no money for a dowry fortune large enough to find them both [Sita and Anuja] suitable husbands" (Moran 40). Girls like Sita, who cannot marry and become "unnecessary burden" for their families, are probably sold off as devadasis¹⁴ in their society. Sita's grandmother attempts to sell her to the nearby temple. Both the grandmother and the temple priest examine Sita physically before the transaction. They consider Sita's "very pretty" looks, her "virginity," her Kshatriya caste identity and her linguistic proficiency in Hindi and English as parameters to decide her monetary worth (35-36).

Sita's father is entirely against the grandmother's decision. Thus, the only option for Sita to save herself from being a devadasi and yet earn enough money for Anuja's dowry fortune is to join the Durga Dal. Hence, one may observe how the narrative makes available the role of a warrior woman to the protagonist as a desperate choice of necessity. The Durga Dal is considered "the most elite group of women" in Jhansi, and a position in it is a matter of privilege and honour. However, the question of choice still problematises the argument. Joining the Durga Dal, for

instance, is not a matter of choice for Sita; it is instead the only route available to her to break through the shackles of patriarchy and misogyny. Notably, most women like Sita from the fringes of society have only the luxury of choosing between the role of a Durgavasi and a Devadasi. Jhalkari expresses how “it was [either the role of a Durgavasi] or a temple for nearly everyone [in the Durga Dal]” (Moran 40, 52, 123). Thus, most ordinary women in society covet the role of an ideal woman of patriarchy. Marginalised women such as Sita and Jhalkari are stuck between Scylla and Charybdis. Hence, the position of a warrior woman is deemed preferable.

Rebel Queen depicts Sita’s metamorphosis from a meek child to a physically strong woman as an effect of the martial training she undergoes under the supervision of men like her father and their neighbour Shivaji. Sita contemplates,

And over several years, I metamorphosed from Sita the child into someone else. At first, the changes were subtle. Muscles appeared in my arms and legs that had never been defined before. My hands, which had once been full and soft, grew strong and callused. Then, the physical changes became more obvious. My waist grew narrower, my cheeks more hollow. The roundness of childhood was gone. In its place was a tall, lean girl who could carry heavy rocks from one end of the courtyard to another, morning after morning, and still not feel fatigued. She was a girl who could swing a metal sword, carry a man’s burden of wheat on her back, and lift multiple buckets of water with both arms. Sita the child could do none of these things. She’d been an average girl with average strength. Now I was probably the strongest woman in Barwa Sagar. (44)

The physical transformation Sita experiences is iterative of the clichéd and much-celebrated transformative processes contemporary heroines undergo in literature and culture. However,

Moran suggests that it is her puberty which makes Sita realise that she “[has] become a woman” (44). Thus, one may argue that the novel portrays Sita’s metamorphosis as an unsettling understanding of her own body. She probably tries to grapple with the stereotypical understanding of sex and gender identities. Her display of physical prowess, which is conventionally considered masculine, surprises her. Thus, she is reassured of her biological female body when she experiences menstruation for the first time. The novel shows Sita being uncomfortable with the masculine power in her female body.

So, one may note that Moran’s *Rebel Queen* probably attempts to break the gender binaries by situating Sita as a physically strong woman who menstruates and such a portrayal highlights a Virangana’s fluid sexuality. However, Moran’s novel can also be considered to essentialise the generic qualities of a contemporary young-adult historical fiction written by a White American woman, who is probably trying to insert current prevailing dialogues of sex, gender and sexuality in the romanticised story of a historical “Oriental” woman.

In Moran’s novel, the warrior women of Durga Dal are like Lakshmibai in most aspects. Sita’s motherless childhood and how she is circumstantially forced to don the role of a warrior woman resonate with Lakshmibai’s life. Like Lakshmibai, the members of the Durga Dal enjoy many social privileges, unlike the ordinary women of society. They do not observe the purdah, for instance. On the day of her selection into the Durga Dal, Sita performs her martial skills without the purdah, and “it would be the first time [her] neighbours had ever witnessed a woman in Barwa Sagar breaking purdah.” While riding towards Jhansi, the ordinary people look at her differently. Instead of identifying her as “a common prostitute—for riding out uncovered and breaking purdah,” they revere her as one of Rani’s Durgavasis. Sita realises that her privileged status is in

association with the queen and, hence, with the kingdom (65, 73,167). It reinstates the larger issue of the gendered nation and the Virangana as patriarchal constructs.

Moran's *Rebel Queen* portrays the Durga Dal as subject to Lakshmibai's authoritative command, thus establishing a hierarchical female institution. The Durgavasis are not permitted by the queen to marry and bear children. In certain circumstances, if marriages are allowed, it is on the condition that they will not procreate (45, 114). Thus, the female structure can be interrogated concerning the exercise of power over it. The fact that the women cannot have any heterosexual partners may also hint at the nature of loyalty and exclusiveness the Rani demands from the Durgavasis. Although the novel does not describe any sexual relationship between the Rani and the female members, the nature of their companionship may not be restricted to sisterhood. The structure may be suggestive of same-sex sexuality.

It may also indicate the special same-sex friendship and companionship traditionally known as *sakhi* in India. Regarding *sakha-sakhi*, Devaleena Das suggests that although it has been prevalent in Indian tradition for a long time, it "became more prominent in the Vaishnavism¹⁵ tradition." According to her:

The *sakha-sakhi* relationship is constituted on unqualified love and trust without limit. It is selfless even when it includes flirtatious romance. Interestingly, the word *sakha* is phonetically linked to the word *śākhā*, which literally means "branch" or "limb," but in this context, can be understood as a sexual entendre referring to a body part. This connection to the corporeal perhaps also hints that *sakha-sakhi* relationship sublimates intense erotic and romantic attraction into divine love. As a result of maintaining this

intimate trust, the *sakha* and *sakhi* are able to understand each other spontaneously and intuitively, without words or the slightest gesture. (91-108)

Ruth Vanita elaborates on *sakhi* as a Vaishnava tradition. She discusses how it “is an omnipresent figure in Hindu bridal mysticism—[sakhi] functions as witness, go-between and confidante for the heroine who represents the human spirit yearning for God” (120). Thus, *sakhi* depicts the eroticised relationship between women in association with God. Considering these perspectives, if one thinks of the women in the Durga Dal as *sakhi*, one must also consider that their homoerotic expressions towards each other are sublimated through divine love.

It is interesting to note that the female members of the Durga Dal are interestingly not only chosen for their skills but also for their beauty and brains, and “their ability to keep the queen company and entertain her” (Moran 64). It suggests that the physical attributes of the warrior women also play a significant factor for the Rani. The Durga Dal and Lakshmibai spend considerable time together, sharing everyday activities. In the morning, they take baths together. Sita narrates the elaborate ritual of a morning bath:

Following the other women, I swiftly undressed and took a long cotton robe from a polished bronze hook on the wall. I tied it around my waist. Then I sat on a wooden bench next to Jhalkari and did as she did, beginning by neatly folding my clothes and tucking them into a hollow space. I glanced at the servants waiting with thick bathing clothes and sandalwood platters of richly scented soaps... the [Rani] walked toward the marble tub, and one by one, we all slipped out of the robes and joined her in the scented water. I had never felt such luxury. (Moran 106)

Such everyday rituals representing the camaraderie between them suggest the erotic nature of their relationship. Some medieval miniature paintings depict such eroticised female spaces occupied by *sakhi*, which show that “she embraces the heroine, helps her dress, and sometimes engages in amorous play with her. Groups of girlfriends hunt, fly pigeons, dance, or bathe together, and their eyes often meet erotically while one touches the other’s breasts or embraces her” (Vanita 120).

Luce Irigaray argues that all forms of “trade” or “transactions” that “organised patriarchal societies took place exclusively among men.” Women are commodified, like “signs, goods, currency” and “they all pass from one man to another man”. She further questions, what if the women “maintained among themselves ‘another’ kind of trade?” She imagines a situation where women would come together in a community, “protected from masculine transactions...for free enjoyment, well-being without suffering, pleasure without possession” (106, 113). The Durga Dal is such a female community where women come together, sharing kindness and love (even erotic or erotic sublimated into divine love, for that matter), and care for each other. However, the Durga Dal may represent an exclusively female community, but it does not necessarily mean it is feminist in Irigaray’s sense. It also does not resonate with Ruth Vanita’s idea that vis-à-vis God, *sakhi*, or “same-sex friend [experience] relatively greater equality and reciprocity because the hierarchies involved in heterosexually constructed gender or in a parent-child relationship do not come into play as much” (94). The Rani’s relationship with the women in the Durga Dal is patriarchal; hence, there is a (patriarchal) dominance over the other female subordinates. Moreover, the Rani’s Dewan selects women for the Durga Dal. Moran’s *Rebel Queen* states, “The final choice rests with the Dewan; when he believes he’s found the right girl, the search [for a Durgavasi] is called off” (62). Thus, it is a man who formulates the supposed female structure. The Durga Dal may seem to appear as a solid female structure, but it is nevertheless a patriarchal one that belongs to the king

of Jhansi. Jhalkari explains to Sita how “everything that belongs to the queen belongs to [the king].” However, she further states, “What belongs to [the king] belongs to the British” (105). Thus, one may observe how an apparent female structure like the Durga Dal is not entirely free from the power relations of the patriarchal, colonial structure. Women, including the queen, are the property of these power structures and are at their mercy.

One may also note how, in this context, it is the male gaze at play here: the male gaze of the Dewan and, consequently, of the Rani. The twentieth-century feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who coined the term “male gaze,” initially discussed it in the field of cinema. However, the term came to be extensively used by feminists in understanding visual arts and literature. While describing it in a broader sense, Mulvey states:

Woman...stands in patriarchal culture as signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning. (58)

Explicitly talking about the visual arts, the twentieth-century art critic John Berger also discusses the male gaze. He says, “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (47). Both Mulvey and Berger discuss how women are reduced to mere objects to be looked at by the meaning-maker man in films and visual art. Although a literary male gaze is comparatively complicated than visual arts and films owing to the structural possibilities of expression in literature as a form of art, it primarily refers to the depiction of the woman through the man’s perspective as a commodity of pleasure.

Returning to the point on the Durga Dal in Moran's *Rebel Queen*, it may be noted that the Durga Dal is not just formed through the intervention of men, but is also constructed by the male gaze. Moreover, the Rani looks at the women vis-à-vis the Dewan's male gaze. Thus, the Durga Dal may be problematised because it is determined through the male gaze for male pleasure. Thus, the Durga Dal is not entirely a feminist structure. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore that the very allusion to an exclusive female structure consisting of warrior women, which exists in nineteenth-century patriarchal Jhansi, makes the Durga Dal an organisation which at least relatively transgresses the normative social structure.

The Durga Dal is an institution with rigid rules set by the Rani. She dismisses members who she feels are not adequate, without any hesitation. Once the members retire after a certain age, they are employed as servants in the same institution to do the warrior women's bidding. On the other hand, the queen offers the leader of the Durga Dal "estates of their own with handsome pensions" (Moran 78, 82, 83). For this very reason, there is stiff competition within the institution. The female members aggressively compete against each other for the Rani's attention to the extent that situations sometimes turn hostile. However, it is noteworthy how the portrayal of female rivalry for economic and social advantages, as well as for the Rani's attention may yet again cater to the voyeuristic male gaze.

An altercation between female competitors is often highlighted to titillate male viewers in contemporary representations. However, as Rachel Reinke states, this American culture has gained popularity since the 1970s, seeping into everyday consciousness. Catherine M. Dalton examines its historical origins and states, "Women throughout the ages have been ensconced in, and have even assisted in the development of, a culture that perpetuates a portrait of women, as driven by jealousy, to the point of seeking the destruction of rivals, real or imagined" (349). Reinke further

states that the female fights resulting from their competition are generally known as “catfights.” The first reference to such occurrence is in the Mormon community in 1854 (166). Female competition and female fights are found “amusing,” sexually provoking, and “humorous” by heteropatriarchal male viewers (Reinke 168). That two strong women *must*¹⁶ engage in rivalry indicates its heterosexual, patriarchal construct. Moreover, to perceive it as a display of qualities inferior to overtly masculine physical and mental abilities of men, accordingly portray women as the weaker sex who should not be taken too seriously. Susan Faludi considers this a heteropatriarchal response towards the women in twentieth-century America who were increasingly “making great strides” (xix).

Considering the arguments mentioned above, Moran’s *Rebel Queen*, a twenty-first-century American literary production, may have been ideologically geared to suit the broader heteropatriarchal construct of female-female rivalry in its depiction of the Durga Dal. Is it essential to refer to altercations within the warrior women group? Most probably not. Perhaps Moran’s novel is also catering to the dominant twenty-first-century neo-imperial American capitalist literary market.

Moran’s novel also uses concomitant ideas of the Virangana as the Mother goddess and the gendered nation. When the Revolt of 1857 breaks in Jhansi and the rebels kill several innocent British lives at Jhokan Bagh, they throng to Lakshmibai’s palace so that she can clarify her standpoint on the Rebellion’s cause. Moran’s Lakshmibai does not support the rebels’ violence; quite clearly this is meant to demonstrate her humanity. However, she also knows about the threat which the Rebellion poses to Jhansi’s safety. Thus, knowing well of the dilemma she is placed in, she appears before the rebels dressed up as a warrior goddess, almost reminiscent of Durga:

...the [Rani] appeared in a white Chanderi sari with a red crescent moon painted on her forehead. On her waist, she carried a sword, and behind her, a shield. She was dressed like a soldier... (285)

Instead of male guards, three Durgavasis—Sundari, Kahini, and Sita—follow her, resembling the many-armed goddess Durga:

...Sundari was armed with her weapon of choice—a pistol—while [Sita] carried [her] bow and Kahini her knives. [They] fell into position behind the [Rani]. Then the doors opened, and the shocked rebels stepped back. [Sita] could hear their sharp intake of breath, as the realization hit them that this woman in soldier's dress had once been their queen.

“What would you like of me?” [Lakshmibai] demanded.

At first, no one said anything. Then one by one the rebels fell to their knees. (285)

This incident not only showcases Lakshmibai's pragmatism and cleverness but also suggests that she must have realised how she is being symbolised as the nation goddess and that she herself uses this symbolism to her advantage. It is also interesting to note how the Durgavasis represent Lakshmibai's avatars, thus suggesting how all the warrior women portrayed in the novel embody the idea of the Virangana.

However, the novel highlights how Lakshmibai and the Durga Dal later join the Rebellion, although circumstances force them. However, when they do, they fight courageously on the battlefield, sacrificing their lives for Jhansi and the larger anti-colonial nationalist cause. Thus, Moran's novel indicates that the Rebellion eventually awakens the Durga in Virangana Lakshmibai and her Durgavasis. The narrative extends the metaphor of the nation as Durga in

portraying Lakshmibai's significance for the idea of India. Much after the Rebellion, Sita, who survives to tell the tale, wonders if the goddess Durga is at peace. She reflects that the sacrifices of Lakshmibai, the Durgavasis, and several others in the Rebellion probably do not suffice as India was still a colony of the British Government then. Sita believes, "The goddess Durga is still here, whispering to her children, 'I'll only be happy when I am free'" (344). Moran's usage of the imageries of the goddess Durga and the Virangana resonates with the patriarchal Hindu nationalists' ideology.

Moran's novel portrays the death of all the Durgavasis except Sita, for she is the protagonist and the narrator who carries the story forward. According to Moran, the end of these women is a necessary element. In her historical note to the novel, Moran quotes Josephine Butler:

What can a poor Army slave-woman do when thus turned out? Her caste is broken, because she has lived with foreigners, and her friends will seldom receive her back; she has been compelled to follow the soldiers on the march; and when dismissed may be hundreds of miles away from any human being who ever saw her face before. (347)

Thus, *Rebel Queen* seems to justify that an "ignominious death" for the warrior woman is the only option. Once she transgresses the threshold of the conventional social structure, she can never return. She must die for the nation, which makes her a physically inaccessible legend. Failing to die renders her nameless and strips her of her identity. She is considered polluted and a whore in society. Only when the warrior woman sacrifices her life for the nation is she raised to the pedestal of the Virangana. Thus, the Virangana continues to remain a national legend. Moran refers to a memorial to Lakshmibai located in front of Phoolbagh Palace, where the following lines are inscribed:

The nurturer of the city of Jhansi who dressed like a man, who could ride the tallest of horses, who held a raised sword in her hand, who was thrilled by the frenzy of war like the Goddess Kali, who many times challenged the English generals such a Hugh Rose in battle—that Lakshmi (the goddess of fortune), was killed here as if by an unfortunate turn of destiny and went [back] to heaven! (348)

The memorial is self-explanatory of Virangana Lakshmibai, remembered as Bharatmata by the patriarchal Hindu nationalist society.

Moran's *Rebel Queen* not only portrays how a woman is used as a symbol for sustaining the nation but also how she is blamed for destroying it. In the novel, it is a woman, Kahini, one of the Durgavasis, who poisons Lakshmibai's husband and her son to death. There are no historical records to ascertain this. Hence, it is noteworthy how these murders alter Jhansi's political status, leading to its annexation by the British and that the "bad woman" is blamed for it. The novel shows how the upholders of the nation vilify Kahini as the femme fatale responsible for Jhansi's eventual ruin. She uses her physical attractiveness and sexuality to betray Jhansi and her queen by helping the enemies (299, 317). The novel depicts the femme fatale as the Virangana's dichotomous Other. That the novel seems to illustrate the story of a warrior woman does not necessarily justify that it is written from an entirely feminist perspective. It is noteworthy how Kahini's depiction is not very different from Lakshmibai's, for the latter is also a femme fatale in the patriarchal colonial viewpoint. Moreover, the title of the novel, "Rebel Queen," borrowed from the British term for the Rani, problematises the novel's standpoint as a postcolonial feminist narrative. However, the title can also be seen as reclaiming the ascribed colonial title to the Rani. If the first interpretation is considered, it would reveal the author's own patriarchal and colonial ideological indoctrination,

which she herself probably cannot transgress. In contrast, the second one establishes the novel as a postcolonial feminist text.

However, one may also note that the White American writer, Moran, essentialises India to a cow-worshipping, vegetarian culture, suggesting her limited and partial Islamophobic, upper-caste, Hindu nationalist understanding of the country (260). Her novel demonises a Muslim rebel named Azimullah Khan and blames him for the Kanpur massacres¹⁷; she does not blame Nana Saheb for it, as is historically known, thus bolstering the narrative's ideological foundation (300). Although the novel partially portrays the futilities, violence, and inhuman destructions of war and also describes the British retaliation of the 1857 Rebellion as equally cruel, it still mostly follows a Western, White, patriarchal framework of looking at the "Orient." The thesis chooses to examine Moran's novel to tease out how these still-prevalent colonial and capitalist, White perspectives romanticise the narrative history of the "Orient". Thus, one may argue that Moran's *Rebel Queen* is reinscribed within the very social structures it sets out to break.

Moupia Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute* (2019)

Published in 2019, *The Queen's Last Salute* (TQLS) is a historical novel by the Indian author Moupia Basu. It is set in nineteenth-century Jhansi and Orchha. It primarily depicts the story of Chandraki, who is Lakshmibai's attendant and friend, through whom the novel explores the historical figure Lakshmibai against the background of the 1857 Rebellion. The novel explores aspects of female sexuality by portraying Chandraki's personality and her relationships.

Lakshmibai in Basu's TQLS is similar to how the Virangana is popularly known. The novel portrays Lakshmibai's masculinity as a warrior queen in opposition to Gangadhar Rao's femininity. She is shown as an able ruler who does not hesitate to address the court, even on hot,

sweltering days. The king, on the contrary, does not take much interest in administrative and political matters. Unlike Misra's *Rani*, Gangadhar is entirely cast as an inefficient ruler in *TQLS*.

The novel presents Gangadhar as Lakshmibai's dichotomous Other. Femininity, darkness, weakness and debility are traits associated with him. On the other hand, Lakshmibai is represented as a person her husband is not—she is associated with masculinity, light, strength and ability. It is interesting how the novel dissociates gender and sex from their conventional categories. However, stereotypes remain the same. The man is portrayed as feminine and the woman as masculine but the associative traits of masculinity and femininity are still confined to their rigid compartments.

Thus, the novel represents the Virangana as possessing typical masculine and virile traits. When Gangadhar is taken ill and is bedridden, Lakshmibai visits him and observes:

'Why is the room so dark? I can't see anything,' the queen said, signalling a dasi to draw back the curtains. Two women rushed to pull back the heavy brocade drapes that had enveloped the king's chamber in a shroud of gloom and despair. Sunlight streamed into the unwelcoming room, dispelling the shadows of impending sorrow. Gangadhar Rao shielded his eyes from the sudden brilliance of light that dazzled him. (Basu 89)

The feminine is thus astounded by the masculine's radiance and abilities. Alternatively, the king probably witnesses the Virangana as a goddess in this context. However, even in this case, it is the Virangana's brute masculinity that is celebrated. The novel still depicts the Virangana as capable of sensitivity when she is required to do so. Seeing her husband approaching his death, "tears welled up in her otherwise fierce eyes," but such caring capabilities are subsumed under her dominant masculinity (Basu 89).

Aligning with recorded Indian history, Gangadhar's femininity is portrayed as his response to the colonial British Rule. He seems to realise it on his deathbed:

He stared vacantly at the walls of the room, inlaid with bold and bright images of various gods slaying the asuras. He turned his head slowly and was greeted by dancing peacocks and elaborate floral motifs. No matter where he looked, these figures leapt at him from all around and were slowly closing in and seemed to be mocking him. They seemed to laugh at him, ridicule him, and even threaten him. He could not bear the assault and shut his eyes.
(Basu 90)

The imagery of the peacocks probably represents masculine pride. The (male) gods slaying the asuras may be figurative of the triumph of the masculine "good" over "evil;" the masculine "good" represents the prodigal son and protector of Jhansi, and the "evil" refers to the colonial power. Gangadhar fails to be the son of his motherland. The grandeur and pride of masculinity hurt him. The fact that he regrets losing his masculinity makes the portrayal of his sexuality even more problematic. It may suggest that his sexuality is not his choice; it is instead a punishment he endures until his death. Notably, like Misra and Moran, Basu also uses Gangadhar's chamber to signify his sexuality.

Although Gangadhar, in Basu's novel, himself fails as the male saviour of Jhansi, he still assists in the act by adopting a male son and declaring him the rightful heir to Jhansi's throne. His decision to ensure his monarchical and patriarchal legacy is, however, fulfilled by compelling a less privileged family to relinquish their own son in the name of the king. A woman who does not belong to royalty and hence is voiceless is separated from her biological child, who needs to be given up for adoption by the royal family. The child is terrified of the grandeur and strangeness of

royalty. He “trembled as he was suddenly lifted and placed on Maharaj Gangadhar Rao’s lap.” However, this is represented as a sacrifice for the Mother nation. Damodar Rao fears his new mother, Lakshmibai, which suggests how the Mother nation should be feared and respected (Basu 91-94). Thus, Basu represents the adoption as Moran does in her novel.

On his deathbed, Gangadhar asks Lakshmibai to “take care of [his] Jhansi and of Damodar Rao.” Thus, Lakshmibai is only appointed to safeguard male property. Like Misra’s *Rani*, Basu’s *TQLS* refers to Lakshmibai interchangeably with Jhansi. *TQLS* also portrays how the adoption of Damodar Rao invokes a renewed sense of motherhood in Lakshmibai, which she enjoys (93). Damodar Rao is adopted as the male heir to protect the mother and the nation from the male adversary.

One must note how Chandraki, the novel’s protagonist, is depicted. She is the daughter of Saanvali, one of the courtesans in Gangadhar’s court. The courtesans occupy the gendered quarters of the *zenana*. They perform for and entertain the king. Basu’s *TQLS* portrays the marginalised status of the courtesans:

The lives of most women in the *zenana*¹⁸ were wasted. They waited, hopeful that one day the king would send for them. They dressed up, they laughed, they cried, and even fought with one another. They were secure within the confines of the *zenana*, involved in their pretty squabbles and jealousies, sharing with each other their joy and grief. But to the world outside, they were nameless, faceless entities with their identities long wiped out of existence. They were just a part of what was simply known as the *zenana*. That was the only life known to them. (Basu 6)

TQLS, thus, offers alternative narratives of the marginalised courtesans in Gangadhar's court, which is usually not discussed in recorded history or most narratives.

Basu's novel does not discuss the king's relationship with the courtesans very clearly. Whether or not he demands sexual favours from them is unknown but the subtle nuances of their relationship may suggest that he uses the courtesans for his sexual pleasure. When he marries Lakshmibai, the courtesans are relieved that "the king let [them] lie in peace for some time" (7). It is suggestive of the fact that women in the court are generally marginalised and commodified by him. The courtesans initially believed that a new queen's arrival would probably ensure slight relief. The courtesans assumed that, at least at the beginning of the marriage, the king would be sexually interested in only the newly married queen.

Unlike the prospective fate of the courtesan which awaits her, young Chandraki prefers running around to performing in front of the king. She is more fascinated by the crafts of a warrior than a court performer. Motibai, another courtesan, reminds Saanvali to discipline her daughter and make her conform to the patriarchal power mechanism. Motibai warns Saanvali, "You better clip [Chandraki's] wings before it's too late...She's now fifteen, and it's time you prepared her for the royal bed as well" (Basu 15). It clearly states how the duties of the courtesans include silently offering sexual favours to the king. It is noteworthy that, unlike the narratives by Devi and Misra, which do not mention the courtesans in Gangadhar's court, Basu's novel portrays a different perspective altogether when she depicts how Gangadhar's sexual exploitation of the courtesans is normalised in society.

The courtesans do not have any choice in their profession. Saanvali laments her fate and does not want the same for her daughter. Saanvali wishes for Chandraki, a conventional life of a married woman,

‘Yes, there will be a wedding day for [Chandraki]. I will ensure it,’ Saanvali instantly retorted. ‘I will not let her grow up in these quarters. She will have a husband, children and a home of her own’... (Basu 5)

The courtesans like Saanvali accept their fate and position in the patriarchal court and society. However, Basu mentions in her novel that “the life of a courtesan had been forced upon [Saanvali], though she was born a Brahmin.” It thus suggests that probably women from all castes constituted the group of courtesans. Saanvali realises that “caste was of no use when it came to the matter of survival. And being part of the king’s harem was survival for her, nothing beyond that.” In Saanvali’s case, the profession of the courtesan is thrust upon her. Thus, the lavishness of the courtesan’s life does not provide her happiness. Although “the king had been kind and ensured that her daughter and she were well looked after,” she “winced at the indignity of her life” (Basu 13). Saanvali does not find the social status of the courtesan dignified. She prefers a heteropatriarchal family for herself and her daughter instead. She contemplates:

The silks and jewels didn’t matter to her, the honour of being proclaimed as the best singer of [Jhansi] was a mere embellishment. Of what use were the gilded ceilings or the polished floors covered with exquisite Persian carpets when it lacked the warmth of a home, the sense of belonging to a family? (Basu 13)

Saanvali, however, considers her profession as a courtesan a better option for her than *sati*. She “had been pushed into the raging pyre that slowly licked the lifeless body of her husband of

one year whilst carrying Chandraki in her womb.” She is forced to follow *sati*, and her uncle saves her from this death. However, her family rejects her for deviating from the tradition. She takes refuge in a temple as well as in a mosque, where she also faces social rejection. Her uncle saves her twice when he rescues her and brings her to Jhansi’s courts (Basu 14). Thus, Saanvali has no choice, even in her struggle for survival. She is tossed and turned by social rejections and rescued by a man every time, only to be finally placed in a patriarchal court. However, she considers the position of a courtesan in the court as the best alternative that the patriarchal society has to offer which ensures her and her daughter’s survival.

Basu’s novel portrays the complexities of nineteenth-century courtly life in India, in particular, and the patriarchal society, in general. However, the depictions of a courtesan also marginalise her. Sex work is probably not considered a legitimate profession for women, thus stigmatising it. Basu, however, mentions that the courtesans have no choice in the matter. Moreover, Basu also wishes to point to the hegemonic nineteenth-century society in Jhansi which condemns courtesans.

Nevertheless, *sati*, essentialised as a horrific death, is forced upon the woman, which is considered worse than a courtesan’s life. In either case, Basu does not consider the woman’s freedom of choice. The next chapter will discuss further and at length how a courtesan can also be considered a Virangana.

Much like Misra’s *Rani*, Basu’s *TQLS* suggests that Lakshmibai’s significance in Jhansi is limited to her role as the possible procreator of Jhansi’s male heir. It is why Gangadhar spends extravagantly on his wife, thus suggesting that she is seen only as a “metaphor for man’s activities and projects” (Kittay 63). The courtesans, who are themselves marginalised, are ideologically

indoctrinated to consider her only as a harbinger of “great fortune for Jhansi.” Lakshmibai fulfils her duty after she gives birth to a male child (Basu 16, 33). Unlike Misra, who depicts Gangadhar’s relationship with Lakshmibai, the lack of sexual intimacy in the relationship and the child’s conception, *TQLS* does not delve deeper into these aspects.

TQLS, on the contrary, discusses Gangadhar’s sexual activities but only regarding his liaisons with the courtesans. It negates the possibility of Gangadhar’s queer sexuality. British perspectives in the novel, however, emasculate him. The British consider the king as “once robust and powerful.” These qualities are now displaced by debility and weakness. Gangadhar is now a “wasted body” for the British (Basu 89). Basu’s novel showcases Gangadhar’s feminine aspects due to his illness, which has rendered him physically weak; they are not associated with his sexuality per se.

Unlike Misra’s Gangadhar, who is the administrative and political tutor to Lakshmibai, Basu portrays Lakshmibai as a queen who is inherently adept in political decision-making. It is Gangadhar who takes Lakshmibai’s “advice earnestly and [finds] himself increasingly turning to her for guidance” (Basu 17). The novel depicts her as an embodiment of courage and resolute strength. At the onset of the advancing fear of Jhansi’s possible annexation by the East India Company, Lakshmibai’s bravery stands out:

There were times when the rest of the people in the courtroom would begin to get fidgety, but not a single crease could be seen on Lakshmibai’s forehead, who sat erect and bright-eyed. She was well aware that her troubles were just beginning but she braced herself for whatever lay ahead, her demeanour stoic and resolute (Basu 81).

Thus, she is not portrayed as a headstrong ruler but as a rational yet courageous diplomat. She contains her calm during troubling times for her subjects. She gathers her courage to fight the impending colonial problem. Nevertheless, she still uses logic and tact to weigh Jhansi's chances against the East India Company. She apprehends the presence of "a niggling fear" regarding Jhansi's future, and hence, she consults the king about it (Basu 81).

Like Misra's *Rani*, Basu's *TQLS* also portrays Lakshmibai as a better ruler than the king. For matters which require decision-making skills, Chandraki approaches Lakshmibai and not the king (Basu 85). However, unlike *Rani*, *TQLS* does not explore Lakshmibai's role as a biological mother at length. Only one paragraph is devoted to the event of Lakshmibai's son, Damodar Rao's death as a child:

Damodar Rao, the heir to the throne of Jhansi, died after four months. Jhansi cried, and so did the king and queen. Chandraki was beside her queen always, trying to console her, but all her efforts were in vain. What could she do to alleviate the queen's grief? She urged her to step out of the palace and go horse-riding with her. But the queen remained ensconced in her chamber, refusing to budge (Basu 36).

The novel only mentions Lakshmibai's grief at her son's death in passing. On the contrary, it emphasises her role as the mother to Jhansi's subjects. Thus, the queen's motherhood is celebrated but associated with Jhansi's body politic.

Basu's *TQLS* also explores Lakshmibai's motherhood vis-à-vis her relationship with Chandraki. One of the many intricate dimensions of their relationship may be that of a bond between a mother and a daughter. As she would have done with her biological mother, Saanvali, Chandraki feels similarly obliged to share details of her personal and heterosexual life with

Lakshmibai. In the “absence” of Saanvali, “it was only Lakshmibai who filled up that space in Chandraki’s life” (Basu 61)

Chandraki appears to be Lakshmibai’s alter ego. There are similarities as well as differences between both women. The novel portrays Lakshmibai as an upholder of masculinity. Chandraki, on the other hand, embraces her femininity and urges the Rani to show more conventional feminine attributes. Lakshmibai dresses up as a widow. However, while meeting the British officers, Chandraki encourages the queen to dress up lavishly, flaunting her physical self (Basu 102). Chandraki probably insists on weaponising her female sexuality against the masculine enemy. It suggests how female sexuality is seen as something to be feared. Lakshmibai’s “delightful smile... charmed even the British officers” (Basu 134). However, they also feared this very charming sexuality at the same time. The meetings with Lakshmibai unsettle British officers like Major Colvin. He contemplates how Lakshmibai “always made him feel that he was inefficient and incompetent even if the matter at hand wasn’t his fault” (Basu 105). The enemy’s masculinity seems to be threatened by the colonised woman’s sexuality. The masculine British “squirmed under the fiery gaze” of the unknown female body (Basu 105).

Lakshmibai dresses like a conventional masculine military man while addressing affairs of the militant state. On the other hand, she dresses like a traditionally feminine woman while discussing matters with British officers. Chandraki points out that Lakshmibai generally dresses like a man, and when she dresses like a queen, she wears only white saris resembling a widow (Basu 103). Thus, it indicates how widowhood and masculinity are intricately entangled. The novel shows how society deprives a widow of her female sexuality.

On the contrary, Lakshmibai, ideologically indoctrinated in the patriarchal society, does not question the gendered and casteist rituals and customs (Basu 103). She realises her privileges as a Brahmin Hindu queen of Jhansi. However, she does not actively and entirely intend to transgress the norms of society. The choice of not committing *sati* or dressing like a widow comes more from her circumstances than her willing decisions.

Lakshmibai's anger towards the colonial power is sublimated through her horse riding sessions or "sword fighting" with Chandraki (Basu 117). It is interesting to note how masculine rage is channelled through conventional masculine activities. However, masculine energies, such as those shared by the two women, add to the complexities of their relationship. Lakshmibai remarks that Chandraki is a "much better rider than a dancer." Lakshmibai further says that Chandraki would not "find a man to marry" her if she continued "dressing up as a soldier" (Basu 117). There are intersections of the women's masculinity and femininity vis-à-vis their relationship. With each other, the women express their fluid sexualities freely, but their perceptions are still stereotypically gendered.

The novel depicts Lakshmibai as disturbed by the news of Chandraki's marriage with Jaywant, a man from Orchha. Chandraki is also upset to have angered Lakshmibai. Chandraki, the queen's "comrade-in-arms, her confidante, her dearest companion," realises that without the queen's presence in her life, she could not continue living. She ends her marital relationship with Jaywant so the queen can forgive her. Chandraki is torn between Lakshmibai, her female confidante, and Jaywant, her heterosexual husband (Basu 122-27).

Lakshmibai's complicated relationship with Chandraki may be noted in this context. Although, Lakshmibai's tense response to Chandraki may be perceived as emotions prevalent in a

typical mother-daughter relationship, yet, there is a more complex web of emotions between them. It is suggestive of a possible homoerotic companionship. Alternatively, it could also hint at them being *sakhis*, thus sublimating their homoeroticism through divine love. Nevertheless, Lakshmibai's anger and anxiety resulting from Chandraki's marriage with another man may express her resentment of letting her female friend leave her for the man. The tension both women share is very reflective of typical romantic discord between two lovers, or even two *sakhis* for that matter.

The close-knit group of Lakshmibai, her son Damodar Rao and Chandraki seems “almost like a family. They find solace in each other's loneliness” (Basu 129). Although their group represents a female space they create for themselves, it is still symbolic of a heterosexual, feudal, patriarchal family.

Lakshmibai, in Basu's *TQLS*, claims credit for uplifting Chandraki from the “undignified” life of a courtesan. By portraying Lakshmibai's relationship with Chandraki, the novel offers a prejudiced perspective of the courtesans and the *zenana*. The novel describes Lakshmibai's relation to Chandraki in this context:

Before [Chandraki] stood a mighty ruler, who was not just her queen but the charter of her destiny, her mentor, her mother, her father, her sister, her friend—a woman who had altered the course of her destiny, her very life, who had given her a new name, and a new identity. If it hadn't been for her, Chandraki would be languishing in some corner of the *zenana*¹⁹, spending her days chewing betel leaves and stringing ghungroos around her ankles. She knew how to read. She knew how to write. She knew how to wield a sword. She knew how to ride a horse. She knew the meaning of dignity. (Basu 130)

Although facets of the relationship between the two women may signify companionship and solidarity, there is still an inherent class hierarchy. Moreover, the dichotomy—of the life of a courtesan and that of a female warrior—reinforces the binary categories of “undignified” femininity as opposed to “dignified” masculinity. Moreover, it is Lakshmibai who is the active perpetrator of these binary values in Chandraki.

Lakshmibai uses Chandraki’s patriotic consciousness when everything else fails to resolve their tension. If Chandraki needs to leave Jhansi for Orchha, i.e., if she prefers her husband to Lakshmibai, it still must be permitted by Lakshmibai, who is the authority in this case. So, Lakshmibai employs Chandraki as a spy for Jhansi in Orchha (Basu 133). Accordingly, Lakshmibai still retains her superiority over Chandraki even when they are physically distant from each other. It is also noteworthy how, although Chandraki chooses her heterosexual lover and husband over her same-sex companionship, she is never permitted this choice entirely. Lakshmibai’s looming presence also remains prevalent in Chandraki’s life in Orchha. It is interesting to note how, in this context, homoerotic desire may be seen as being replaced by or overlapped with patriotic consciousness. Although there is no literal closure to their relationship, Lakshmibai, as a metaphorical representation of Jhansi, sustains her relationship with Chandraki.

Basu’s *TQLS* portrays Chandraki’s inner conflict concerning her sexual identity and desires. Lakshmibai’s physical presence in Chandraki’s life enforces masculine features in her. However, when she leaves Lakshmibai and reaches Orchha, the very first scene depicts Chandraki admiring her own physicality while bathing in the Betwa on a moonlit night. The novel compares her movements to a dancer’s (Basu 150). It emphasises her courtesan ancestry. The novel further portrays that her feminine qualities as a court dancer are due to her excellence in the masculine activities of a warrior:

For Chandraki, her body had been made for just one purpose...to dance. She may have been tutored by Lakshmibai to wield a sword and ride a horse, but even in those strokes, she found movements and traces of dance, the reason why she excelled in them. (Basu 150)

Thus, fluid and intersectional sexuality are perhaps not well defined in the novel. Chandraki's orgasmic experience of self-love in the Betwa that night is not depicted as an expression of her sexuality, but its inherent eroticism is sublimated through the divine. The novel shows how:

She knew that at this moment she had made a union with all that was meant to be, with the Almighty designing it for her. She felt fulfilled in a way not known to mortals. (Basu 151)

Basu's *TQLS* gradually blends the different female characters into each other. One female character realises that which the other is not and cannot fulfil. While Chandraki may be seen as Lakshmibai's alter-ego, the novel probably depicts Meher as Chandraki's alter-ego. Meher, a courtesan in Orchha, is not very dissimilar to Chandraki. Meher "had been brought up in the palace of Orchha itself," and her "mother had been one of the concubines of the previous king" (Basu 200).

Meher is, however, sexually more liberated than Chandraki. Unlike Chandraki, Meher does not struggle with her sexual desires. The novel depicts Meher as a sexually licentious woman. However, it portrays her as "lacking in intellect," unlike Chandraki. It describes how "Meher more than made up her cerebral deprivation with her skills in the craft of lovemaking and seduction (Basu 201)." It is problematic that the novel recognises intellectual weakness as the reason for Meher's sexual freedom. It subordinates sexual desire by considering mental prowess as superior. Meher's sexual freedom is maligned, while Chandraki's intellect is revered.

While Jhansi and Lakshmibai precipitate Chandraki's masculinity, Orchha and Meher bring to light Chandraki's femininity. As opposed to the sessions of sword fighting with Lakshmibai, Chandraki shares dance performances with Meher. However, the novel portrays Chandraki's inner conflict with her sexuality. As femininity is rendered inferior to masculinity, she believes that in Orchha, "she had been reduced to a court dancer...She never got a chance to practice sword fighting or ride Bijli, who had been kept away in the royal stables" (Basu 211).

Thus, Jhansi may be seen as the macrocosm of women's masculinity, whereas Orchha may be women's femininity. Like their queens, Orchha consists of opulent palaces "embellished with beautiful frescoes and colourful stones, unlike the stark, military façade of the Jhansi fort" (Basu 241). As Chandraki eventually inclines towards her femininity, she develops a liking for Orchha and its queen. Like Lakshmibai, who has substituted Chandraki's mother, another woman in Orchha named Taravati becomes a mother figure for Chandraki (Basu 221). Thus, Lakshmibai is perhaps replaceable for Chandraki. However, Chandraki's personal feelings are eventually layered by her patriotic fervour towards Jhansi and Lakshmibai. Therefore, in Orchha, Chandraki thinks of Lakshmibai and her "beloved Jhansi all the time." She reminds herself that her mission has brought her to Orchha in the first place (Basu 239). Hence, it is noteworthy that Lakshmibai symbolises Jhansi itself, so Chandraki's love for both is interchangeable.

Basu's *TQLS* further explores Chandraki's tense, unrequited relationship with Riyaz Khan. One can note that Basu may have carved Riyaz Khan's character based on the historical Nathe Khan of Orchha, who fought Lakshmibai (as mentioned earlier in the chapter). Basu's novel portrays Riyaz Khan as the best of Jhansi's military officers. However, due to his growing misbehaviour towards women, he is exiled from Jhansi by Lakshmibai, after which he goes to Orchha and finds refuge there. Due to his excellence in military skills, Riyaz Khan finds a

respectable position in Orchha's court. However, he still nurtures his animosity towards Lakshmibai for banishing him from Jhansi. It is noteworthy how the novel portrays an overt sexual tension between Chandraki (Lakshmibai's female friend) and Riyaz Khan from the outset, thus creating a clichéd amorous entanglement. Although neither Chandraki nor Riyaz Khan directly expresses their desire for the other, he "had become a part of her life" (Basu 325). They are aware of their desire for each other but do not acknowledge it.

The recurrent imagery of the Betwa is symbolic of their relationship:

Behind the palace, the Betwa flowed merrily, oblivious of the flames of passion that had just erupted in the hearts of two unhappy and forlorn human beings. But neither was ready to succumb to it. (Basu 250)

The Betwa not only bridges Jhansi and Orchha but also serves as a motif of unfulfilled sexual and romantic yearning. It is in this river that Chandraki realises her latent femininity. The river distances her from her beloved Lakshmibai and Jhansi. Chandraki finally sacrifices her feminine self in this river, which would otherwise have been defiled by the male rebels of the Revolt of 1857 (Basu 344).

Towards the novel's closure, it is through the Betwa that Chandraki seeks Lakshmibai and Jhansi. Chandraki's relationship with Lakshmibai, thus, comes full circle. The husband for whom Chandraki leaves Lakshmibai comes to light as a fraud who deceives her for larger political purposes. Her husband's deception pains Chandraki but simultaneously augments her patriotic consciousness, hence, her love towards Jhansi and Lakshmibai. Eventually, Chandraki rejects her femininity to embrace her masculine role as a warrior woman. She denies her sexuality and her

desires towards Riyaz Khan. Instead, she struggles to return to Lakshmibai and possibly meets her death in the process (Basu 344).

It is remarkable how none of these relationships in *TQLS* is fulfilled. Due to their religious differences, Basu probably does not portray a successful romantic relationship between Chandraki and Riyaz Khan. The Hindu woman *cannot*²⁰ have sexual desires for a Muslim man, which indicates the author's prejudices. Alternatively, the author may not wish to tread on treacherous paths threatened by twenty-first-century upholders of Hindu national chauvinism.

Furthermore, Chandraki's relationship with Lakshmibai also does not find any closure. Their companionship bordering on eroticism is not possible to safeguard the heteropatriarchal nation. Thus, Chandraki dies. In a tragic turn of events, Riyaz Khan shoots Chandraki to save her "purity" from the militant men who wish to rape her. A wounded Chandraki falls into the river and is swept away by the current, nowhere to be found. It is noteworthy that a man must kill the woman to rescue her from being raped by other men. Thus, it suggests that death is more honourable than being raped. Chandraki's death at the hands of Riyaz Khan may also symbolise the ritual *sati*. However, even in this context, the woman is not independent to choose.

Chandraki's death is essential for the survival of the patriarchal and Brahmanical Hindu nation. With the alter-ego's death, Virangana Lakshmibai can eventually live to become a martyr for the sustenance of the nation. Nevertheless, one may note how Chandraki, a warrior woman like Lakshmibai, may also be seen becoming a martyr. Thus, like most other female martyrs, one may infer that a courtesan's daughter may also accordingly be considered a Virangana.

However, in either case, the Virangana only exhibits partial non-conformity to the normative structure. Like the narratives by Devi and Misra, Basu depicts Lakshmibai in purdah in

the presence of men. However, after her husband's death, unlike other widows in her society, Basu's Lakshmibai does not follow *sati* and chooses not to shave off her hair. The novel also portrays Lakshmibai's privileged social status as opposed to ordinary women of Jhansi, which permits her liberties. Similarly, it also paints Chandraki as a patriarchal subject. She practices *purdah* in men's company (37, 99, 102).

Nineteenth-century Jhansi, portrayed in Basu's *TQLS*, is a casteist and gendered society where crimes like rape, molestation, and domestic violence are common. Riyaz Khan's physically violent behaviour towards his second wife, Noor, is seemingly justified in the story because the novel shows a forced circumstantial marriage between both. The novel portrays him venting his frustration and anger by inflicting violence on his second wife and raping his sister-in-law Mohsina. When his beloved first wife, Heerabai, and their children leave him to stay outside the kingdom, Riyaz Khan's personality inclines towards harbouring resentment, anger, lust, and insensitivity. He begins "treating women as objects to satiate his lust for revenge" (71, 73-4). However, the shift in his personality is still founded upon losing his heteropatriarchal familial love. The novel seems to rationalize Riyaz Khan's conduct, thus almost normalising domestic violence and rape.

As stated earlier, Lakshmibai reprehends Riyaz Khan for his sexist behaviour towards the women in the court and the *zenana*. However, she admonishes him more because he refuses to marry women after violating their sexuality (Basu 79). Thus, society considers marriage an answer to rape and sexual violence against women. Basu provides some salvation to the sexually licentious Riyaz Khan but does not forgive the same trait in a woman. As stated earlier, Riyaz Khan's brute sexual activities are justified as circumstantial and not characteristic. Sexual excess in a woman,

however, challenges social standards. So, the novel kills Chandraki. Her death seems to be a penalty for transgressing the societal codes of feminine modesty and behaviour.

Basu's *TQLS* offers alternative narratives of Virangana Lakshmibai. Rather than emphasising the political event of the Rebellion in which the novel is set, it focuses on the stories of fictional female characters, Chandraki (the protagonist) and Meher (a minor character), as products of that society. Vis-à-vis these female characters, the novel sheds a different light on Lakshmibai. As already stated, the women are alter-egos of each other. While Lakshmibai is the figurative representation of masculinity, Meher represents feminine excess. Meher has already transgressed the social structure, never to return. Thus, society stigmatises her as a fallen woman. However, Lakshmibai's masculinity, associated with a larger Hindu nationalist purpose, is thus celebrated. Meher's sexual licentiousness and Lakshmibai's militant masculinity may be seen as projections of the qualities latent within Chandraki's personality. However, as a patriarchal subject, she inclines towards the latter by rejecting the former. However, as stated earlier, Chandraki cannot become Lakshmibai and, hence, needs to die. It indicates Basu's ideological perceptions of the Virangana aligned with the larger patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideals. It may be further noted that *TQLS* perhaps only temporarily transgresses the rigid gendered binaries it seeks to subvert.

Basu's novel, however, refers to two historical female queens who were Lakshmibai's contemporaries. Misra's *Rani* also mentions the Rani of Orchha and Rani Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh in passing. *TQLS* devotes similar space to both Lakshmibai and the Rani of Orchha; the novel is divided into two sections, the first in Jhansi and the second in Jhansi Orchha. Rani Ladein Dulaiya, known as Rani Larai, ruled Orchha in the nineteenth century. There is not much information about her. The portrayal of Rani Larai in *TQLS* is based on Basu's research in Orchha,

where she stayed for one year. Basu states that Rani Larai is a historical female figure who ruled over Orchha in the nineteenth century. She was Lakshmibai's contemporary. The novel bases the descriptions of Rani Larai partly on the folklore the author had heard in Orchha and partly on her own imagination²¹. Only a few historical records on the Rani of Orchha are found in the National Archives of India (Jerosch 88).

TQLS portrays that both Lakshmibai and Larai are more similar than different. Larai "seemed to be equally authoritative and formidable despite her diminutive stature. She is seated on a throne as imposing as that of her neighbour a few miles away." The novel depicts her as an honest and just ruler, much like Lakshmibai. Even the British officers find both queens very similar in this regard. However, unlike Lakshmibai, Larai is shown to be more ostentatious. She dresses up in fine saris, and society regards her as "a symbol of divinity." The most noticeable difference between both queens is that unlike Lakshmibai, who openly defies the East India Company's rule over Jhansi, Larai clearly states that she neither opposes the Company's rule nor supports it. Rani Larai shows considerable interest in Jhansi and more in its Rani Lakshmibai (Basu 166-245). It probably even depicts symbolic solidarity between both women.

These ideas may lead to the overarching issue of the paradigm of the Virangana. The pertinent question is: how are Rani Larai's political desires for her kingdom's safety and peace different from Rani Lakshmibai's? If they are not different, then why is Rani Larai not remembered and celebrated as much? Basu believes that Lakshmibai's identity associated with the northern and central parts of India, which constitutes the larger bed of Hindu nationalism, may also play a significant role in her popularity as a Virangana since the nineteenth century²². Basu does not break away from the stereotypical representation of the Virangana. Although Lakshmibai's relationship with Chandraki may be analysed from the framework of same-sex sexuality, Basu herself probably

does not consider Lakshmibai to be a woman who deviates from the heteropatriarchal parameters. According to Basu, Lakshmibai was “a complete woman” who did not “mess with any man,”²³ perhaps revealing the author’s ideological footing. However, the novel still questions the political making of a Virangana through the portrayal of Rani Larai and Chandraki.

Rani Lakshmibai’s position in dominant historiography from both British and Indian perspectives portrays her either as the most dangerous rebel of 1857 or as the bravest warrior of the Indian nation. The four narratives analysed in the chapter try to represent alternatives to the dominant historiography. Devi’s *Queen of Jhansi* depicts Lakshmibai from the subaltern’s perspective, and Misra’s *Rani* describes her as a sexually bold woman. Moran’s *Rebel Queen* and Basu’s *The Queen’s Last Salute* instead depict Lakshmibai as a secondary character assisting the stories of different heroines. Although Virangana Lakshmibai undergoes a representative evolution across time in these narratives, she is still significant as a feminist icon, which is noteworthy. In their choice to tell the story of this resolute warrior woman, the four narratives explore the domains of history, culture and memory through a postcolonial, postmodernist, and feminist lens, although the narratives are still subject to contemporary literary and publishing market.

Basu’s novel, for instance, was initially named *The Tale of the Stone*, depicting the story of the protagonist Chandraki and not Lakshmibai. However, she confesses that her publishing team advised her to change the name to *The Queen’s Last Salute*, suggesting that the story is, in fact, Lakshmibai’s, thus catering to the demands of the dominant contemporary literary market in India. Therefore, the title and the popular image of the Virangana Lakshmibai on the cover page are misleading. However, one cannot disagree with the fact that the women writers in this chapter have successfully managed to provide an insider’s perspective on the most popular Virangana of the

Indian nation, thus speaking about her individuality, suffering, grief, desire and sexuality. And that must be acknowledged. The next chapter focuses on another such category of the subaltern woman—the Muslim courtesan—who can also be looked at as a re-imagined Virangana.



Notes

¹ Historian Harleen Singh uses the phrase “reluctant rebel” to refer to Rani Lakshmibai in her book *The Rani of Jhansi: Gender, History, and Fable in India* (2014).

² Due to my lack of proficiency in reading and understanding Marathi, the English translation of Godse’s travelogue by Mrinal Pande has been used here.

³ This English translation is used here.

⁴ Nana Saheb is spelt as Nana-sahib in Misra’s *Rani*. However, the former spelling will be used here to maintain consistency in the chapter.

⁵ Emphasised in the original.

⁶ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

⁷ Emphasis mine.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ See Yi-Fu Taun’s *Space and Place* (1977) where he talks of human interactions and experiences with their external environment.

¹⁰ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

¹¹ Nana Saheb is spelt Nanasahib and Tantia Tope is spelt Tatya Tope in Moran’s *Rebel Queen*.

¹² It is not known clearly whether Safvi’s references are limited to folk legends and oral culture or if she finds accurate written historical evidence of the same to bolster her argument.

¹³ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

¹⁴ Devadasis were originally temple dancers who were ritually and symbolically married to god. However, in the colonial era, devadasis were associated with prostitution. There is a lot of scholarship on the devadasi culture, which is not examined in this chapter due to time and space

constraints. For more on the devadasi culture, look at *Nityasumangali: Devadasi Tradition in South Asia* by Saskia C. Kersenboom-Story and Saskia Kersenboom (1987).

¹⁵ A significant tradition of Hinduism, Vaishnavism is founded on the belief of the male god Vishnu, incarnated as another male god-person Krishna.

¹⁶ Emphasis mine.

¹⁷ Most historical records hold Nana Saheb responsible for the massacres of the British men, women and children in Kanpur. For more, read about the series of killings at Sati Chaura Ghat and Bibighar in Kanpur.

¹⁸ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ Emphasis mine.

²¹ As told by the author in the telephonic interview I conducted with her, and in the later correspondences with her through emails.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*

Chapter Four

The Tawa'if as a Virangana

“Men covered with gunpowder and blood come to my house everyday. I’ve spent my entire life in their company. If I can bear them, then why can’t I bear the context they create?”

(Sharma; Mukherjee 159)

The previous chapters discuss how the upper-caste Hindu nationalist discourse idealised the warrior-mother as the Virangana in the making of the incipient nation of India. The chapters also focused on re-examining hegemonic constructs, and as part of this endeavour, they discussed the deviant female figures in history and memory who may also be reclaimed as Virangana. The courtesan in nineteenth-century India who participated in the Revolt of 1857, the focal point used for the hegemonic anti-colonial nationalist discourse, is one of these female figures. There is meagre historical documentation on them. A few fictional narratives represent courtesans-turned-warriors. However, there are fewer which depict these courtesans participating in the Revolt, of which two were Begum Hazrat Mahal of Awadh and Azizun Nisa Bai of Kanpur. Like their contemporary, the popular Rani Lakshmibai, the courtesans mentioned above also participated in the same Revolt, in overt ways or otherwise. However, perhaps owing to their social identity as a “public” and sexually independent (Muslim) woman, the courtesan does not find any location in the caste Hindu nationalist discourse.

Thus, this chapter will explore the two courtesans named above for their involvement in the Revolt of 1857 vis-à-vis their representation in fictional narratives. Consequently, the chapter will try to relocate their voices in alternative and subaltern histories through which the figure of the ideal Virangana will also be re-defined and re-imagined. This chapter will locate both Begum

Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai as representatives of the courtesan figure in the re-imagined trope of the Virangana.

Courtesans in India

Courtesans have existed in the socio-cultural history of India since millennia. They are known by different names in different spatio-temporal locations. However, the term commonly signifies a woman talented in arts, music, and etiquette across all these periods and locations, who is associated with amorous love and sensuality. In her book *The World of Courtesans: Sensuous Women Who Practiced Love as an Art and Profession* (1973), Moti Chandra describes courtesans from Vedic times to the medieval period. Although courtesans are considered as women who “served the baser needs of society...[they] were also a symbol of culture and ars amoris” (1).

Chandra states that “the institution of courtesans” developed in “an urban society.” Vedic and post-Vedic literature like the *Natyashastra* and *Kamasutra* mention the courtesans “casually” and about their knowledge of the arts of love and sensuality. On the other hand, Buddhist literature narrates more detailed stories of the institution of the courtesans. The *Jataka* tales “throw light on [the courtesans’] achievements and the modes they employed in enticing their lovers.” Jain literature also depicts the institution in a similar fashion. During these periods, the artistic and sexual services of the courtesans were stressed. The institution of courtesans saw changes in the Mauryan period when it “became highly complex and the state devised a set of rules which governed their conduct.” The courtesans’ organisation was not limited to artistic achievements but became “an important source of revenue to the state.” The significance of the courtesans and their organisation received “great attention” during the Gupta period. The courtesans accepted handsome patronage from wealthy clients, so the former flourished in their business. They became one of the most affluent sections of society, thus living opulent lifestyles (7). However, Chandra’s

work on the courtesans showcases them as “crafty” women. The courtesan’s primary profession is mentioned as sexual, which is decisive of her socio-politico-cultural existence.

Pran Neville’s *Nautch Girls of the Raj* (2009) explores the history of the courtesans as “cultured women” till the eighteenth century. Skilled in music, dance and the art of sensual pleasure, courtesans are depicted as being integral to the culture and history of India. Neville traces the courtesans to the lineage of the mythological *apsaras* who entertained and served the Hindu gods. Neville also discusses the associations of the courtesans with the aristocracies of the medieval period (6, 15, 102, 105). In this period, with the imposition of colonial rule, the courtesan culture began to decline. The courtesan was not bracketed in the category of the ideal “good woman of patriarchy,” albeit she still occupied a specific position of dignity, perhaps owing to her artistic abilities, thus unsettling the idea of conventional respectability in society. Towards the latter half of the period, which ended with the Revolt of 1857, certain laws were passed, as discussed in previous chapters, whereby the courtesans’ social position started its slow decline.

In her essay “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow, India,” Veena Talwar Oldenburg discusses how the courtesan culture flourished the most under the Nawabs in early medieval India. The wealthy male patrons who visited them not only paid them money but gifted ornaments and also property, which raised the courtesans to wealthy elite class in the kingdom. The civic-tax ledgers of 1858-77 show that the courtesans, known as *tawa’ifs* during this period, fell under the taxable category of society (261). The property which the *tawa’ifs* owned was later confiscated by the East India Company in the siege of Lucknow during the 1857 Revolt. Thus, the courtesan culture declined in India with the advent of colonialism. The courtesans, especially the *tawa’ifs* of the early and late medieval period in India, came to be represented in a negative light by the upper-caste Hindu nationalists, thus pushing them to the

margins of society. However, a post-colonial feminist reading of the courtesans showcases them as independent, unconventional women who interrogate the hegemonic social structure. For a better understanding of the role of the *tawa'ifs* in the patriarchal, caste Hindu nationalist society in general, and in the 1857 Revolt in particular, a brief discussion of the institution of the *tawa'ifs* is necessary.

The Courtesans as “Public” Women

The courtesans, or the *tawa'ifs*, occupied a significant cultural and economic position in nineteenth-century Awadh in North India. They resided in the “lavish apartments in the city’s main Chowk bazaar, and in the Kaisar Bagh palace.” They were talented and educated in the “high culture of the court.” They were “preservers and performers” of this culture and “actively shaped the developments in Hindustani music and Kathak dance styles.” Their artistic talents and elite status “commanded great respect in the court and in society.” The nobility often sent their young sons to the *tawa'ifs* to be instructed in “etiquette, the art of conversation and polite manners, and the appreciation in Urdu literature” (Oldenburg 263). The courtesans were the “influential female elite” in all courts of the kingdoms in the Indian subcontinent. The *tawa'ifs* of Lucknow “were especially reputable.” They played a significant role in court politics (Oldenburg 262, Sharar 192). The upper-class women were constrained within the *zenana*, the inner female quarters, during the Nawab rule.

On the contrary, the *tawa'ifs* were women who owned and ran the *kothas* or salons in the public sphere. Dealing with different (male) clients, *kotwals*, and local police on an everyday basis required intelligence and business acumen. As “professionals and businesswomen,” the *tawa'ifs* “organised funds, paid people and arranged travel” (Singh, “Retrieving Voices,” 100). Moreover,

they were also adept in the functioning of the establishments of the *kothas* and training more women as skilled musicians, poets and dancers.

Based on personal interviews and surveys Oldenburg conducts, she describes the structure of a *tawa'if's* establishment thus:

In Lucknow, the world of the *tawa'if* was as complex and hierarchical as the society it was part of. Courtesans were and still are usually a part of a larger establishment run by a *chaudhrayan*, or chief courtesan, an older woman who has retired to the position of manager after a successful career as a *tawa'if*. Having acquired wealth and fame, such women are able to recruit and train women who came to them, along with the more talented daughters of the household. Typically a wealthy courtier, often the king himself, began his direct association with a *kotha* by bidding for a virgin whose patron he became with the full privileges and obligations of that position... The *chaudhrayan* always received a fixed proportion (approximately one-third) of the earnings to maintain the apartments; hire and train other dancing girls; and attract the musicians, chefs, and special servants that such establishments employed... The household had other functionaries beyond the core group of daughters or nieces of the senior *tawa'if*. These women, called *thakahi* and *randi*, were affiliates of a *kotha* but were ranked lower; their less remarkable appearance and talent restricted them to providing chiefly sexual services in rather more austere quarters downstairs. Another interesting group of women secretly associated with the establishment were *khangi*, or women who were married and observed strict purdah, but who, for financial or other reasons, came to the *kotha* for clandestine liaisons; the *chaudhrayan* collected a fee from them for her hospitality. Doormen, watchmen, errand boys, tailors, palanquin carriers, and others, who lived in the lower floors of the house, or in detached

servants' quarters, and were also often kinsmen, screened suspicious characters at the door, acted as protectors of the house, and spied on the activities of the police and medical departments. (263-64)

A *tawa'if's kotha* was, thus, strictly structured, hierarchical and functioned based on disciplined professionalism. The functioning of such an establishment in the public sphere in an otherwise patriarchal society is representative of the *tawa'if* as an excellent businesswoman and a strong diplomat.

Oldenburg further shows how the *tawa'ifs*, vis-à-vis their establishments and their profession, subvert patriarchy. Her research states that most women, irrespective of their religious, caste and class identities, escaped the clutches of male domination to become courtesans of their choice; there were occasions, however, when women were forced into the profession. Thus, a courtesan did not have any definite religious identity as such. The *chaudhrayan* acted as a mentor and a counsellor to the women, especially the newly admitted ones. The senior courtesans helped the new ones deconstruct their patriarchal conditioning and liberate themselves. It was a "process of rehabilitation for [the] women." They were against the hegemonic institutions of marriage and family. They celebrated the birth of a female child as opposed to a male child. Unlike the normative social structure, a courtesan's daughter inherited the property (267-273).

Oldenburg opines that, unlike other women in society, the *tawa'ifs* ventured into the outer world and had greater mobility, perhaps owing to their professional identity. The *tawa'ifs* donned *purdah* of their own choice, *purdah* being generally a patriarchal tool employed to police women's sexuality in society. An otherwise sexually independent *tawa'if* would not be expected to or was not forced to be in *purdah*. But by donning themselves in *purdah* while accessing the public sphere,

the *tawa'ifs* appropriated the male gaze to express their resistance against the normative structure (273).

The *kotha* became “a sanctuary for both women and men; women found in it a greater peace and freedom than in the normal world; men escaped the boredom of their domestic lives.” Thus, the *kotha* can be seen as an alternate space for the courtesans where they enjoyed creative, sexual and financial independence. There was solidarity and camaraderie amongst the women in the *kotha*. This often translated to love and homosexuality between the women in the *kotha*, albeit they did not identify themselves under any definite category of sexual identity. Thus, the courtesans, vis-à-vis their culture, subverted patriarchy by “celebrat[ing] womanhood in the privacy of their apartments by resisting and inverting the rules of gender of the larger society which they are part” (Oldenburg 261-73).

Oldenburg's research is very informative of the courtesan culture in nineteenth-century Awadh but can also be questioned. Feminist playwright Tripurari Sharma argues that Oldenburg's research negates the fact that the courtesan's establishment also functioned on patriarchal ordering (Singh, “Retrieving Voices, 108). Meenal Tula, in her research work titled *Precarious Control, Anxious Desire: Courtesans and Emerging Publics in Late Colonial India* (2016), argues, “In an attempt to valorise the courtesan's practices of resistance, Oldenburg simplistically reduces patriarchy to the institution of marriage alone” (13). To assert that only by resisting the patriarchal institution of marriage and family, the courtesan succeeded in subverting patriarchy is perhaps an overstatement. It is the patronage they received from the male nobility which made the functioning of the *kothas* possible. The courtesans were also constantly subjected to the male gaze.

Moreover, even if one considers Oldenburg's research, the women who were forced into the profession of a courtesan, thus, do not have any choice in the matter. The sex and flesh trade

is fundamentally exploitative. Women are treated as commodities in this economic transaction. Although Oldenburg suggests that there were only very few cases of kidnapping and forcing young girls and women into courtesanship, female agency in all the other cases is still questionable. That most courtesans would have willingly entered the profession as a possible employment option is debatable.

Moreover, the fact that the courtesans did not identify themselves under definite sexual identity and were uncomfortable discussing their homosexual relationships in the *kotha* (Oldenburg 276) suggests their latent heteropatriarchal ideological indoctrination. Alternatively, expressing homosexual behaviour openly could also cost them their clients, who were primarily men in the dominant heterosexual society. Although the courtesans appropriated their social position in an otherwise heteropatriarchal society, their establishment, unlike Oldenburg's essentialised statement, could not perhaps completely escape the normative structure. However, the courtesans can still be seen as strong women who exercised sexual, artistic, financial and political liberty, rendering them unconventional for society. The courtesans were, thus, "public" women, but, as Tripurari Sharma claims, this did not necessarily make them available to all (Singh, "Making Visible," 100). Instead, the courtesans occupied a "respectable" social position in nineteenth-century Awadh.

Colonialism and the Courtesan Culture

The courtesan's *kotha* became a space for political conspiracies during the time leading to the Revolt of 1857. Historical evidence suggests the covert roles the courtesans played in the Revolt. They not only lent their establishments for the Revolt to be planned but also generously financed some initiatives of the rebels. The courtesans, "though potentially noncombatants, were penalized for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels." The British officials were

aware of the courtesan's secret participation in the Revolt, so they imposed restrictions during and after the Revolt to subdue the courtesan culture (Oldenburg 259, Singh "Courtesans and the Revolt," 1678).

Consequently, the British officials confiscated the courtesan's property when they sieged Lucknow. Some courtesans were relocated to the cantonment cities, where they were used merely for sexual services by the British troops. Thus, the elite and cultured institution of courtesans was slowly detached from the arts. This gave rise to the spreading of venereal diseases and death amongst the British troops. Hence, for medical reasons, Britain's Contagious Diseases Act was passed in 1864. This law required the "registration and periodical examination of the prostitutes in all cantonment cities" (Oldenburg 260). Thus, with the decline of the rule of the Nawabs in Awadh, the unsuccessful Revolt of 1857 and the consequent stringent restrictions imposed by the colonial government, the heydays of the courtesans declined.

However, the point to be noted in this context is the courtesan's access to the political happenings during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, in general, and the Revolt, in particular. Whether or not the courtesan had any political agency is a matter of question, which is not appropriately documented in hegemonic historical narratives. However, occasional historical references to courtesans like Azizun Nisa, one of the two primary figures explored in this chapter, reveal that courtesans not only participated in the Revolt in covert ways but also as combat soldiers. It is, therefore, significant to understand why the courtesan's role in the Revolt has been little understood or explored.

Bourgeois Nationalism and the Courtesan Culture

The courtesans who survived the colonial government seemed to struggle under pressure from the upper and middle-class Hindu nationalist structure. Meena Tula states that there are two dominant perspectives of looking at the courtesans. The first is the perspective of the colonial government, which policed the courtesan's bodies vis-à-vis "a discourse of health." The second is the perspective of the new elite, middle-class Hindu nationalists who viewed the courtesans as "obscene" as opposed to the modern Indian "pativrata" woman (30). As discussed in the second chapter, the new Indian woman who belonged to the elite and middle-class society was required to be the personification of the confluence of the West and the East/ modernity and tradition. Immediately after India's independence, the figures of the *pativrata* (the dutiful wife) and the *sugrihini* (the good housewife) were exceedingly emphasised to reinforce the respectable standing of those women who had taken to the streets during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle (Singh, "Retrieving Voices," 94). To uphold the image of this new Indian woman, the figure of the courtesan as the "public" and the performing woman was created as an antithesis, a binary opposition. Thus, the courtesan's sexual, creative and financial independence threatened the heteropatriarchal, caste Hindu nationalist new India.

Teresa Hubel, in her essay "From Tawa'if to Wife? Making Sense of Bollywood's Courtesan Genre" (2012), while exploring the courtesan's representation in Hindi cinema, states, "The bourgeois nationalist class" attempts to erase the significance of the courtesans as agents of the classical performative arts. Instead, the nationalist class wishes to "[install] itself and its members into the narrative of the nation," claiming themselves to be the ones who rescued the arts from the coloniser's clutches. Thus, the courtesans had already lost their elite social status; the bourgeois nationalists also took away the economic advantages associated with their performative

arts. The courtesans had survived British imperialism and adapted themselves to the new capitalist era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, they could not survive the nationalist reform movements of the caste Hindu nationalists (220-21). The anti-naught campaign, which had begun during the colonial governance in 1892 in Tamil Nadu, was supported mainly by “educated professionals and Hindus.” It culminated in the passing of the Anti-Naught Act in 1947, which banned temple dancing and the dedication of devadasis (Srinivasan 1869, 1873). Thus, performing women came to be viewed as prostitutes and disrespected from the vantage point of middle-class femininity (Singh, “Retrieving Voices,” 95; Hubel 218).

The advent of the capitalised markets and gramophone records opened economic avenues for struggling courtesans. Thus, very few were employed as commercial singers. However, Hubel quotes Regula Burckhardt Qureshi who says, “One of the last nails in the coffin was an edict issued by a newly independent government in 1954, which banished from the airwaves of All India Radio any female performer ‘whose private life is a public scandal.’” Hubel further states that “as a consequence the tawa’if ‘as tawa’if’ disappeared from the national cultural arena, leaving the way clear for men and women from the bourgeois to take over their dance and their music” (222).

However, as Mrinal Pande states in her essay “‘Moving beyond Themselves’ Women in Hindustani Parsi Theatre and Early Hindi Films” (2006), a few courtesans like Gauhar Jaan and Fatima Begum still struggled to survive. They managed to enter the male-dominant Hindi film industry (1651). The narratives showcased in Hindi cinema “warp[s] and even erase[s]” the historical courtesan. Hindi cinema usually portrays the courtesan as an “extraordinary self-possessed professional [woman] before [her] heterosexual yearning for [her man] turns [her] into a sobbing loser in the love game” (Hubel 214, 219). Such representations of the courtesan as “a

romanticised Other” whose cultural contributions, although acknowledged, still vilify her for her sexuality.

In opposition to this stereotypical depiction, the new Indian woman is valorised for her selflessness. She is “maternally inspired, domesticated [and encouraged to have] heterosexual desire for marriage and children.” Thus, the courtesan figure, as represented in heteronormative Hindi cinema, “camouflages a deep-seated anxiety about female independence from men in its function as a fetishised ‘Other’ to the dominant female character, the wife or wife-wannabe...” (Hubel 214-18). So, it may be noted how different power structures at different points in time have used the courtesan figure for larger socio-political purposes. In the process, the historical courtesan is excised from the hegemonic discourse. Moreover, the representations of the historical courtesans are mostly skewed, thus reducing an otherwise strong, independent flesh-and-blood woman to a negative archetype.

Fictional Representations of the Courtesan

The courtesan has been represented in classical fictional narratives of India. Sudraka’s *Mṛcchakatikam* (2nd century BCE), a ten-act play in Sanskrit, depicts a romance between a courtesan and a Brahmin. Later, imperial feminists who came to India with a mission to rescue “brown women from brown men” were surprised to encounter the more independent courtesan (Jagpal 12). However, they exoticised the courtesan as a femme-fatale in the narratives. Flora Annie Steel’s *The Potter’s Thumb* (1900) is one such colonial fictional representation of the courtesan. Mirza Hadi Ruswa’s *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899) and *Junun-i-Intezar* (1899) are two plays in Urdu which represent the courtesan as a tragic and repenting character in the old aristocratic society, thus negating her independent disposition. Robert Brightwell’s *Flashman and the Cobra* (1986) depicts the historical Begum Samru, the courtesan-turned-queen of Sardhana, near Meerut,

in the nineteenth century; however, she is not the protagonist of the novel. She has also been represented as one of the characters in the TV series “Beecham House” (2019). Binodini Dasi’s *My Story and My Life* (1912) is a Bengali autobiography of a stage actress with the same name in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Unlike the few examples of literary fiction, there are several films which depict the courtesan in India like “Anarkali” (1953), “Mughal-e-Azam” (1960), “Teesri Kasam” (1966), “Pakeezah” (1972), “Devdas” (1955, 2002), “Umrao Jaan” (1981, 2006), the documentary “Courtesans of Bombay” (1983), “Sardari Begum” (1996), “Bajirao Mastani” (2015), “Begum Jaan” (2017), and the very recent “Kalank” (2019). Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s yet-to-be-released Netflix series “Heeramandi” is also based on the stories of the courtesans of Heeramandi in Lahore. However, there are only two historical courtesans who fought in the Revolt of 1857 and have been represented in fiction: Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai. This chapter discusses Kenize Mourad’s novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013), which depicts the story of Hazrat Mahal and Tripurari Sharma’s play *San Sattavan Ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa* (1999), which portrays the story of Azizun Nisa.¹

Before exploring Kenize Mourad’s novel, a brief historical account of Begum Hazrat Mahal may be in order.

Begum Hazrat Mahal: A Brief Historical Account

Hazrat Mahal finds meagre representation in popular historical documents, perhaps owing to her identity as a courtesan, the antithesis to the “good woman” of patriarchy. Twenty-first-century writer Ira Mukhoty provides a relatively detailed account of Begum Hazrat Mahal in her book *Heroines: Powerful Indian Women of Myths & History* (2017). Tracing Hazrat Mahal’s

journey from “obscurity and ... squalor” to becoming the queen regent of Lucknow, Mukhoty states:

Muhammadi Khanum [as Hazrat Mahal was originally known] was born to a slave of African origin called Umber, who was owned by a certain Ghulam Ali Khan. Her mother was Maher Afza, Umber’s mistress. At some stage of her adolescence she was sold by her parents to a courtesan. (152)

Although the chapter on the Begum is titled after her, thus promising the readers a historical account of the lesser-known Hazrat Mahal and her life, Mukhoty, on the contrary, seems to offer a more extensive description of the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah and the courtesan culture in nineteenth century Lucknow.

Most British records describe the Nawab Wajid Ali Shah, “who ruled Awadh from 1847 [as] a flamboyant character and a much-maligned king,” as a king with a “character [which] holds no promise of good,” a man with a “capricious and fickle” temper whose “days and nights are passed in the female apartments,” a ruler who “resigned himself to debauchery, dissipation and low pursuit.” Historian T.R. Metcalfe states that at the increasing power of the British Raj, most Nawabs “abandoned the attempt to govern and retired into the *zenana*, where they amused themselves with wine, women and poetry,” and Wajid Ali Shah was no different. However, despite such colonial perspectives of the Nawab, as Mukhoty suggests, “Wajid Ali Shah initially made attempts to rule his kingdom [efficiently]” (Mukhoty 155).

The Nawab had an “institution of the pari, or fairy” (Mukhoty 157). He “acquired a large harem of singers and dancers by using a Shi’a variant of Islamic marriage called *mu’tah* (sic) wherein a temporary contract could be drawn up between a man and a woman for a specific amount

of time in exchange for gifts or money.” These women included “female palanquin bearers, courtesans, domestic servants, and women who came in and out of the palace.” He married four “women of high birth and important political connections through traditional nikah,” during his father’s lifetime. If any woman from his later mut’ah wives, who mostly belonged to the lower strata of society, gave birth to the king’s children, they “were given the title ‘mahals’ and were allowed to live in purdah” (Mukhoty 156-57). Thus, women, especially those from the lower class, were often treated as commodities in male economic transactions.

When Muhammadi Khanum was bought as a courtesan for the Nawab’s courts, she was renamed Mahak Pari. Due to her intelligence and poetic talents, the Nawab’s interest in her grew by leaps and bounds. In his autobiography describing his numerous love affairs, *Ishqnama*, Wajid Ali Shah notes that he married Mahak Pari according to the mut’ah marriage laws. She gave birth to Birjis Qadr in 1845. The Nawab expresses his joy and exclaims, “The angel of day and night conveyed the good news of an infant flower’s arrival” (Mukhoty 96). Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, in her book *The Last King in Awadh, 1822-1887*, states, “If [the mut’ah wife] became pregnant during the marriage, the child was considered to have been fathered by the husband and was therefore legitimate” (143). Consequently, the concerned mut’ah wives were “given the title ‘mahals’ and were allowed to live in purdah” (Mukhoty 157). Similarly, after her son’s birth, Mahak Pari was also permitted to live in purdah and was bestowed the title “Iftikhar-un-nissa,” meaning “dignified among women.” Her son Birjis Qadr was considered a legitimate offspring of the Nawab. The son’s birth was also celebrated in grandeur by an elated father. In 1850, the Nawab divorced six of his wives, including Begum Hazrat Mahal, on the orders of Janab-i Alliyah, his mother (Llewellyn-Jones 13, 144).

Janab-i Aliyyah was a strong-willed, steely woman occupying the political position of the queen mother. Widow of the late king, Amjad Ali Shah, she mothered four children, the eldest of whom was Wajid Ali Shah. Apart from being “a forceful, strong-minded character, perhaps more so than her son, the king,” she also belonged to an “impressive” lineage, thus appearing as a powerful figure in the kingdom of Awadh. She was “feared and revered” by all in her kingdom. She always remained in *purdah*. The entrance to her *zenana* was guarded by enslaved African women trained as soldiers. She is considered to have “held her own female *durbars*, or court audiences, where women from all over the kingdom, rich or poor, could come to her with petitions, complaints and gifts.” As a literate and religious woman, she “spent many hours reading the Qur’an.” She intervened in her son, the king’s numerous marital affairs, significantly those that involved lower-class women. When the East India Company announced Awadh’s annexation in 1856, Janab-i Aliyyah opposed it and met with the Resident but failed in securing Awadh for her son’s rule. She travelled to England with Wajid Ali Shah to plead to Queen Victoria; Janab-i Aliyyah never returned from England (Llewellyn-Jones 33-35). Thus, in contrast to Wajid Ali Shah’s character, the queen mother, Janab-i Aliyyah, may be regarded as a more able and determined ruler of Awadh; similarly, Begum Hazrat Mahal would also don the same role.

Hazrat Mahal, better known as Iftikhar-un-nissa at the time of her divorce, “retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr, living on the pension provided to her by her ex-husband.” As mentioned earlier, after Lord Dalhousie’s proclamation to annex Awadh and Janab-i Aliyyah and Wajid Ali Shah’s visit to England to meet Queen Victoria, Wajid Ali Shah returned to India. He retired to Calcutta with three wives, leaving the rest behind in Lucknow. Despite the British representation of the Nawab as debauchery personified, Indian historical records suggest how, on his leaving for Calcutta, Wajid Ali Shah “was deeply mourned by his people. They wept

for their disgraced, generous and cultured Nawab and followed him all the way to Kanpur, reciting dirges written by him” (Mukhoty 158-59).

The fire of the impending Revolt of 1857 was kindling under the surface then, and Awadh was in need of a new king. Wajid Ali Shah’s eldest son, Noshewan Qadr, had speech and hearing impediment, and was therefore not considered fit for the crown which implied that Wajid Ali Shah’s second son, Birjis Qadr would be the rightful heir to the throne (Llewellyn-Jones 25). While Mukhoty notes that Hazrat Mahal “embraced her destiny and stood in for the imperial authority of the Mughal emperor” (159), Rosie Llewellyn-Jones states that Hazrat Mahal was, in fact, “*persuaded*² to offer her twelve-year-old son...as a nominal king” (25), perhaps by men who were to take part in the Revolt later. If the latter thinking holds any truth, Hazrat Mahal may also be seen as a “reluctant rebel”³ like her contemporary, Rani Lakshmibai. However, no further historical reference is found, which may clarify the extent of agency Hazrat Mahal had while undertaking her role as the queen regent.

Thus, Hazrat Mahal’s minor son Birjis Qadr was crowned the king of Awadh on 5th July 1857 in Kaiserbagh Palace, owing to which she became the queen regent (LJ 14). Exercising her rights as a political and administrative decision-maker, Hazrat Mahal “headed the operations in Lucknow” for the next eight months, “directing the siege of the Residency for three months.” In his published diary titled *My Dairy in India* (1859), William Howard Russell comments on the queen regent’s leadership competency: “This Begum exhibits great energy and ability. She has excited all Oudh to take up the interests of her son and the chiefs have sworn to be faithful to him.” He further acknowledges how he witnessed the women leaders in India perhaps “acquire in their *zenanas* and harems a considerable amount of actual mental powers and, at all events, become able *intriguanes*” (161-62).

Hazrat Mahal undertook further diplomatic decisions, such as building “huge defensive ramparts” around the city. She appointed Raja Jailaal Singh, who was “a taluqdar of Faizabad district and a prominent courtier during the time of Wajid Ali Shah,” the task of supervising the fortifications. Hazrat Mahal “allocated five lakh rupees [to him for the purpose], even selling some of her own jewellery, for the constructions.” Under her orders, wealthy citizens were ‘persuaded’ to contribute to the war fund” (LJ 26). The palaces were “all fortified and some of the main streets of Lucknow were blocked with stockades and parapets.” Hazrat Mahal had to resist not only the troops of the East India Company but also “a self-styled [patriarchal and misogynist] holy man” known as Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah “who claimed to have received divine orders to throw out the British from India.” There were also the much-dreaded Gurkha fighters led by Jung Bahadur of Nepal, who allied with the British in invading Lucknow. The Revolt broke out in 1858, and Hazrat Mahal’s army presented a strong opposition against the colonial forces when they attacked her kingdom. It is considered that “the fiercest fighting was at the Begum’s palace.” On one occasion, she had also “joined the soldiers herself ..., riding an elephant, trying to bolster the courage of her men and directing the swirling mass of soldiers” (Mukhoty 160-65). Russell’s diary compares Hazrat Mahal to Penthesilea, the mythological Amazonian warrior. However, Russell ascribes her relentless determination against the East India Company’s attack to the devotion she had for her son, the king (178, 198). Thus, Russell assumes that it is her male guardian who demands that Hazrat Mahal become a warrior woman. While doing so, her maternal qualities are emphasised more than her political and martial capacities.

A “bitter two-week[long]” battle was fought, following which the East India Company recaptured Awadh in late February-early March 1858. Begum Hazrat, her son, and a few other supporters escaped to the outskirts of Lucknow on 15 March 1858. She turned down offers from

the East India Company to surrender. Consequently, she fled to Nepal, where she lived in exile. She continued her administrative and political duties as the queen regent from a make-shift “cutcherry parliament.” She kept up her resistance against the East India Company “for the better part of a year.” She turned down offers of surrender issued under Queen Victoria’s Proclamation after the Revolt of 1857 and remained in exile in Nepal till her death in 1879 (LJ 26; Mukhoty 167-68).

After recapturing Awadh, “all the papers and documents found in Kaiserbagh Palace,” except Wajid Ali Shah’s autobiography, were destroyed by the colonial troops. “All that remains are the accounts of witnesses recorded during the trials that followed the recapture of Lucknow and the proclamations issued by Hazrat Mahal” (Mukhoty 172). Moreover, after India’s independence, Hazrat Mahal, like the other Muslim courtesans, was also probably excluded from nationalist historical narratives by the dominant upper-caste Hindu nationalists. Hence, unlike Rani Lakshmibai, Hazrat Mahal is not similarly documented in historical, nationalist, cultural, and even fictional narratives. Kenize Mourad’s novel *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013) is perhaps the only fictional narrative on the Begum. Besides this text, filmmaker Mohi-ud-Din Mirza’s “Begum Hazrat Mahal: The Last Queen of Awadh” (2011) is a visual documentary depicting the queen’s life. Since the thesis primarily looks at the fictional representations of the proposed Viranganas, Mourad’s novel depicting Begum Hazrat Mahal will be discussed here.

Kenize Mourad’s *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2012)

Published in 2013, Kenize Mourad’s novel *In the City of Gold and Silver*, originally written in French, depicts a fictionalised account of the nineteenth-century historical courtesan and queen of Lucknow, Begum Hazrat Mahal. This chapter uses the English translation of this historical fiction by Anne Mathai and Marie-Lousie Naville. The novel traces the humble origins of Begum

Hazrat Mahal from a common household to the courtesan's salon, then to the courts of the nineteenth-century Nawab of Lucknow, Wajid Ali Shah. The novel also depicts Begum's involvement in the Revolt of 1857, her romantic and sexual relationships, her role as the queen regent of Lucknow, and her escape to Nepal, where she continued her anti-colonial nationalist fight.

Mourad's novel does not devote much space to Hazrat Mahal's childhood and life as a courtesan, perhaps to emphasise the Begum's role in the Revolt of 1857. The novel's first few chapters describe very little about Hazrat Mahal's early life. The novel quickly narrates her early years. Begum Hazrat Mahal is born as Muhammadi "into a family of small artisans from Faizabad, the ancient capital of the kingdom of Awadh." She is twelve when her mother dies, leaving her with her father, Mian Amber. Faizabad lost its splendour when King Asaf-ud-Daulah moved to Lucknow in 1798. Muhammadi's father finds a job as a caretaker in Lucknow, so they move here in 1842. After her father's death, who is "the only person who loved and protected her," she is left an orphan. She is taken in by her uncle, who has a garment shop. A eunuch working in the royal court once comes to purchase caps for the king from the uncle's shop. A strand of Muhammadi's hair is found in one of the caps; she has secretly tried on the cap before it is sold to the eunuch. In a turn of events, Muhammadi is discovered by the eunuch, who sends two courtesans, Amman and Imaman, to take the girl away to the salon. The courtesans buy the girl, paying the "delighted" aunt a purse of money while the uncle is absent (Mathai and Naville 26-9). Thus, Muhammadi is sold and "pushed" into the courtesan culture by women: her aunt and the two courtesans. This suggests how force was implemented in recruiting girls as courtesans and the limited agency of the women who ran such businesses in the patriarchal world.

Oldenburg discusses the courtesan culture in nineteenth-century Lucknow during the rule of the Nawabs and the changes it saw after the Revolt of 1857. Her research, which is mainly based on personal interviews, states that most women who came to the *kothas* and were trained as courtesans belonged to different strata and religious sections of society. They escaped the clutches of the hegemonic structure: they were either child widows, or their male guardians and in-laws physically and sexually abused them, or they were impoverished. Oldenburg claims that cases of women kidnapped to be sold to *kothas* were not improbable but rare. It is Mirza Hadi Rusva's early-twentieth-century novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1899), which depicts a fictional account of a courtesan known as Umrao Jaan. The novel shows her being kidnapped and forced into courtesanship. Oldenburg suggests Rusva's novel was "the single most important source of information on courtesans of Lucknow, and by extension, the entire profession as it was practiced in the nineteenth century, in northern India" (264). Thus, the perception drawn regarding courtesans from Rusva's novel generalises the fictional figure Umrao Jaan's desperate situation with real-life courtesans of nineteenth-century Lucknow. The courtesans interviewed by Oldenburg disagree with Rusva's depiction of the "evil kidnapper" and "exploitative [courtesan] madame" (265). Thus, Mourad's novel is not much different from Rusva's novel in stereotyping the courtesans as inferior in nineteenth-century Awadh. Unlike Oldenburg's research, which stated how the courtesans were primarily women who chose their profession to escape patriarchal exploitation, Mourad's novel showcases how a woman was instead forced into it.

The City of Gold and Silver focuses on Hazrat Mahal's character in order to depict an image of the warrior woman involved in the 1857 Revolt. In the process, however, it also shows the nuances of the Begum's everyday choices as a poet, an administrator, a political leader, a wife, a mother and a lover.

Keeping close to historical facts, Mourad's novel portrays how Muhammadi is renamed Hazrat Mahal as a courtesan in the Nawab's palace. She gains recognition not only for her exquisite beauty but also for her skills in poetry and satire. However, Mourad colours Hazrat Mahal in a unique light. Unlike most other courtesans who are adept in dancing, sometimes "sensual," sometimes "merry," Hazrat Mahal's passion lies in poetry, and she recognises herself as a poetess (Mathai and Naville 34). On one early occasion, the Nawab remarks,

Hazrat Mahal! I knew you were a poetess, but I was not aware you also had such a keen sense of satire! You made me laugh on this difficult day. You truly deserve the name I gave you: Iftikar un Nissa, 'the pride of women.' (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 24)

Mourad's novel describes Hazrat Mahal as an atypical courtesan who "prefers to spend her time alone, reading or composing poems, rather than participating in games and chatter she considers childish" (Mathai and Naville 79). Mourad's intention to carve Hazrat Mahal as an unconventional woman of her time is based on stereotyping the other courtesans as unintelligent, ordinary dancers who do not understand or value poetry or books; the latter, by virtue are considered higher forms of art and culture. Mourad's depiction of the courtesans, in general, is flawed considering Oldenburg's research, which suggests how courtesans in nineteenth-century Lucknow were educated and skilled in all forms of art like poetry, languages, music and dance. Furthermore, Mourad's portrayal of Hazrat Mahal debases courtesans in general, thus positing a very patriarchal perspective of the culture.

The Nawab is depicted as less manly for harbouring "feminine" interests in poetry, music and dance rather than the "masculine" preoccupations such as warfare and politics. Though he is the patriarchal head of the court and the kingdom, he indulges in revelry and sexual pleasure involving the commodification of women. The fact that in his letters as a captive under the colonial

administration, he “speaks only of himself, his regrets, his sadness not a word of concern about what [the courtesan’s] fate has been, about how [they] have had to face the occupier’s tyranny alone since his departure,” suggests the Nawab’s male chauvinism and lack of concern towards the women he once “enjoyed.” Hazrat Mahal sees this in the Nawab, although the other courtesans cannot and still only consider the absent husband and king their sole guardian (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 94). Thus, the novel depicts her as a self-aware woman who recognises the normative society she is a part of and the gender role assigned to her. Unlike the other courtesans who are ideologically conditioned to subscribe to their patriarchal social structure, Hazrat Mahal is depicted as the one who resists the same.

Mourad’s novel portrays the *zenana* as an alternate space for the Begums, who are shown to be politically aware though restricted from the public sphere. The Begums are duly provided information about the political happenings outside. The Begums wish the British Raj to be uprooted by the conspirators of the Revolt close at hand. The women also express their excitement, considering it is “the beginning of the war for freedom.” The Nawab’s wives in the *zenana* “spend the whole afternoon in discussion, drawing up the most absurd [political] plans” (Mathai and Naville 151, 170-71). This suggests an intriguing life within the *purdah*. Though the *zenana* restricts women from the public world, it does not limit the women from harbouring a political interest in matters of the state. However, despite their political awareness, the novel posits all the other Begums’ participation in political discussion as “absurd.” Thus, to shine the spotlight on her protagonist, Mourad’s novel is probably entangled in a web of contradictions. The other women, who are depicted to have a political understanding and voices of their own, are casually deemed unimportant for their lack of appropriate knowledge of matters of the state.

On the contrary, Hazrat Mahal is depicted as the most involved and knowledgeable in political matters. She uses her *burqa*⁴ to facilitate her mobility within the inner and outer worlds. She clads herself in the burqa to venture into the “public” world to gauge the socio-political happenings. However, Mourad’s novel also shows how Hazrat Mahal “[heaves] a sigh of relief” when she returns from such market visits and takes off her *burqa* (Mathai and Naville 153). It perhaps implies that she does not usually like being veiled but only employs it as a tool to access mobility in the outer world. Mourad perhaps intends to depict the *purdah/burqa* as a patriarchal invention to control a woman’s body. However, it may also be argued that Hazrat Mahal, whom Mourad portrays as an unconventional woman, appropriates the patriarchal tool of policing female sexuality to hone her political sensibility. One may further counter-argue that Hazrat Mahal’s choice to be in *purdah* in the outside world may also suggest her ideological indoctrination in the patriarchal society. Thus, her choice to be in *purdah* is open to debate and interpretation.

The previous chapter discusses Rani Lakshmibai as a “reluctant rebel” who accidentally finds herself amid the Revolt, a war she initially did not want to fight. Mourad’s novel draws a similar figure in Hazrat Mahal, albeit in subtle tones. Hazrat Mahal chooses to be the queen regent for the opportunity it provides her to participate in state political matters. However, the novel subtly suggests her longing for a simpler life. Hazrat Mahal reminisces her past as a common girl:

Images run through her mind: the poor but carefree little girl for whom the horizons of happiness were limited to the red *garara* that young brides wear, and lots of sons who would have enough to eat every day. She feels a sudden nostalgia for those simple joys—the mutton they feasted on during the Eid ul-Kabir festival, it tasted even more delicious, as they could only afford to eat meat once a year. The new clothes they received for Eid ul-Fitr; they pranced about in them all day, even wanting to wear them to bed! As the

memories return, she is overcome by emotion but also amazement. She, who has come so far, does she really miss this ordinary past? (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 200)

Thus, the feminist figure the novel depicts perhaps also desires normative gender roles of the wife/mother. Although Hazrat Mahal's choice to participate in the Revolt is not forced on her, unlike in the case of Lakshmibai, the former is portrayed as a subject/object of society wherein she prefers conventional womanly duties to being an active political agent in anti-colonial nationalism. Mourad depicts the Begum finding herself in a political position she does not initially yearn for. Such a representation of the Begum's preferences may, however, implicate her in a place which draws male sympathies towards her. In the process, it seems to justify the need to bring an otherwise able political woman under the rubric of patriarchal control. Mourad's novel portrays an unrelenting warrior woman fighting against the East India Company. Still, it suggests that her male lover and guardian, Raja Jai Lal, is the source of her inspiration (Mathai and Naville 403). Thus, the man and his patriarchal dominion give birth to a woman warrior, eventually making her inferior to the man's rule.

Hazrat Mahal's political sensibility is largely condemned by the patriarchal society; few appreciate this quality in her. However, her privileged position as the queen-mother perhaps allows her political opinions to be heard. Rajah Jai Lal, who later plays an integral role in the mutiny against the Raj in Lucknow, remarks, "[Hazrat Mahal] is certainly audacious, she dares challenge me! ... I am told she has a keen political sense. It is a rare enough quality in a woman for people to remember it" (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 157). The novel shows how the patriarchs and religious fanatics like Maulvi Ahmadullah Shah, who encourage the native population in Lucknow to revolt against the British Raj, employ religious chauvinist ideologies and oppose women's role in politics. "What can a woman understand of politics, or of warfare for that matter?" He quotes a

famous religious scholar: “A nation which places its affairs in the hands of a woman shall not prosper” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 205). Hazrat Mahal vehemently opposes the Maulvi’s religious chauvinist and patriarchal temperament. She states an array of historical women who were “more capable” than their male counterparts in warfare and administration. Opposing the Maulvi’s skewed Islamic beliefs, she states:

Over the centuries, men have perverted the meaning of the Prophet’s teachings. How could he have advised women to remain cloistered when his first wife, Khadija, was a skilled businesswoman, and his youngest wife, Aisha, used to attend dinners with him and his friends? They discussed everything, especially politics! (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 309)

Such historical records are primarily found in colonial and European accounts. There are not many Indian historical records describing the Mughal women’s role outside domesticity. It is mainly the European historical records, the accounts of the British officials and those of the very few British women who were permitted to visit the *zenana*, that reveal the administrative, political and business affairs of the Mughal begums. These records suggest that begums, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were powerful, wealthy, and capable women in commerce and trade.

Aparna Kapadia refers to begums and queen-mothers of whom Maryam-uz-Zamani, who was married to Akbar in 1562, was “the most powerful and privileged woman of her time.” She was an active investor in the Mughals’ trade with European trading companies. Her daughter-in-law, Nur Jahan (who was married to Jahangir in 1611), was also a powerful businesswoman and an able politician. Like her mother-in-law, Nur Jahan also owned many ships, which she used for trade and commerce. Similarly, Jahanara Begum, Shah Jahan’s daughter, “had more access to liquid cash and immovable capital than any Mughal woman in history.” She was a patron of “great

public charities, saints, architectural projects, and paintings,” thus not only representing her wealth but also her financial independence. However, such powerful women were also constrained within the patriarchal boundaries. Inside the palace, they stayed within the *zenana*; and on the rare occasions when they had to interact with the outer world, they would be in *purdah*. Thus, their involvement in administration, politics, trade and commerce was restricted. They relied on male servants, agents and mediators, which hindered their progress. However, contrary to popular representation, one cannot deny how the begums of the Mughal period played roles beyond the ones assigned to them by the patriarchal society (“We Know All About Warrior Queens...”)

Mourad’s novel also portrays Begum Hazrat Mahal following the previous powerful begums and queen mothers. Hazrat Mahal is depicted as a loyal wife who tries to justify her husband’s detachment from the political upheaval Lucknow is in; however, anger bubbles in her towards the incapable sovereign who remains in British captivity, least interested in his kingdom and the well-being of his people (Mathai and Naville 168). Hazrat Mahal’s powerful political voice is showcased during her son’s coronation ceremony. Raja Jai Laal addresses the audience on behalf of the minor and the queen regent, as convention dictates that women do not speak in public, let alone in political matters. However, Mourad portrays how Begum Hazrat Mahal steps forward and addresses her people, promising to serve them and inspiring them to offer their commitment in return, but obviously, all in the name of their Nawab Wajid Ali Shah. Jai Laal is “surprised by this unceremonious intervention,” and is later “stunned” (Mathai and Naville 207-08). However, the male *taluqdars* present are outraged. They cry:

How dare she speak to us in this manner? Who does she think she is? She was a mere dancer before. She cannot make demands on us. If she does not like it, we can do without her! (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 208)

Thus, a woman's active political role is frowned upon and probably considered threatening to the hegemonic social structure. Therefore, the politically active woman is considered a *femme fatale* in society. Begum Hazrat Mahal's administrative competence is dismissed owing to her hypersexual identity as the courtesan, the "fallen woman." She threatens society's patriarchal structure, which upholds the image of a silent and obedient *pativrata*.

Despite that, the Lucknawi women's response to Begum Hazrat Mahal's new political position is striking. The men celebrate Birjis Qadr's coronation as an occasion marking their king's ascension to the throne, but "hidden behind the *jalīs*, the women [who nevertheless] praise the young boy's qualities [but they also] ...marvel that for the first time in Lucknow, power is in the hands of a woman" (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 210). Thus, vis-à-vis the women in Lucknow who are elated at a fellow woman's access to political and administrative power, Mourad's novel probably draws attention towards female solidarity in society.

The novel deliberately paints a vivid image of Begum Hazrat Mahal's first day as the Queen regent at the court:

At precisely 4 p.m., the Queen Mother enters, preceded by her Turkish guards in their dark green uniforms. Sumptuously dressed in a *garara* interwoven with gold and decorated with pearls, she slowly steps forward, no longer wrapped in her veils, as she had appeared on coronation day before the gathered people. Today her face is uncovered—a light gauze is draped over her hair, concealing her elaborate coiffure—in a gesture indicating to all present that it is not the woman presiding over these government sessions, but the regent and leader of the government and, as such, *purdah* has no place here.

Its significance is not lost on the men assembled before her. Their first reaction is one of shock, but above all, her beauty perturbs them and so they avert their eyes...

Hazrat Mahal smiles to herself, satisfied... And maliciously she notes that if women's beauty disturbs men so much, they can always choose to look away! (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 213)

Such a graphic description of how Hazrat Mahal adorns her beauty as well as confidence as a leader emphasises her heroic figure. She may be seen as a Virangana in this context, one with political, administrative, and sexual independence. However, this may also endanger her under the male gaze as merely a symbol to be valourised and deified. However, one may also argue that Hazrat Mahal appropriates the same male gaze to evoke fear and obedience in the male-dominant court.

In merely two weeks, Hazrat Mahal proves to be an efficient administrator and “a remarkable organiser” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 218). When Lucknow enters the Revolt, she undertakes able political, administrative and economic decisions to sustain the fight against the East India Company. She “visits every construction site [on the battlefield] to encourage them and to ensure ration distributions are sufficient.” Based on archival research and historical records, Mourad's novel portrays how the East India Company burned the agricultural lands during the Revolt, leaving the native army famished. Hazrat Mahal appoints “a leader for each area to make sure that no one starves to death, and...if necessary to confiscate food from the rich to feed the poor.”

Moreover, she looks after the financial matters of the state in times of conflict. After many skilful negotiations, she manages to secure a loan from the bankers to pay and feed the soldiers.

To meet the shortage of funds, she “decides to have her jewellery and all her gold and silver ornaments melted down” and painfully convinces the other begums to follow suit. As a result of her proficient budgeting abilities, she can “secretly set aside a small war chest to finance her diplomatic actions” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 318). Thus, vis-à-vis Begum Hazrat Mahal, the novel presents a Virangana who is more accomplished in administrative and financial affairs than in warfare and combat fighting, thus redefining the conventional trope of the warrior woman.

However, she senses the omnipresent scrutiny she is under—an upper-class, heteropatriarchal gaze expecting a courtesan who has “come from nowhere” to fail so that she may be brought back to the power structure’s clutches (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 220-21). The Begum’s freedom, albeit limited, to express her political voice and sexuality is probably only permitted because she is originally a lower class and a “fallen woman.” Her image speaks of her ancestry, which is not royal and respectable, thus entirely negating her competence.

Mourad’s novel portrays Begum Hazrat Mahal participating in the 1857 Revolt fought in Lucknow, though it is only a single incident when she is shown on the battlefield. Raja Jai Laal reprimands her for joining the armed forces: “What are you doing here? Have you lost your mind? This war is not a game. You have a duty to the state and to the king, your son. You have no right to get yourself killed (Mathai and Naville 286).” The queen-mother’s political status, associated with the king, symbolises stability and security in the kingdom. She is a mother to the king and the entire kingdom. Hazrat Mahal only inhabits the political position of the queen-mother; in the process, her individuality is thwarted. Jai Laal’s rebuke infuriates her for his patronising attitude. She asserts that her presence on the battlefield as the queen-mother will encourage the rebels, who are “captivated by this fragile woman’s bravery, to fight with increased courage and daring”

(Mourad; Mathai and Naville 286). Thus, Hazrat Mahal's participation on the battlefield is only limited to her allegory as the Mother nation who incites her sons to martyr themselves for her.

Mourad's novel portrays Hazrat Mahal as a rational and pragmatic woman. She is not foolhardy, or someone who underestimates their weakened situation when the British take siege of the palace. The British troops enter the Chattar Manzil Palace, the quarters where the wives reside, ordering the women to evacuate the palace and shift to the south wing of Kaisarbagh. While a few women like Begum Shahnaz and Begum Akhtar "haughtily" refuse to leave, Begum Hazrat Mahal tries to convince them to reconsider the situation logically to save their lives; bravado and de-contextualized loyalty are not going to save the trouble, and she recognises it. Her pragmatism is further showcased in her choice as a Muslim to not believe in the "prophecies" or "miracles that the common people are so fond of" (Mathai and Naville 96, 107). Thus, Hazrat Mahal, who later becomes an integral part of the 1857 Revolt, is not depicted as an impractical national chauvinist or a religious fanatic who meets foolish ends.

However, given the appropriate context, Hazrat Mahal acts on her patriotism. Mourad's novel describes how when Wajid Ali Shah surrenders after Awadh's annexation by the East India Company, there are talks of re-claiming Awadh by the royal family. Hazrat Mahal accepts responsibility readily. As discussed earlier, Hazrat Mahal's agency in her choice to accept the queen regent's role for herself and the king's role for her son Birjis Qadr, is not documented in historical records. Mourad's novel portrays Hazrat Mahal actively choosing these political roles for her son and herself. The novel shows how Begum Khas Mahal, mother of Nausherwan Qadar, the natural heir to the throne, refuses the title on her son's behalf for fear of losing her son and her desire for a simpler life. Hazrat Mahal, on the other hand, who has been desiring political positions for her son and herself, immediately volunteers (Mathai and Naville 201-03). The novel perhaps

depicts this incident to compare the two women, thus accentuating Hazrat Mahal's courage, determination and capabilities as a political leader. Such a binary representation instead paints one woman as conventionally emotional, feminine and weak to bring forth the heroine to the limelight, thus betraying the essential idea of feminism. It is Begum Khas Mahal's independent choice for a simple conventional lifestyle and her desire for relative safety for her son and herself, which does not need to be judged by other standards. On the contrary, Begum Hazrat Mahal's choice to take an active part in the political matters of the state is also her own, which need not be measured against any patriarchal yardstick.

In her new position as the queen regent, Hazrat Mahal plays an active role in instigating the Revolt by continuously contacting the rebels. In one such early communication, she is advised by the rebels to wait for the Revolt to unfold, considering that the active agents of the Revolt are primarily men. Hazrat Mahal refuses to do so. She claims:

We women spend our whole lives waiting, until...we have nothing left to wait for. But this time it is different, do you not see that? The people are ready to fight against the Angrez. It is true their weapons are superior to ours, but we will drive them out! (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 118)

Thus, it may be noted how Hazrat Mahal does not acquiesce to the advice to be the quintessential woman waiting for male action. When the "good woman" usually waits or is expected to wait (to act), she is rendered passive and inferior in the patriarchal power structure. She *is made to wait*⁵ by the man. In Mourad's novel, Hazrat Mahal is similarly expected to wait until the impending Revolt's male leaders take action. However, she flouts the normative and decides that she will not wait; she plans to take matters into her own hands and fight the British in her own capacity. Thus, in certain aspects, Mourad manages to draw a strong female figure in the novel.

Apart from the single incident of Hazrat Mahal taking part on the battlefield, the novel also refers to other women playing minor roles in the battle: they “hurl[ed] volleys of bricks and stones from the terraces [on the British troops]” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 288). Thus, the novel acknowledges and highlights women’s active participation on the battlefield. The novel mentions the historical statement published by the *London Times*: “The Begum of Awadh shows greater strategic sense and courage than all her generals put together” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 416), which is a testimony of the British acknowledgement and appreciation of Hazrat Mahal’s acumen and leadership.

The novel describes Hazrat Mahal as not only an able political leader but also a kind person. She expresses her loyalty towards the people of Lucknow before the onset of the Revolt: “Do not forget that my son is a prince and I am the wife of the exiled sovereign. There is no question of us abandoning our people. We belong here” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 122). Her humanity is expressed in her condemnation of the historical Bibighar incident in Kanpur when several innocent British women and children were massacred by the Indian soldiers participating in the Revolt. The novel also showcases her as a progressive woman tolerant of all religions (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 243-45, 254, 272). However, the novel perhaps ascribes her kindness and humanity to the well-spring of “motherly” feelings towards her son and her people. These feelings surface when she needs to act otherwise—as a ruthless authoritarian, the performance of which has significant emotional ramifications within her.

On one occasion, she metes out capital punishment to a few traitors of the state. Unlike customs which do not allow women to witness criminals hung to death, Begum Hazrat Mahal looks at the accused “with her penetrating gaze.” While the criminals cry for mercy, which is “intolerable,” even Raja Jai Laal is “worried” and “looks over at the regent. Her face is livid. She

raises her hand...then she drops it slowly” ordering for the punishment to be carried out. Hazrat Mahal perhaps wishes to set an example of the consequences of betraying the kingdom, and her authoritarian diktat is successful in doing so as the “crowd’s cheers drown the victim’s cries” when they witness “justice [being] served” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 258).

The novel perhaps attempts to establish Hazrat Mahal as “a true sovereign” but also portrays the incident’s impact on the Begum’s state of mind (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 258). She repents her decision, considering herself to be cold-blooded. Introspecting, she wonders if she has turned into an inhuman, stern ruler who is only interested in keeping up her image of “the powerful and generous sovereign beloved by all” (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 259). It may be noted that this self-incrimination that Hazrat Mahal goes through after having exercised her firm orders as the sovereign weakens the authoritarian figure who is feared by all and which the novel attempts to portray. The question arises: can a woman holding significant political power not be shrewd and stern? Such a woman political leader who does not base her political decisions on maternal passions perhaps emerges as “unwomanly” and may be considered a “dangerous woman” in society. Hence, Hazrat Mahal’s repentance is necessary for her to fit in the conventional trope of the Virangana, according to Kathryn Hansen’s definition⁶: a warrior but a doting mother.

As portrayed in Mourad’s novel, Begum Hazrat Mahal does not succumb to the British Raj or its ally, Jung Bahadur, the king of Nepal, till her death. Hazrat Mahal is the lone survivor of the 1857 Revolt. Pragmatic as she is described in the novel, Hazrat Mahal manages to escape to Nepal from the clutches of the East India Company. Although the king does not maltreat her while in exile with her son and friend Mumtaz, the novelist depicts her secretly trying to sustain the spirit of anti-colonial nationalism among the people in India. There are several occasions when Jung Bahadur unsuccessfully pushes her to reveal her hidden agenda (Mathai and Naville 424). Hazrat

Mahal only responds in silence, thus still resisting to yield to the colonial power. While featuring her resistance, the novelist describes the situation thus:

Winter in Nepal is harsh and Hazrat Mahal's health begins to deteriorate. But, above all, it is the condition of exile that saps her. In 1863, the British government yet again offers her the possibility of returning to India, on condition that her son signs a document renouncing the throne. Yet again, she does not bother to reply. (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 427)

Through such incidents, Mourad's novel portrays Hazrat Mahal's resilience against the British Raj, which may not necessarily translate to heroism on the battlefield. It may be seen as a reimagined and alternative Virangana.

Hazrat Mahal's bold expression of her sexuality does not conform to the image of an ideal aristocratic Nawab's wife. The novel probably justifies this based on her origin as a courtesan considered hypersexual. During her first private meeting with Rajah Jai Lal for political purposes, there is "none of the shyness and simpering airs common to the palace women" (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 173). Hazrat Mahal is aware of her beauty and its effect on the male-dominated world. She uses her body and sexuality as a tool to appropriate her political standpoint. For a woman who is usually in *purdah* in public, she "allow[s] her veil to slip, revealing an aquiline nose and a determined chin that contrasts with her voluptuous lips," which the Rajah notices. He acknowledges her "[sexual] temperament" in awe yet perhaps expresses a patriarchal desire to possess it (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 175). Hazrat Mahal appropriates the male gaze on her to make her political voice be heard. When she gains the Rajah's attention, she dismisses his patronising attitude and says:

I do not need any lessons from you, sir. It appears that you are quite unfamiliar with the women of this country. Are you not aware that over centuries, they have fought innumerable times? Some have even reigned and led armies on behalf of a captive or deceased father or husband... (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 175)

Her independent expression of sexuality is portrayed when she is complimented on her beauty on another occasion by Prince Firoz Shah, Bahadur Shah Zafar's nephew, and she remarks that she "feels like a butterfly thirsting after nectar" (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 301).

The novel shows how Hazrat Mahal develops romantic feelings towards the Rajah. She realises her feelings for Wajid Ali Shah are initially "an admiration for a sovereign wreathed in glory," and later they develop to "tenderness tinged with pity for a kind and loyal being" (Mathai and Naville 233, 330). Her feelings towards Jai Laal, however, are more amorous. Their liaison is realised in a *kotha* in the city, an alternate space which permits Hazrat Mahal to flout the normative structure. The novelist describes the materialisation of their sexual desire for each other in the *kotha* in detail, thus portraying Hazrat Mahal's sexual libido as atypical for a conventional queen. However, it is traced to her courtesan origins. In Jai Laal's embrace, "for the first time in her life, she is no longer in control of her feelings" (Mourad; Mathai and Naville 331). It is debatable whether the novel portrays a sexually expressive woman or one who loses her individuality under the man's guardianship. Hazrat Mahal's affair with Jai Laal is fictitious. Hence, it raises the question, why does Mourad need to depict a romantic affair an otherwise strong, politically and financially independent woman has with her minister? It may be argued that the affair further expresses the Begum's bold sexuality. However, there may be two counterarguments to this. First, the liaison occurs in an alternate space, thus lending a quixotic character to Hazrat Mahal's unconventional figure. Moreover, patriarchal obligations towards her son and the kingdom stop

her from pursuing a conjugal life with Jai Laal, only accentuating Hazrat Mahal's circumscribed societal situation. Second, her relationship with Jai Laal makes her more dependent on him, thus validating a woman's need for a man's patronage and security. Therefore, such a fictitious amorous relationship between Hazrat Mahal and Jai Laal may not contribute much to her depiction as a feminist figure.

Mukhoty notes that Hazrat Mahal was divorced by the Nawab in 1850 "probably at the indignation of the queen mother who abhorred the low-born among the king's wives." Consequently, she "retired quietly to a house in Lucknow along with Birjis Qadr [before the prince was crowned as the Nawab after Awadh's annexation by the East India Company], living on the pension provided by her husband" (158). Mourad's novel, however, does not mention Hazrat Mahal's divorce. A divorced Muslim courtesan rising to the political position of the queen regent makes her a strong, progressive woman in a heteropatriarchal colonial society. The novel's omission of this critical detail probably tells of Mourad's preference to paint Hazrat Mahal as a conventionally beautiful woman political leader in the context of the Revolt. By portraying her thus, Mourad perhaps negates the Begum's more personal choices in her life, reflecting her political ideologies and liberty in nineteenth-century colonial Lucknow.

Although Mourad's novel shows Hazrat Mahal as a strong woman, sexually and financially independent, and an efficient political leader, she nevertheless seeks male guidance and patronage, first from the Nawab and later, in his absence, from Rajah Jai Lal. She exercises her agency in choosing to bear the responsibility of the queen regent, but she claims it is under the Rajah's mentorship that she and her son "are ready to lead [the] battle [against the Raj]" (Mathai and Naville 204). Thus, the Begum's romantic relationship with the Rajah may be argued to have been founded on her social conditioning as the inferior sex. However, it may also be read as an

independent exercise of the Begum's sexuality. Nevertheless, whether the novel translates her need for a male guardian as her sexual agency is still debatable.

Mourad's novel portrays how a woman who does not engage in conventional gender roles is considered to have failed in being a "good wife" and a "good mother." The novel, however, does not question these assumptions; it simply represents them. The novel shows Hazrat Mahal's friend, Mumtaz, to be emotionally closer to Birjis Qadar than his own mother. Mumtaz observes that "the Queen Mother is far too busy" in political and administrative affairs than being a conventional doting mother to her son. The novel shows Mumtaz questioning Hazrat Mahal's lack of maternal feelings (Mathai and Naville 405). Although the novel does not draw any definite conclusions concerning Hazrat Mahal's incapacity to be a "good woman of patriarchy," through Mumtaz's questions, the novel perhaps portrays the perceptions to which a woman flouting the hegemonic structure is subjected.

Tripurari Sharma's *San Sattavan Ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa* (1999)

Tripurari Sharma is a contemporary feminist theatre director and playwright. She has written, translated, directed and produced several plays. Her plays have been staged across the country as well as abroad. Her works, it has been said, "provide deep insights into different dimensions and layers of a woman's life." Also a social activist, she has been actively involved in democratic and women's movements. She "saw [herself] very much part of the women's movement in the 1970s," thus continuing her support and work concerning women's issues since then (Singh, "Making Visible," 130, 133).

San Sattavan Ka Kisa: Azizun Nisa (1999), written in Hindustani, is one of Sharma's many woman-centric plays. This chapter uses both the original text and its English translation by

Tutun Mukherjee (the latter, particularly for the quotations mentioned in English). The play narrates the story of the historical figure Azizun Nisa Bai, who was a courtesan in nineteenth-century Kanpur. There is a dearth of historical evidence on Azizun Nisa. Sharma managed to access some of the existing historical evidence. She also came across folklore accounts of the courtesan in Lucknow and Kanpur. Based on her research, Sharma states that Azizun Nisa perhaps belonged to the Bedia caste, who are professional singers and dancers. This community claims that most nineteenth-century courtesans in Awadh hailed from their caste, and the community takes pride in their lineage. Sharma states, “This community feels that [the courtesans] have sacrificed a lot for their homeland but in comparison to their sacrifice they do not get the same respect” (Singh 135). Historical records mention Azizun Nisa as “a woman who was a dancer, who wore male costume and was very close to the soldiers and that she was involved with Shamshuddin, who visited her and who died in the 1857 mutiny.” She originally belonged to Lucknow but, at some point, shifted to Kanpur, where she opened her own *kotha* (Singh, “Making Visible,” 133). Sharma’s play depicts Azizun’s metamorphosis from a talented courtesan to a sword-wielding soldier who played a significant role in the Bibighar massacre of 1857. Vis-à-vis Azizun’s narrative, Sharma’s play problematises women’s role in politics.

The play depicts Azizun as an unconventional courtesan of her time. Azizun, who originally belonged to Lucknow, leaves this prosperous city, where she receives opportunities of royal court patronage and instead settles in Kanpur, “a city belonging to the poor” (Sharma 21).⁷ In an interview, Sharma remarks that Azizun, a contemporary of Begum Hazrat Mahal, probably had access to Wajid Ali Shah’s patronage too. Azizun’s mother also hailed from Lucknow, an aristocratic, “respectable” city. The clients the courtesans received therein were trained with “royal taste, culture and refinement.” On the contrary, Kanpur “was just developing as a cantonment

city,” a “city of bazaar,” not “respectable” and hence, economically backward (Singh, “Making Visible,” 133). The city is poor, “crooked,” “dirty and contemptible,” leaving the courtesans bereft of the luxurious lifestyle they are otherwise habituated to—their “dress with faded embroidery and dull, artificial beads,” their *kotha* “in the middle of the bazaar...with windows that deny a glimpse of the sky,” the constant “buying and selling,” and “the noise of the trade that drowns the music of the instruments” (Sharma; Mukherjee 136). The clients in Kanpur are primarily traders and moneylenders, “cheats and unruly characters” (Singh, “Making Visible,” 133, Sharma; Mukherjee 136). Thus, they would not be endowed with elite qualities to appreciate the courtesans’ culture.

However, Kanpur’s anonymity offers Azizun a “haven,” a relatively “safe” place for courtesans like her because “no one points fingers at [them]” (Sharma; Mukherjee 136). Sharma says she was “intrigued” to know that in such a socio-politico-historical context, Azizun left Lucknow where she could have flourished more and instead settled in Kanpur (Singh, “Making Visible,” 133). In her play, Sharma holds on to this historical fact when carving Azizun’s unconventional character: a courtesan who does not wish to be under any man’s patronage, be it nobility or otherwise, and instead wants to be financially, sexually and creatively independent. Of the fictional courtesans Sharma creates in the play, Adila, who originally belonged to Bitthur, is shown spending a few days in Azizun’s *kotha*. Adila, who ventriloquizes Sharma, questions Azizun’s decision to settle in Kanpur:

Adila: No wonder they say you are its pulse. But where the people are so indifferent, who will appreciate your art? Those who come to your threshold...

Azizun: I don’t depend on them. They become nearly the excuse for my practice. I have a deep commitment to my art. That someone will come by in the evening and spout random praise is not the reason for my music.

Adila: Still, there should be some patrons...a prosperous and large-hearted man to shower his bounty on you.

Azizun: I would have stayed back in Lucknow, Adila. But obeisance to any prince is not possible for me...and it was becoming progressively difficult to avoid it... (Sharma; Mukherjee 121).

Thus, Azizun is depicted as an artist deeply interested in and devoted to the performative arts. She performs her art more for her own passion and commitment to it as an artist than for her clients. However, Azizun perhaps appropriates the male gaze to earn a living as well as uses it as an opportunity to hone her artistic skills. Hence, as an independent woman, she declines male patronage to nurture her passion for her profession and creative abilities, which is unusual in a nineteenth-century courtesan. Like all other courtesans of her time, Azizun is not only a talented and sincere artist but also an able businesswoman. Nevertheless, what lends Azizun a further uniqueness is her competence to run her *kotha* with entire independence.

Sharma's play portrays Azizun's *kotha* as a politicised public space. Most conspiracies for the soldiers' rebellion in Kanpur in 1857 are discussed and plotted in Azizun's *kotha*. As hosts to the soldiers, Azizun and the courtesans in the *kotha* are privy to the uprising against the East India Company rumbling underneath the surface. The courtesans also have their own political subjectivity and voices regarding the matter. Azizun often discusses matters of the state, like the annexation of Awadh by the East India Company with her lover and soldier, Shamsuddin. She fears her "homeland" losing its freedom to colonial rule (142). Apart from the protagonist, the play also shows the political consciousness of other courtesans. Adila discusses Nana Saheb's administration with the courtesans, whereas Zubeida, another fictional courtesan, opposes the war and violence, thus voicing her political opinion.

Eventually, Azizun asserts her desire to participate in the Revolt actively and not just be its passive witness. There is general disapproval amongst the soldiers as well as the courtesans regarding her decision. Azizun's decision to enter politics is deemed to go against the patriarchal assumption of women's disposition and their conventional disinterest in politics. As discussed earlier, Rani Lakshmibai and Begum Hazrat Mahal found themselves amidst the eye of the storm, i.e., the Revolt. They had direct and more immediate reasons to join the Revolt. Unlike the queens mentioned above, Sharma's play depicts how Azizun does not have pressing causes to participate in the Revolt; she could have easily kept herself aloof from the action on the battlefield. However, it is Azizun's patriotism which inspires her to make such a conscious choice.

The soldiers patronise Azizun's political consciousness and remark that matters of the state, politics and war are not a woman's interest. Speaking of the battle (of 1857), in which she is interested, she responds:

[The battle] has begun in the lanes of the city. My home is in one of those. How the situation changes I can see from my windows, the whole day. What don't I feel? The helplessness of slavery? The sense of despair? The slowly aggravating coldness? (Sharma; Mukherjee 143)

Thus, Azizun brings to attention how a woman, as a citizen of the same socio-politico-historical world, is also subject to certain political ideologies and opinions. A courtesan occupies a public space, thus further acquiring access and mobility in the male-dominant public /political world. Azizun does not limit her political consciousness to discussions alone; she expresses her desire to fight the battle with other (male) soldiers. The soldiers ridicule her, saying that "[it] isn't love; [it] is war." She counters thus:

Azizun: And I love this war that has already knocked on my door.

Shams: This is our profession. What will you do? You don't even know how to wield the sword.

Azizun: That's the only way to participate.

Shams: But you won't be able to bear the sight of bloody bodies scattered around. The hearts of men shiver at such sights and you...

Azizun: Men covered with gunpowder and blood come to my house everyday. I've spent my entire life in their company. If I can bear them, then why can't I bear the context they create?

Shams: Dear God, a beautiful woman crazy about war!... (Sharma; Mukherjee 159)

Sharma's play paints a conventionally beautiful woman and talented courtesan passionate about war. Azizun does not want power or sovereignty; she exercises her patriotism. However, the play stretches her patriotism to a jingoistic level; some scenes later, Azizun is shown engaging in ruthless combat fighting, which seemingly gives her pleasure. She is also seen as a cruel woman to be feared and considered "dangerous" in both colonial and caste Hindu nationalist hegemonic discourse.

Lata Singh, in her essay "Retrieving Voices from the Margins: The Courtesans and the Nation's Narrative" (2007), states, "Feminists have contested the essentialist position that sees militarism as masculine, and peace and passivity as feminine." Women are excluded from war for their putative womanly nature that desires peace and are believed to possess peace-making abilities. They are considered to be not only physically but also emotionally weaker beings. Thus, a woman's participation in politics is, in the very first place, discouraged (106). In this context, a cruel, battle-crazy warrior without any "womanly" mercy is not the same as the ideal, patriarchal

construct of the Virangana. This woman who is unbound, courageous and ruthless, contrary to the trope of the woman warrior-mother, is seen as a threat to the hegemonic discourse of caste Hindu nationalism.

Azizun's battle-crazy figure may be seen in the light of the dichotomous figures of Kali and Durga symbolising the nation, as discussed in the second chapter. The "new Indian (middle-class) woman" fought for anti-colonial nationalism in the ("public") world. She needs to be bound by the patriarchal structure, thus inspiring her to be a "pativrata," a dutiful wife and a kind, doting mother in the ("private sphere") home. Thus, rather than comparing her to the ferocious, battle-crazy, merciless Hindu goddess Kali, the "new Indian woman" is depicted as the Hindu goddess Durga: a kind, loving, dutiful wife and a mother who, when the need arises, can transform into a fierce warrior for her children's defence. Thus, the ideal figure of the warrior-mother Virangana was reinforced by the Brahmanical Hindu nationalists to limit the "new Indian woman" within the hegemonic structure. In that context, the re-imagined Virangana, which this thesis proposes to achieve, can include a courageous, ferocious and merciless courtesan who is neither a wife nor a mother. In the larger context of humanity and peace, attributes like cruelty, bloodshed, and mindless violence are undesirable. However, the gendering of these attributes, i.e., associating cruelty with a man and kindness with a woman, is probably problematic.

As shown in Sharma's play, the soldiers do not readily acknowledge Azizun's desire to join the Revolt as an armed rebel. Instead, they assign her the role of a spy, similar to Adila, who is Nana Saheb's appointed spy (35). The woman's abilities in masculine realms of politics and war are questioned and patronised. Thus, the most that a woman may be permitted to venture into these realms is to use them as spies, thus commodifying women's bodies for the larger purpose of male-dominant politics and wars. In doing so, women treated as the archetypal femme-fatale are reduced

to objects in masculine enterprises. As discussed in the first chapter, female spies occupy very challenging and intricate grounds in society which needs elaborative study. Using the contextual study from the first chapter, Azizun and Adila, in Sharma's play, may also be seen inhabiting such complex and problematic spaces in society. They are perhaps assigned the role of female spies owing to their already tainted origins as courtesans. Although their bodies and sexuality will be weaponised to advance the overarching patriarchal narratives of caste Hindu anti-colonial nationalism, the same courtesans will never be accommodated in the "respectable" pedestal of divine female martyrs.

Moreover, the fact that Azizun accepts her role as a spy without questions may be interrogated. For a courtesan who is depicted as strong, resilient, independent, and who grows passionate about fighting in the war, Azizun's obedient acquiescence seems puzzling. Thus, she is also a subject/object of society and unquestioningly exercises her heteropatriarchal gender role. It may also be argued that this decision may be read as Azizun's intent to join the war in any manner, even the role of a spy, better than not being involved in it at all.

As portrayed in Sharma's play, however, Azizun ruptures the hegemonic structure and enters the war as a soldier. The transformational moment which probably instigates her to do so is significant. A British officer attacks Azizun when he discovers her to be a spy. She escapes, but the incident leaves her infuriated; she repents her physical inability to defend herself against the male colonial officer. At that moment, she wishes to train herself and be able to fight "like a man" (43, 47). The process of Azizun's metamorphosis into a soldier is not elaborately described. Consequently, on the night the soldiers revolt against the British in Kanpur, Azizun is directly introduced as one of them vis-à-vis Zubeida's⁸ point of view:

Zubeida: ...The same noise day and night...never did I dream that I'll be watching the fight from so close...Look at that, they're coming this way...looks like a gora and a sipahi...the gora aims a pistol but the sipahi slams it down with his sword...oh God have mercy...I'm trapped in the middle of the battlefield. Is it by chance or fate that I came here? ... The sipahi pushes the gora...his sword shines in the dust...the gora stands up again...he stretches his sword...and rests it at the neck of the gora...the head is severed...it falls off...the sipahi bends low and examines it, touches it... He stands up—oh no, that can't be Azizun! Perhaps someone resembling her...how did all this happen? ... (Sharma; Mukherjee 156)

Such a graphic introduction of Azizun, the soldier, emphasises her cruelty and ruthlessness, thus drawing an image contrary to the ideal warrior-mother. Azizun even derives pleasure from the kill. She remarks with excitement:

Zubaida, did you see that...But you didn't believe...neither did I...until I saw the head and body from close...the heart and the head separate...palpitating for a few moments...then stopping. The fountain of red...I was stunned...the white skin also grows cold...as the drops of blood grow dark... (Sharma; Mukherjee 156-57)

In this metamorphosis, Azizun breaks apart from the gendered compartment she is initially put in as a spy and, instead, embodies the violent essence of war as a battle-crazy soldier. However, whether or not Azizun's role as a sword-wielding soldier makes her a feminist allegory needs to be questioned. One must examine how Azizun enters the male-dominant realms of politics and war to explore this.

Sharma says in an interview, “There was a temptation to highlight in the play that the courtesans had lots of anger against the British and wanted to take revenge because of cases of rape in British *mehfils*.” Sharma claims that if she had found Azizun’s participation in this revenge and anger, it would have “helped in building dramatic devices in the play.” Sharma “restrain[ed]” herself from doing so to instead base the courtesan’s participation in war and politics on a rational consciousness devoid of any “craving for personal gain or political power” (Singh, “Making Visible,” 136).

However, the authorial intention may be counter-argued. With the gradual decline in the Nawabi culture, the colonial rule sexually exploited the courtesans and threatened the courtesan’s profession, culture and lives. These are just and rightful causes for a courtesan to be angry and harbour a desire for revenge against the colonial force. Sharma’s wish to portray the courtesan’s participation in the war “as a call of [her] conscience” (Singh, “Making Visible,” 136) is understood as the playwright’s intention to draw Azizun as a patriotic woman; the “call of conscience” being founded on patriotism. However, Sharma’s decision to negate a woman’s motives inspiring her to enter war implies that the playwright perhaps carves a courtesan who prioritises her “homeland” before herself or before her fellow courtesans, for that matter. However, in a different context, had Azizun entered the war to avenge the British officials’ sexual exploitation of courtesans like her, would she have become a lesser patriot? Thus, Sharma negates the courtesan’s individuality or the British exploitation to portray Azizun as a patriotic woman warrior instead. A woman using her body physically, martially and sexually for revenge against the perpetrators of exploitation, sexual or otherwise, should not be considered problematic and need not be deemed lesser than safeguarding the nation.

One needs to focus on the gender binaries associated with the hegemonic discourse of war and politics to discuss the second aspect that examines how a courtesan enters these exact domains. Politics and war are male-dominant enterprises, thus rendering them overtly masculine. Owing to this, militarism is often essentialised as hypermasculine and, on the contrary, “peace and passivity as feminine” (Singh, “Retrieving Voices,” 106). As mentioned earlier, women are stereotyped as weaker and more peaceful than warring, virile men. If women enter or are permitted to enter the military, they are expected to be masculine enough. Anuradha Chenoy, in her book *Militarism and Women in South Asia* (2002), provides an anecdote from military training where women soldiers are taught to “kill the woman in [her]” and imbibe hypermasculinity and its associated traits of violence and ruthlessness (16-21).

Azizun, in Sharma’s play, from the very onset, desires to learn warfare and sword-wielding. When a British officer mocks her as a common prostitute as opposed to the higher status of the courtesans in the socio-cultural and economic hierarchy in the nineteenth century, Azizun is incensed. She wishes she could kill the officer if she knew swordsmanship: “I swear by God, had I weapon in my hand then with one swing I would have stopped that man’s inauspicious steps (Sharma; Mukherjee 135).” She wants to be trained as a male soldier and, thus, enter the Revolt. Later, she enters into a combat fight with Ali Khan, another soldier. He wins the combat but does not kill her. He spares her life, claiming she is a woman (hence, weaker, which, according to him, does not make an equal fight). Azizun laments:

I am not a mere woman. He should have treated me like a soldier. Fought and killed me. I am not afraid to die. But no, in his eyes I remained a mere woman. He thought I was a coward. There is more to be done to be his match. I must become so strong and tough that

one would not know that one is facing a woman. There would not be any need to show pity. (Sharma; Mukherjee 166)

Azizun's constant need to prove herself at par with men and emulate them by adhering to the dominant sense of masculine militarism is problematic.

The fact that Azizun wishes to enter the war as a hypermasculine man implies that Azizun herself, as a subject of the heteropatriarchal society, subscribes to the gendered roles in militarism and politics. Once she embodies masculine militarism, she forgets the woman in her. She does rupture the confined boundaries of gendered roles in war by becoming a soldier despite the male soldiers not permitting her. However, she breaks apart from one gendered category to fall back into another when she emulates masculinity to fight the war "like a man."

Moreover, what must seem a transgression for Azizun is only temporarily permitted to her in society. Once the soldiers tire from the nightlong battle against the East India Company, they return to Azizun's *kotha* to enjoy her music and dance. They exclaim, "We've achieved our goal, haven't we? What else...? Throw aside the armour and pick up your dancing bells...let the *jhanan-jhanan* of your feet resume...." Azizun responds, "No. Talk of swords and ammunition...I'm a soldier now, nothing else. Behave as you should with a fellow soldier" (Sharma; Mukherjee 167).

Moreover, Azizun treats her fellow courtesans as a man would after the fight. She speaks a patronising hypermasculine language when she orders an unwilling Rowshni, a younger courtesan, to dance for the tired soldiers, "Shyness does not befit a courtesan. Don't you have anything to offer the tired and battle-worn soldiers? For the sake of your safety also, you shouldn't make us wait any longer. Let me observe how a *mujra* is performed" (Sharma; Mukherjee 168).

Thus, it may be observed how Azizun imbibes hypermasculinity as a male soldier to fit in the

hegemonic nationalist discourse, therefore, in the process, leaving her femininity behind, in which she had earlier reposed her dignity.

Sharma remarks that she was disturbed by the historical evidence she found regarding Azizun's participation in the Bibighar massacre of innocent British children and wives. Through Azizun's desire to enter politics and war as a man, Sharma problematises the manner of women's political participation. The playwright states, "To prove to be like men and unquestionably accept the ways of men can be seen as a tragic flaw in Azizun Nisa's character." The playwright further believes that the women and the courtesans like Azizun should have stopped the Bibighar massacre rather than taking part in it. Sharma thinks that women "bring with them a certain kind of aura, culture, ambience and a certain way of looking at life in a nourishing way which humanises other areas too. If those areas get excluded then...women's participation stays back from its potentiality and possibility. Becoming like the oppressor is probably not the answer" (Singh, "Making Visible," 138). Sharma raises specific questions regarding how women enter male-dominant realms of politics and war. However, it may be argued that by associating a woman's disposition with humanity and non-violence, Sharma also probably falls prey to gendered stereotypes of militarism and peace.

The inherent contradiction in Sharma's approach may be observed in her depiction of Azizun's passionate brutality on the battlefield, which the playwright once again seems to associate with masculinity. Perhaps the playwright is also guilty of being disturbed by the archetypal dangerous, dark, cruel woman. Probably, this is the reason why Azizun, as depicted towards the closure of the play, laments her fierceness after the war, considering it to be ungodly and, hence, unforgivable:

Yes, I have lost His mercy...I feel it. His anger...He will not pardon this dark crime...I'm unworthy of His grace. Will I be found deserving of punishment on the Day of Judgement? In the depths of hell...in the pandemonium...will my soul wander forever, helpless and despairing? I shan't complain...let God be strict with his rules. Let no one pray for me, no one offer me shelter...not stain the purity of their worship. Let the sky burst, the chasms of the earth gape—I shall slip into the depths of darkness...lost for ever and ever, denied the presence of God...whom I hoped to attain once. (Sharma; Mukherjee 180)

Azizun's lamentation serves as a salvation for her temporary transgression, thus reinforcing her in the heteropatriarchal nationalist discourse. This chapter tries to retrieve Azizun's voice from the fringes through the fictionalised historical narrative of Sharma's play. Consequently, the chapter attempts to relocate Azizun in the redefined and re-imagined trope of Virangana: as a creatively, sexually, and financially independent woman; as a sword-wielding, ferocious, merciless courtesan; unlike the ideal dutiful wife and doting mother. Sharma's play does lend a political voice and agency to Azizun, unsettling the patriarchal ordering of gendered militarism. The playwright claims that it is Azizun's "efforts [which] fall short of transcendental participation" (Singh, "Retrieving Voices," 111). However, this seemingly feminist narrative also subscribes to gendered dispositions of war and violence as active and masculine, as opposed to peace and non-violence as passive and feminine. Thus, Sharma's narrative fiction of the historical nineteenth-century courtesan of Kanpur, Azizun Nisa, also seems to have failed to transcend the normative.

However, these narratives do offer valuable insights into the courtesan's "private space," thereby throwing light on the everyday politics of her life. Thus, this individual woman is woven out from the trope of the "fallen woman." This chapter has attempted to examine her participation in anti-colonial nationalism and tried to reclaim her as a re-imagined Virangana.

Notes

¹ A recently published historical fiction in English titled *Begum Hazrat Mahal: Warrior Queen of Awadh* (2023) written by Malathi Ramachandran also portrays the story of Hazrat Mahal. Since it is a very recent publication, it could not be included in the chapter. Thus, this fiction can be incorporated into further research in this area.

² Emphasis mine.

³ Rani Lakshmibai as a “reluctant rebel” is discussed at length in Chapter Three.

⁴ An outer garment used by some Muslim women to cover their face and body.

⁵ Emphasis mine.

⁶ As discussed in Chapter Two.

⁷ Translation mine. The original is “shaharein garibaan” which Tutun Mukherjee translates as “city of strangers” (148). However, in this context, the latter perhaps does not seem apt to describe Kanpur, which was economically backward than Lucknow in the nineteenth century.

⁸ Another fictional courtesan in Sharma’s play.

Chapter Five

The Mute Princess: The Silent Woman as a Virangana

“The technology of science/ The rituals, the etiquette/the blurring of terms/ silence not absence/ of words or music or even/raw sounds/ Silence can be a plan/rigorously executed/ the blueprint to a life/ It is a presence/ it has a history a form/ Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence”

(Rich 17)

The previous two chapters explore Lakshmibai, Begum Hazrat Mahal and Azizun Nisa Bai from the perspectives of seeing them marginalised figures, largely erased in historical writing. The Revolt of 1857 was used as a focal point, since which point of time Lakshmibai became historically and culturally popular on a pan-Indian scale as one of the first Viranganas. The third chapter discusses Lakshmibai as a woman who, despite her reluctance to join the battlefield, found herself on it as a matter of circumstances designed by male warriors. The fourth chapter examines the Muslim courtesan as an alternative Virangana. Although she may not have engaged in explicit combat fighting against the East India Company during the 1857 Revolt, the Muslim courtesan participated in more covert and nuanced ways in political matters. The dominant trope of the upper-caste Hindu warrior-mother is unsettled. The Muslim courtesan is considered an alternative Virangana for holding her ground against hegemonic colonial power, even if the later Hindu nationalist discourse denies her this recognition.

Thus, the previous chapters explore how women may weaponise active combat fighting skills and/or decision-making abilities and/or sexuality to fight as part of dominant nationalist narratives. This chapter will examine if silence and forbearance, otherwise feminine virtues in patriarchy, can be used as tools by a woman to perform an alternative narrative of resistance. If so,

can such a woman be seen as Virangana, not because she adheres to the trope of the “good woman” but because she uses silence to subvert the same patriarchal structure? To explore the same, the chapter chooses the historical figure of Joymoti, a seventeenth-century princess of the Ahom kingdom (in present-day Assam). She is popularly known as a *sati* and Virangana in the history and culture of Assam. Joymoti is known for sacrificing her life for her husband and the Ahom nation by remaining silent despite the many atrocities inflicted upon her. Thus, this chapter will try to look at Joymoti as a Virangana who performs silence as a narrative of resistance.

In making the hegemonic national narratives in India and the dominant construction of the figure of the Virangana, the voices of the Northeastern region of India are seldom included. Ranajit Guha, in his article “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” (1981), states:

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism . . . shar[ing] the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism—which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies, these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions, and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings—to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas. (46)

A postcolonial rewriting of the history of India deconstructs the White, Western, Christian metanarrative and enables the making of the Indian national narrative. However, the hegemonic anti-colonial national narrative is often not inclusive. The voices of the upper-caste Hindu upholders of nationalism belonging prominently to north India¹ constitute the nationalist narrative of modern India. In the process, subaltern voices and narratives are seldom accommodated within

this discourse. In the hegemonic nationalist narrative, voices from the Northeastern region of India are conspicuously absent.

Joymoti who was queen of the Ahom kingdom, has been used as a national allegory in Assam for her virtues until very recently. The narrative of her sacrifice finds more mention in popular culture in Assam than in historical accounts. Her story and image have been represented and constructed in different forms of media over the centuries in Assam. These representations tell their own socio-political history over time. From anti-colonial nationalism to linguistic nationalism to sub-nationalism, Joymoti's story has been used to serve different purposes.

Nation, in this chapter, is associated with “an ethnic group whose markers of identity (such as language or religion) are frequently embedded in its official symbolism and legislation” (Gellner qtd. in Eriksen 119). Consecutively, nationalism is then understood as “ethnic ideologies which hold that their group should dominate a state” (Gellner qtd. in Eriksen 119). The chapter is premised on Joymoti, a princess of the Ahom kingdom. Partha Chatterjee's non-western concept of nationalism, which has been discussed in the second chapter, acknowledges the existence of various forms of nationalism in a country like India, constituting plural ethnicities (5). Using Chatterjee's framework of understanding nation and nationalism, this chapter also acknowledges Joymoti's sentiment of belonging to the Ahom ethnic group as “Ahom nationalism.” Thus, the Ahom kingdom is referred to as the Ahom nation.

Moreover, the chapter considers how the colonial imposition of Bengali as the medium of instruction in educational institutions and administrative establishments gave birth to aspirations of linguistic nationalism amongst the Assamese-speaking population in Assam (which will be discussed later here). This form of sub-nationalism excludes the minority linguistic and ethnic groups in Assam. Thus, to distinguish the Assamese language from the sentiment of nationalism

based on it, “Assamese nationalism” and its associated “Assamese” identity are marked in quotations in the chapter.

Joymoti is a cultural icon used for various forms of nationalism in Assam. This chapter will explore the layered construction of such myths regarding a historical figure and how this figure came to be woven into the “Assamese national” memory.

Furthermore, within the history of the Northeastern region of India, at large, and Assam, in particular, marginalised communities such as the Nagas² similarly find meagre documentation. So, in deconstructing the figure of *sati* Joymoti, the chapter will also attempt to recuperate Watlong, the Naga queen, from the dominant Assamese narratives around Joymoti. Watlong is probably historically associated with Joymoti, but she is lesser known and hence can also be viewed as an alternative Virangana.

Historical Background

Assam is a land where many ethnic groups have lived for centuries. “Before the arrival of the Aryans, different Mongoloid tribes came to Assam and settled on their own at different points” (Sarma 1-2). However, tribes like the Kacharis were some of the already existing tribes in Assam when the Ahoms arrived. The Ahoms are popularly known to have been a Burmese tribe that came to Assam and settled here. Their arrival saw clashes with the existing tribes. After assimilating various extant tribes, the Ahoms emerged as a large community in the state by the fifteenth century. The Ahom dynasty ruled Assam for six hundred years, straddling the centuries between 1228-1819 (Misra 2). Although the Mughals invaded Gauhati, they were defeated by Ahoms like Lachit Barphukan, whose courage is greatly extolled.

Arup Kumar Dutta, in his book *Ahoms* (2016), mentions that Ahoms “recorded contemporary events in the form of chronicles called buranjis” (10). Historian Surya Kumar Bhuyan’s *Tungkhungia Buranji* (1932), based on the Ahom Buranjis and written in Assamese, devotes one entire chapter on the Tai-Ahom prince Gadapani’s rule in the Ahom kingdom (1681-1696) but mentions Joymoti’s death cursorily in a single line. On the other hand, Edward Gait’s *History of Assam* (1906) does not mention Joymoti at all. Only Gadapani’s accession to the throne and his rule over the kingdom are portrayed in valour. Gunabhiram Barua’s *Asam Buranji* (1887) mentions the story of Joymoti comparatively in more detail than the accounts of either Gait or Bhuyan.

Dutta’s *Ahoms*, based on the Buranjis, gives a colourful historical account which reads almost like an imaginative fictional form. Dutta’s book states that Laluksola Borphukan (brother of Lachit Borphukan, who fought against the Mughals and protected Gauhati) proved to be a traitor. To fulfil his ambitions, he returned Gauhati and the adjacent areas to the Mughals in 1679. Atan Buragohain, who was Assam’s Rajmantri Dangoria (the chief counsellor) for over seventeen years, realised this and expressed his fears. However, Laluksola Borgohain got Atan Buragohain assassinated. Since he could not officially be a king (counsellors could not become kings), Laluksola chose Sulikphaa, a fourteen-year-old male child, to be the king of the Ahom dynasty. Lora Raja (boy king), who was so-called by the kingdom’s subjects, became a puppet king under Laluksola (246-247).

The fourteenth Ahom King, Swargadeo Suhungmung, had divided the Ahom dynasty into four clans. These clans, known as *phaids* or *khels*, were the “Charingiya, Dihingiya, Tipamia and Tungkhungiya. The Ahom commoners were divided into these clans based on their specific occupations and hereditary status. Thus, in a traditional Ahom society, the hereditary aristocracy

(Sat-gharia Ahom) on the one hand and specific occupations on the other, helped in the growth of Ahom social organisation in terms of phaid” (Gogoi 11). According to the Shan laws, only the progeny of these *phaid*s were rightful successors to the Ahom throne. The *phaid*s branched into sub-*phaid*s as the population increased. Thus, several princes could lay claim to the throne, the only condition being that they needed to be physically and mentally whole. Realising this, Lora Raja, on Laluksola’s suggestions, ordered that all such Ahom princes be either maimed or killed, thus attempting to eliminate the chances of all possible threats to his kingship (Bhuyan in *Atan* 186-7; Dutta 247).

Amongst all the Ahom princes, Gadapani, the son of Gobar Raja, was the most rightful heir to the Ahom throne. His father had been a king of the Ahom dynasty for a short period. Moreover, Gadapani was “also reputed for his personal vigour and energy, thereby rendering his candidature readily acceptable to the nobles and officials.” Due to Lora Raja’s brutality, many Ahom princes lost their body parts or lives. Others, including Gadapani, escaped the king’s men (Bhuyan in *Atan*... 87-8).

Popular representations abound of Joymoti’s role in Gadapani’s escape and her sacrifice for her husband and kingdom. However, the *Buranjis* barely mention Joymoti as Gadapani’s wife. In the manuscript of the *Assam Buranji*, which Bhuyan obtained from Pundit Hemchandra Goswami’s family, Joymoti has been mentioned twice. The first chronicle states:

Previously to this, out of fear for the Buraphukan he [Gadapani] had kept his two sons in a Naga village. His wife died in a state of pregnancy in the midst of punishments and tortures.
(Bhuyan in *Assam Buranji*, 145)

The second chronicle states:

At that time [after the departure of the Bengal envoy Govindaram] the Barphukan, after having informed the monarch, caused the death of Bahgaria Gohain and his brother at Kaliabar. After this he searched for princes and killed all those he could get. Having failed in his search for the Burha-Raja [Gadapani, afterwards king Gadadhar Singha, commonly known as Burha-Raja], and having got his wife, Dakhinpatia Hazarika Gidagathi killed her by punishments and tortures. (Bhuyan in *Assam Buranji*, 145)

Bhuyan lists the early works of literature to have first romanticised Joymoti's death. The first one to produce a narrative around Joymoti is Mr J. M. Foster's article (1874) on the temple of Joysagar. Published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1893), Foster's article inaccurately declares that Gadapani escaped to the Naga jungles after his defeat by the Moāmariās³, not to escape Lora Raja's orders. The Moāmariās made Lora Raja the king, who captured and punished Joymoti for not revealing the whereabouts of her husband. The article describes how she was tied "in the centre of the [Joysagar] Tank," and they "daily flogged" her, but she did not comply. On hearing this, Gadadhar came to his wife "in disguise...and asked her why she did not point him out to his enemies. She at once recognised him but refused to betray him. Addressing her as a friend of her brother, she told him to leave her to her fate, as his submission to the Lora Raja could be of no advantage to either." The article mentions how this was repeated three times, thus dramatising the details, after which Gadadhar left his wife, who died eventually. Bhuyan states that Foster claimed to have historically referred to William Robinson's *Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841) and the *Assam Buranji* (1906) by Radhanath Barabarua and Kasinath Tamuli Phukan. However, as Bhuyan notes, Foster seems to have been "misled" by his "Assamese helpers," as the passages cannot be found in his historical references (Bhuyan in *Atan*, 193).

Dutiram Hazarika's *Kalibharat Buranji* is the second piece of literature which describes that Joymoti "was taken to the royal court with her young daughter and was questioned about the whereabouts of Gadapani." The mother-daughter twosome did not reveal any information. Gadapani, disguised as a man named Gothor, "had taken shelter in the house of a female hawker named Ramani Pohari." After being tortured endlessly, the daughter died, and Joymoti was barely living. Similar to Foster's article, Hazarika also mentions how, on hearing of the condition of his wife (and daughter's death), Gadapani visited his wife in disguise and asked her to reveal his whereabouts. Joymoti demurred and instead requested him to save himself. She died after Gadapani's departure (Bhuyan in *Atan* 194).

The third piece of literature to elaborate on Joymoti's story is Harakanta Barua Sadar-Amin's revised version of the *Assam Buranji* by Barbarua and Phukan. Based on old chronicles and "oral reports of reliable Ahom nobles," this *Buranji* states that Joymoti escaped with Gadapani to a forest. Before Lora Raja's emissaries found them, Joymoti "persuaded her husband to leave the hut in disguise, and she waited alone to face the royal agents." When she did not reveal any information about her husband when asked, it was the emissaries who, without any royal orders, tortured her to her death (Bhuyan in *Atan* 195).

Fourth, Ratneswar Mahanta (1864-1893) published an article, "Jaymati Kuanri and Langi Gadapani," in Lakshminath Bezbarua's edited journal *Jonaki*, in Calcutta in 1899. Aparna Mahanta states that Ratneswar Mahanta's source for historical facts on the Ahoms was Gunabhiram Baruah's *History of Assam* (1876). S. K. Bhuyan, on the other hand, claims that Ratneswar Mahanta's article is based on the folklore and materials provided by Indibar Barua Shirastadar of Sibsagar. The article is similar to Foster's, except that Ratneswar Mahanta does not mention a daughter (Bhuyan in *Atan* 191-5). In the first edition of his article, Ratneswar Mahanta

inaccurately says Joymoti is the eighteenth-century Ahom king Lakshmikanta Singha's wife. On realising his error, Ratneswar Mahanta adds a footnote in his other article published in the next issue of *Jonaki*. In the footnote, he acknowledges his mistake (A. Mahanta 67).

Ratneswar Mahanta had already been writing a series of articles on “evil women” in the history of Assam, published in “Asamat Man” (Burmese in Assam). His series includes Pijou Aideo, “daughter of Badan Barphukan, and daughter-in-law of Purnananda Buragohain.” She was “caught in the political feud between” her father and son. She revealed her husband's conspiracies to her father. Barphukan then convinced the Burmese to invade Assam, a historical event which brought forth “untold misery” for the people of Assam. Unlike most historical records which valorise Pijou Aideo for supporting her father, “misogynist” Ratneswar Mahanta considers her the “main mover (shakti)” in the act (A. Mahanta 65).

The second woman in Ratneswar Mahanta's series is Numali Rajmao, “the mother of King Chandrakanta Singha who had to submit to the Burmese rule.” To save her son, she had planned the assassination of Badan Barphukan. Though she fought against the invasion of the Burmese, Ratneswar Mahanta considers her a “bad woman of patriarchy,” who, despite being a mother, did not fear to “shed the blood of so great a noble” (A. Mahanta 66).

The third woman in the series is Queen Phuleswari or Pramestheswari. She was a Shakti follower. She “humiliated the Vaishnavite Mahantas or powerful heads of the *Satras* (religious establishments) by forcing them to join in Durga worship.” This act kindled the Moāmariā rebellion. The Moāmariās were “a non-conformist Vaishnava sect” and “popular among the tribal and lower caste people.”⁴ Records mention conflicts between the Ahoms following Hinduism and the Vaishnav Satras. The Moāmariās also clashed with the Hindu Ahoms, who felt threatened by the rising popularity of the Vaishnava sect (Gait 185-186, 191-192, 200, 205). One may note that

Ratneswar Mahanta was probably against the Shakti cult of Hinduism and instead celebrated Sankaradeva's Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism⁵. Thus, the "evil women" he mentions are portrayed as Shakti personified, who, according to the author, are "bad women."

In the same Moāmariās Rebellion, the "rebels" had a leader, Radha-Rukmini. Though she fought for her husband, history states that she was a "skilled archer and her appearance in the battlefield frightened the Ahom soldiers who thought her to be 'Ranachandi' (the goddess of battle)." Ratneswar Mahanta considers her to be "battle crazy," which earns her the allegory of the avatar of Shakti. Hence, he includes her as the fourth "evil woman" in his series (A. Mahanta 66).

The fifth woman is a Manipuri princess, Kuranganayini, "who had been a consort of the previous king and had been taken by one of the rebel leaders [of the Moāmariās] as part of the royal harem." The supporters of the royal throne had promised her the title of the chief queen if she helped them execute the rebels' assassination and thus restore the king. She "had succumbed to their inducements" and actively took part in the assassination by bearing arms (A. Mahanta 68).

Thus, Ratneswar Mahanta's "evil women" fall in the conventional category of the Virangana (alluding to Hansen's model). However, as a misogynist, he villainises them for transgressing the hegemonic threshold. According to him, the ideal woman of patriarchy is the one who exudes conventional feminine virtues of *pativrata*, submissiveness, silence, suffering and self-sacrifice. Thus, contrary to the array of "evil women" in his series, Ratneswar Mahanta discovers Joymoti, "the paragon of feminine virtues" (A. Mahanta 68).

Aparna Mahanta claims that Ratneswar Mahanta's article is considered the first attempt to introduce Joymoti "into the Assamese collective consciousness" (67). However, if one is to follow S. K Bhuyan's arguments, Joymoti, who does not otherwise appear at length in the *Buranjis*, J. M

Foster is perhaps the first person to have described Joymoti's story, though, it did not reach as wide an audience as Ratneswar Mahanta's version. Notably, there is an existing body of popular narratives, oral and otherwise, formed on the barely mentioned historical metanarrative on Joymoti. Thus, one may suggest that perhaps Ratneswar Mahanta's articles gave birth to the subsequent discourse on Joymoti. However, a pertinent question arises: how, despite the lack of historical evidence, Ratneswar Mahanta's articles rebirth Joymoti's story and catapult a fragment of history to a national myth and memory?

To seek a response to this question, a brief idea of the late-nineteenth-early twentieth century "Assamese nationalism" is explored here. The anti-colonial nationalist wave across India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century also touched Assam. British rule in Assam had established Bengali as the medium of instruction in administrative offices and educational institutes. Boddhisatva Kar refers to Captain Francis Jenkins' private journals and states that "pure Bengallee" was officially introduced in Assam "primarily [as] a territorial move: an attempt "to render this Province as far as possible an integral part of the great country to which that language belongs" (35)⁶. Most young men of Assam who received their education in this language and wished to pursue higher education went to the colleges in Calcutta. Very few of them went further to London for further studies. In the wake of nationalism in India, in general, and Assam, in particular, these youth returned to Assam to join the movement (Chaudhuri 102).

While in Calcutta, these young male students formed the Asamiya Bhasa Unnati Sadhini Sabha (ABUSS, Society for the Improvement of the Assamese Language) in 1888. They resided in "mess houses around College Square in Calcutta." The organisation began with these students' motives to build a sense of "Assamese nationality" in Assam (Rajkhowa 110). One must note how this identity was deeply founded in linguistic nationalism; most elite youths considered the

dominant Assamese language in the state a pan-regional linguistic identity. This process thus negated several minority linguistic communities within the state. Evidently, “Assamese nationalism” was a form of sub-nationalism that merged with anti-colonial sentiments and the need to invoke the Assamese language to exercise an idea of imagined Assam⁷.

Amidst debates which have been ongoing since colonial times, “Assamese nationalism” was a product of the conjuncture of the “Bengal Renaissance” and the linguistic anxiety suffered by the intelligentsia in Assam under the colonial imposition of the Bengali language. One perspective acknowledges that “Assamese nationalism” took birth in Calcutta and was very much influenced by the rising sense of linguistic and cultural ethos in Bengal. On the other hand, the other perspective dismisses the Bengali influence. It instead situates nineteenth and early twentieth-century “Assamese nationalism” as a linguistic uprising to protect vernacular Assamese from the increasing impact of the Bengali language (Chaudhuri 102). This debate needs extensive exploration that cannot be undertaken here since this will deviate from the primary argument of the chapter. This chapter will examine if the popularity of Joymoti was historically created under the influence of Bengal’s nineteenth-century linguistic and cultural movement, and if it has been strikingly reused in contemporary caste Hindu “Assamese” sub-nationalist narratives.

Jayeeta Sharma, in *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (2011), states that in “1928 the Simon Commission, in its deliberations in the future of Indian constitutional reform, received a strongly worded letter of protest from Assam. A young lawyer expressed indignation that an exhibition at the Calcutta Museum classified Ahoms as an uncivilized hill tribe.” The Assamese-speaking male educated elites, especially, considered this to be “an insult to the entire Assamese nation.” In order to establish a superior and distinct “Assamese” identity over the “savage” hill tribes like the Nagas, Sharma argues, the Assamese-speaking “publicists” comprising

the aforementioned elites emphasised weaving “incidents from the Ahom past into a heroic [Hindu] Assam history.” The process of creating a distinct “Assamese” identity was attempted, it may be argued, by incorporating Assam’s history into “the grand narrative of Indo-Aryan” identity of the more dominant caste Hindu northern India (222-23).

J. Sharma states that Surya Kumar Bhuyan was one of the most prominent voices to claim this distinct identity. Although he relied primarily on the *Buranjis* to do so, much like most other historians writing on Ahom history, the lines between fact and fiction were blurred in Bhuyan’s history writings as well (225). However, as discussed in the first chapter, such kind of history writing is aligned with the Whitean “metahistory” and Sudipta Kaviraj’s idea of the “imaginary history” of India where myth, fiction and fact are accepted integrations of historiography (Kaviraj 74). The “new elite” Indian nationalist’s necessity to pen down a patriotic history of the Indian nation is considered to be a voice against the coloniser’s history writing. Bhuyan can also be considered one of these intellectuals to have undertaken a similar approach towards creating a historical discourse of Assam to establish an “Assamese” sub-national identity. It is noteworthy that “since throughout the subcontinent reading public was small, and skewed towards urban male elites,” the idea of the new nationalist or sub-nationalist identity was condensed with the perceptions of this dominant reading section. In early twentieth-century Assam, Ahom history was portrayed as representative of “sacrifice and redemption,” thus defining the “Assamese” identity on a pan-Indian nationalist canvas; Joymoti’s imagined narrative was perhaps considered the epitome of this representation (J. Sharma 225). However, it was after all a prejudiced upper-class, Hindu patriarchal representation.

It has already been mentioned how Ratneswar Mahanta, a Calcutta student, had ahistorically introduced Joymoti in the first edition of his article. In a footnote to the subsequent

corrected edition, he claims that he had referred to and had been influenced by a Bengali article titled “Abalar Atmadan” (or, as Aparna Mahanta also mentions, “A woman’s self-sacrifice”), published in a magazine named *Pakshik Patrika* in Calcutta. Ratneswar Mahanta reuses the trope of the sacrificing woman used in the Bengali article in “his own treatment of the Joymoti story” (Aparna Mahanta 67). Furthermore, Lakshminath Bezbarua, in the preface of his play *Joymoti*, warns the readers of the similarities one may find between the initial part of his play and Dwijendralal Rai’s Bengali play *Shahjahan*. Still, Bezbarua states that the reader should only consider this an inevitable subconscious influence he probably gathered when he watched *Shahjahan* (Bezbaruah). Thus, it is evident that the students from Assam residing in Calcutta were exposed to Bengali literature and other cultural productions. This exposure made a considerable conscious or subconscious impact on the Assamese literature that the ABUSS produced and published from Calcutta.

Although “Gandhian nationalist mobilisation” did not thoroughly surface till the 1930s, Assam and especially the “Assamese” intelligentsia were already exposed to and influenced by the non-violent Gandhian ideology (Rajkhowa 116). For the first time, educated women organised themselves politically after Gandhi visited Assam in August 1921 (Boruah 717). Women had not thronged the streets in solidarity with political protests until then. The ideal woman restricted her duties to the well-being of her husband, in-laws and children. The second chapter of this thesis extensively explores the gendered anti-colonial nationalist discourse and its creation of the figure of Bharatmata, the woman deified. In this political context, the ideal late nineteenth-early twentieth-century nationalist “Assamese” woman was also considered the one who “had children, relatives, a household.” Still, despite these duties, she prioritises her *pativrata dharma*. For her nationalist husband, she suffers and sacrifices all her other responsibilities (A. Mahanta 69-70).

One may note how the nation becomes an extended metaphor for her husband, and in this case, is created in the image of the patriarchal man. The ideal nationalist “Assamese” woman is chaste to her husband and, thus, also towards her nation.

Aparna Mahanta states that before publishing articles on Joymoti, Ratneswar Mahanta’s already published works included articles titled “*Swadhinta ne swechachasar*” (freedom or wilfulness), “*Ghainir kartyabaya u stree siksha*” (wife’s duty and women’s education), a poem titled “Gaonlia Bowari” (the rural daughter-in-law), an article titled “Bibah” (marriage). In these writings, Aparna Mahanta suggests, Ratneswar Mahanta “presented his version of the ideal hardworking, self-sacrificing, obedient woman untainted by education.” Aparna Mahanta further states that Ratneswar Mahanta’s ideal “Assamese” woman aligned with “pillars of society like Indibor Baruah or Dangoria Dinanath Bezbaroa” (64, 70).

The second chapter of this thesis has also examined the idea of the “new Indian woman,” which emerged during the late nineteenth century. As discussed in the chapter, the “new Indian woman” or the “modern Indian woman” (modernity as viewed from the Western coloniser’s perspective) was, as Tanika Sarkar mentions, an epitome of feminine chastity despite her exposure to social reforms initiated by the Indian male reformers, including educational opportunities. The “modern Indian woman” was always a caste Hindu wife, and her loyalty towards her husband implied loyalty towards the nation (42). “Assamese” intelligentsia like Ratneswar Mahanta were exposed to the Bengal ideas of reform and were simultaneously aware of the gradual changes in the “Assamese” society. Some academics believe that “modernity in Assam (and other parts of British India) is often seen to echo the Bengal example” (Chaudhuri 102). However, as mentioned earlier, this statement has also been extensively debated. If it is held to be accurate, the “Assamese” intelligentsia, like Ratneswar Mahanta, perhaps felt the need to construct a figure of a “new

Assamese woman,” who, despite being exposed to the gradual reformative changes like education would remain chaste to her husband and nation.

Moreover, Ratneswar Mahanta belonged to the Vaishnavite Mahanta community in Assam. It has already been mentioned how he vilified the Shakti cult. So, it can be argued that under these circumstances, Ratneswar Mahanta’s “new Assamese woman” would indubitably be the silent, forbearing, passive, chaste Hindu wife. She sacrifices her life for her husband and her nation. Thus, Ratneswar Mahanta conforms to “the nineteenth century’s conception of the ideal feminine character as exemplified by the Hindu pantheon of virtuous women” like Sati, Savitri and Sita (A. Mahanta 69). It is interesting to note how Mahanta’s article and the discourse, which is based on Joymoti, mythicise her to serve various socio-political agendas at different times.

Ratneswar Mahanta’s article popularised Joymoti as the ideal *pativrata* who suffered to protect her husband and the nation. Though Joymoti did not undergo the ritual of *sati*, historically or otherwise, Ratneswar Mahanta symbolises her as a *sati* because the received ideas of Joymoti see her as silent and unprotesting. Although the scant material available since the pre-Ahom days reveals the inherent patriarchy of Assamese society, it is also a fact that Hindu caste practices of *sati*, prohibition of widow remarriage, child marriage, etc., did not prevail here. At the behest of the Ahom king Rudra Singha (1696-1714; who was Joymoti’s son), the society of Assam, constituting the Ahoms, Kacharis, Bodos and several other tribal groups, saw a process of “Aryanisation” with the infiltration of Bengali Brahminism. Thus, caste Hindu social practices influenced the upper castes of Assam. However, upper-caste customs specified above were very rarely in practice. Tilottama Misra refers to the *Orunodoi*, the first Assamese journal (1846-1854), which “informed its readers the details about this evil custom and about the promulgation of the anti-sati law in 1829.” A report in the journal published on 26 April 1846 mentions that “an

Assamese ‘mauzadar’ of a village in Sibsagar reported to the police the intentions of his widowed sister-in-law for self-immolation, thus preventing a possible act of ‘*sati*’⁸) (1559, 1561, 1565).

J. Sharma claims that the first piece of writing to bestow the title of *sati* on Joymoti was “an orthodox Brahmin publicist, Kumudeswar [Borthakur]...in his brief tract Jaymati Kahini (1918).” Sharma argues, “The [Hinduised] attribution shifted the [Joymati] story closer to Indic values at the same time as it retained local roots. The use of this [*sati*] framework allowed the Jaymati theme and its author admittance into a pan-Indian Hindu universe” and the “Assamese” woman would also be made compatible with the “elevated destiny of the new Indian woman.” Borthakur justified that an otherwise “non-Hindi woman who is ritually impure” is revered as a *sati* because the virtues she exudes incorporates her into the pantheon of the pan-Indian Hindu female goddesses like Sati, Sita and Savitri (227). One can also argue how perhaps Joymoti’s ideal Hindu wife’s qualities redeem her husband Gadadhar’s non-Hindu tainted identity as well and in turn, helped elevate him to the pedestal of a sub-national hero.

Thus, it is interesting to note how a society not extensively influenced by the social custom of *sati* came to accept Joymoti as the ideal *sati* in the anti-colonial and sub-nationalist discourse. Deviating considerably from historical veracity, the likes of Ratneswar Mahanta and Kumudeswar Borthakur revived Joymoti in the popular imagination. She has hence been frequently reproduced and used to interpellate the “Assamese nationalist” subject in different politico-historical times.

Fictional Representations

As has been mentioned in the first chapter, Joymoti has been very frequently represented in the popular imagination, thus rendering it difficult to trace all literary or cultural productions

about her. Nevertheless, the following texts may be considered the select popular representations that have created a space in the cultural memory of the region:

- Padmanath Gohain Barua's play *Joymoti* (1900)
- Lakshminath Bezbarua's play *Joymoti Kunwari* (1915)
- Kumudeswar Borthakur's brief piece titled *Jaymati Kahini* (1918)
- Dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan's ballad "Jaymati Akhyan" (1920)
- Dandinath Kalita's play *Satir Tez* (1931)
- Dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan's fictional historical narrative titled *Asom Jiyari* (1935)
- Lakhidhar Sarma's play "Sati Jaymati Kunwari" (1935)
- Jyoti Prasad Agarawala's film "Joymoti" (1935)
- Ganesh Gogoi's trilogy *Jerengar Sati* (1937)
- Bishnu Prasad Rabha's (1909-1969) song "Jaya Nai"
- Khagen Mahanta and Archana Mahanta's (late twentieth century-early twenty-first century) Bihugeet "Lai-Lechai"
- Manju Borah's film "Joymati the Saviour" (2006)

Bishnu Prasad Rabha's poem "Jaya Nai" is an elegy which became popular as a song commemorating Joymoti's death. Conforming to the popular myth, Rabha's piece depicts how Sati Joymoti sacrificed her life trying to protect her husband and the nation. She is referred to as "Asomi Air Senehor Ji" (the beloved daughter of the "Assamese motherland"). Joymoti's death should not be grieved; instead, it should raise anti-colonial nationalism as well as "Assamese" nationalism in the young women of Assam and the "Assamese." Similarly, Khagen Mahanta and Archana Mahanta, known for their *Bihugeet* (songs celebrating the regional Bihu festival) in

Assam, have also created a rendition of Joymoti's myth. Their eponymous *Bihugeet* portrays how Joymoti's twin sons, Lai and Lechai, grieve their mother's death.

Apart from these, there are several other fictional representations like Chitra Deb's "Gadadhar O Jaymati," a short story in Bengali published in her anthology of stories *Rajakiya Premkatha* (1963) and Amar Chitra Katha's graphic short story "Joymoti" (1971). While the former depicts a tragic romance of Sati Joymoti and Gadapani, the latter valorises her for her bravery, forbearance and sacrifice, as a paragon of conventional feminine qualities, in the larger national discourse.

The primary texts selected for analysis in this chapter have significance for the primary argument of this thesis; they are also seminal in understanding the crucial role socio-political contexts play in the making of a nationalist or sub-nationalist identity at different points in time.

Padmanath Gohain Barua's play *Joymoti* (1900)

Padmanath Gohain Barua was a prominent nineteenth-century litterateur and academic. He felt that "Assamese language could be developed only through pragmatic efforts at its institutionalisation and use" (Rajkhowa 111). He was one of the vital resource persons who helped build course material in the Assamese language to be deployed in the curricula of schools and colleges. He was a founding member of a branch of the ABUSS in Tezpur. He wrote Assamese plays to be performed onstage that drew large audiences and is therefore considered one of the founders of Assamese theatre.

First published in 1900 during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, Gohain Barua's play *Joymoti* is one of the first fictionalised and popular literary representations of the historical Joymoti. It is "the first historical play in Assamese dramatic literature" (Rajkhowa 112). The play

depicts the story of the seventeenth-century Ahom princess. Following the conventional trope circulating in the rest of the country, Gohain Barua's play deifies the Ahom princess as the nation goddess. The preface to the first edition of the play states how Joymoti's portrayal was divine because she was far beyond a mere mortal. She was claimed to be a *mahasati* (41).

The play reiterates historical records and the popular narrative alive in the cultural memory of the region. However, it anachronistically represents the antagonistic figure as Atan Buragohain, not Laluksola Bargohain, who manoeuvres the king's decisions and actions. Apart from the fact that all potential Ahom princes were ordered to be physically maimed to fulfil the political interests of the king and the Buragohain (counsellor), Gohain Barua's play also introduces another fictional reason for the king's vengeance against Gadapani. Sulikpha is depicted to have had an unrequited romantic interest towards Joymoti. Thus, unlike historical facts, Sulikpha in the play is not an entirely passive and innocent "puppet king." He is relatively young, mindlessly passionate and a heartbroken, egotistical man. His retaliation is directed towards harming Joymoti, who rejects him and marries Gadapani instead. Sulikpha laments how Joymoti rejects him "with disgust" (44). Perhaps the play builds a foundation for a conventional narrative which holds the "beautiful woman" responsible for bringing down great kingdoms and nations, like Helen of Homer's *Iliad* and Draupadi of *Mahabharata*. However, Gohain Barua probably constructs this narrative to present Joymoti as the saviour of her husband and nation. It is with her silence and forbearance that she defeats Sulikpha.

Interestingly, unlike historical or mythological narratives, Gohain Barua's play stresses Joymoti's beauty and sexuality. Gadapani fondly reminisces about his first meeting with her. He describes how her beauty and sexuality had rendered him weak. Thus, he refers to her as a Ranachandi (a war goddess, an avatar of Shakti) (44). One may wonder if the play, which is most

probably influenced by Ratneswar Mahanta's article, turns his ideology on its head. In his arduous attempts, Mahanta created Joymoti as the dichotomous silent, kind and docile Other to the violent and aggressive Shakti. Moreover, Gohain Barua's play aligns with popular history and culture, not showing Joymoti taking arms. Perhaps the play introduces Joymoti to the audience in the very initial Act 1, Scene 2, as a woman whose power lies not in her physical might but in her conventional beauty and sexual appeal, thus underlining the trope of angelic beauty.

Contrary to the submissive damsel is the well-built male warrior. Act 2, Scene 1 of the play opens with an elaborate celebration of Gadapani's divine hypermasculinity. An ordinary woman who offers Gadapani refuge praises his gigantic physical stature, voracious appetite and extraordinary physical strength. She expresses with sorrow how even if she desires to help Gadapani, she would not be able to sustain him with food for a long time. She is not sufficiently wealthy enough to feed a godlike Gadapani (Gohain Barua 50).

The play showcases Joymoti as a warrior's wife whose primary duties are to keep her husband safe for greater national interests and to produce warrior-like sons for the nation (Gohain Barua 54). Nevertheless, the play showcases Joymoti as a supporter of her husband in his political interests and fight for freedom, even as she exercises little agency in the course of events. When Padma, Joymoti's friend, reveals the king's decision to injure Gadapani, Joymoti is taken aback. However, Padma pacifies her friend, reminding her that she is a brave warrior's wife. Thus, as a *pativrata*, Joymoti is required only to exude patience and superhuman forbearance (47). Joymoti takes the friend's advice to heart and proclaims much before her actual death,

Offering my life,

For my husband's well-being, I shall sacrifice myself to the pyre.

I am leaving my two orphan sons in your custody,

Provide them with your maternal love. (47, translation mine)

A woman reminds another of her marital responsibilities. Moreover, Joymoti is not a mere subject of the kingdom. Her devotion to her husband, directed towards the larger interests of the Ahom nation, requires profound sacrifices. It may be noted that, much before understanding how the future may unfold, Joymoti promptly dives in to sacrifice herself for her husband's well-being. Gohain Barua depicts Joymoti as a proud and willing *sati*.

Like Padma and Joymoti, the play depicts more women who play secondary roles in making Gadapani the king. The chorus in Baruah's play consists of women who lament their ill fate in the absence of their *nāthas* (husbands). The chorus prays for their husbands' safety. Thus, the play depicts a patriarchal society where women are the inferior sex and responsible for their husbands' well-being.

However, one cannot ignore the nuanced representation of political agency, albeit transitory, which Joymoti is shown to possess in certain instances. In Act 1, Scene 5 of Gohain Barua's play, Joymoti is shown as a judicious woman who sees it politic to advise her husband to flee before the Ahom emissaries find him. Thus, he can bide time and build an army to protest against Sulikpha and Lukuksola. However, Gadapani initially disagrees because fleeing a battlefield is seen as cowardly, which would elicit questions about his masculinity. Moreover, agreeing immediately to his wife's deft political scheming would effeminise Gadapani. Therefore, after much coaxing by Joymoti, he changes into a commoner's attire and escapes to the Naga hills. Even later in the play, when Gadapani decides to return disguised as a Naga to see his tortured wife, he laments, considering himself an emasculated coward for failing to save his wife and sons

from the clutches of the king (Gohain Barua 66, 88-9). Perhaps he feels so because the woman here plays an active role in saving her husband, sacrificing herself in the process.

The earlier chronicles by J. M Foster and Dutiram Hazarika represent Gadapani's courage. According to these chronicles, on learning of Joymoti's tortured plight, Gadapani comes in disguise and advises her to reveal his location to the king's men. Similarly, Gohain Barua's play also depicts the same set of circumstances that emphasise Joymoti's patriotism. She opposes Gadapani and reminds him of his pledge to the nation, her appeals, and her advice. She tells him that her sufferings are a part of her *mahabrat*—a grand ritualistic pledge—towards her motherland. She requests him not to intervene in her venture to rescue her “father-like” nation from the clutches of the corrupted king and his ministers (70). It is noteworthy how her act of heroically forbearing all afflictions and tribulations is presented as a process of salvation and transmogrification for the devoted and patriotic wife. Thus, in the latter half of this process of transcendence, Joymoti ceases to be a mortal. The process elevates her forbearance, patience, courage and patriotism, qualities she already possessed, to a superhuman level. By virtue of this, Joymoti is not deterred by her husband's pleas; instead, she once again advises him to continue with their nationalist ambitions. Thus, Gohain Barua's play creates a *sati* out of Joymoti much before she physically dies for her husband and her nation. Interestingly, she sees the nation as her father, another male guardian.

The play clearly shows Joymoti's metamorphosis into a complete goddess. Towards the very end, the same emissaries who had tortured her under the king's orders are astonished to see how Joymoti changes moments before she succumbs to death. With her fiery eyes, she is probably depicted as the fearsome Hindu goddess Kali. The emissaries are petrified and pray to her as a mother goddess. They immediately untie her from the thorny tree on which they have impaled her, and they plead for forgiveness. The play's climactic end shows Joymoti whispering haltingly in

pain, uttering god's name as if she witnessed divinity while taking her last breath (Gohain Barua 72). One may observe how the *sati* is, in the process, embraced by the divine. Thus, her deification process is rendered complete.

When the king and his courtiers realise that Joymoti has helped her husband escape, King Sulikpha warns Buragohain to beware of Joymoti. She, according to the king, is not an ordinary woman. He describes her as a resolute person who would never reveal her husband's whereabouts. Buragohain, a misogynist, responds that he is aware of womankind—they are weak and scared of being socially stigmatised. Thus, if Joymoti is unwilling to comply with the king's orders, she shall be summoned to the (men's) assembly hall. A woman's presence in the assembly hall is considered unacceptable and is hence socially a humiliation for the woman. The surmise is that Joymoti would reveal information about her husband for fear of being socially stigmatised (Gohain Barua 51).

Since Joymoti protests against the king's orders by remaining silent about her husband, both King Sulikpha and Buragohain consider her a disobedient woman who is too arrogant and therefore deserving of punishment. The men are astounded to have met a woman who uses forbearance and silent suffering as her weapons against the heteropatriarchal society (Gohain Barua 56-57). Such a defiant woman of society is considered evil and a deviant; she needs to be forcefully bent and corrected. It may also be noted that Joymoti's silence is, in this context, regarded as a significant form of political opinion and protest.

Act 2, Scene 4 shows Joymoti refusing to go to the king's court. She prays for divine forgiveness of her sins in her long lament. She prays for her husband's safety and well-being. She addresses divinity as her *nātha*, her male guardian, an epithet also interchangeably used for Gadapani. Thus, it may be noted how the play puts Gadapani, the warrior, on a godlike pedestal. In her prayer, Joymoti states:

According to divine regulations, a *sati*'s foremost tasks are duties towards the husband, attaining salvation by sacrificing for her husband and worshipping the husband's feet. (Gohain Barua 53, translation mine).

Thus, a *sati* is the quintessential devoted wife whose entire world is only consumed by her husband. The husband, for her, is supreme. Joymoti, in Gohain Barua's play, cites examples of Savitri, the ideal *sati* who, with her devotion and loyalty, brings back her husband's life from the clutches of death personified. With this example, Gohain Barua perhaps attempts to locate Joymoti, a lesser-known Ahom princess, within the pan-Indian array of Hindu goddesses. The play refers to Joymoti by epithets of Hindu goddesses Mahasati and Rajalakshmi, the epitome of the devoted wife, popular amongst the dominant caste Hindus of India (54-5).

The epithet *sati*, which Gohain Barua uses in his play to refer to *pativrata* women, probably does not refer to the self-immolation practice by women. The *Cambridge publication of India in the World* states that "the word *sati* derives from sat (truth) and a *sati*⁹ was, then, a faithful woman to Hindu idealisation (chastity, purity and loyalty to the dead husband)" (287). Gohain Barua's play, in particular, and the subsequent popular image of Joymoti as a *sati*, in general, thus draws her as this ideal woman who remains faithful to her husband. The husband, in this case, is not dead but absent. Though Joymoti eventually offers her life to safeguard her husband's life, she is referred to as a *sati* by others or herself, much before it is known that she would need to undergo the ritual sacrifice, not through self-immolation but by meeting her death at the end of the horrific corporeal punishment. More will be discussed on Joymoti as a metaphorical *sati* towards the latter half of the chapter.

Gohain Barua's play shows that when Sulikpha and the other male courtiers in the assembly fail to procure any information about Gadapani from her, the king orders his emissaries to punish Joymoti. She cries for vengeance, but this is vengeance which her husband will wreak on her behalf as a brave warrior. He would one day come and take on Sulikpha and his ministers for meting out violence on a *sati* in her husband's absence. Joymoti considers the king's act as effeminate and cowardly (58). Thus, it may be observed that Joymoti internalises her position as the weaker sex who cannot physically protect herself from the male perpetrators of violence. She needs her "prince charming" to come and rescue her. Moreover, when looked through the Foucauldian framework of knowledge and power, Joymoti, in this context, can also be seen as a capillary of patriarchal power for believing that harming the weaker sex, who is additionally a *sati/pativrata*, dismantles the men's masculinity. They are not "men enough" to dare fight the mighty hypermasculine Gadapani.

Joymoti is tortured for days on the king's orders in *Jerengapathar*, a large, arid field. The villagers eventually learn of it and come in hordes to witness the act. They lament but are voiceless under the might of the brutal king. As days pass, the villagers discuss how Joymoti does not comply with the king's orders and suffers silently. According to their knowledge, the king is affected mentally and has become deranged. The villagers deliberate on how the king is supposedly hallucinating and talking nonsense. They assume the devil possesses the king or he has succumbed to some black magic (Gohain Barua 62). Although the play does not explicitly state it, the king's unstable state is perhaps portrayed as an outcome of his evil doings against Sati Joymoti. The latter's virtues, which are said to be greater than a mortal's, thus elevate her to the pedestal of a goddess.

Disrespecting this goddess kindles Sulikpha's downfall. In the later part of her torment, Sulikpha is seen as entirely disoriented. He cries in fear of the *sati* as he hallucinates; the *sati*, he claims, drags him to hell (Gohain Barua 68). This avatar of Joymoti, whom Sulikpha imagines in his delusions, is perhaps an allusion to more violent goddesses like Kali and Ranachandi. It is noteworthy how Gohain Barua's comparisons of Joymoti with the avatars of the Hindu goddess Shakti deviate from Ratneswar Mahanta's Vaishnavite Sati Joymoti. However, Gohain Barua's Joymoti is an imagined Ranachandi, not corporeal.

The king's mother consoles a suffering Joymoti by telling her that the common folk would always revere Joymoti as a *sati* and a *pativrata*. She would be worshipped forever (Gohain Barua 62, 65). Hence, Joymoti is required to gather courage and patience as she silently suffers to save her husband. Thus, a *sati*'s achievements lie in her goddess-like status, for which her self-sacrifice is considered just.

Gohain Barua's play showcases how Joymoti becomes a national symbol in the very process of her suffering. Joymoti's father, a distinguished member of the Ahom ministry, learns of his daughter's state while he is defending the kingdom against the Mughals in Guwahati. He claims that although a father's heart finds it difficult to see his child suffer, it is Joymoti's sacrifice which will save the nation. Like any other man of the gendered nation, the father uses her as a symbol to evoke patriotism in himself and his army, inspiring them to fight with renewed enthusiasm against the Mughals. The play builds on this idea further in its closure. With the words of men like Joymoti's father and the other ministers, the play, which was written in the wake of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, perhaps intends to motivate the twentieth-century common folk of Assam to rise against the British Raj to uphold the spirit of nationalism which Sati Joymoti had bravely exuded in her time. Joymoti is revered as a dutiful daughter of a Janaka-like father, a

beloved wife of the brave warrior Gadapani, and a pregnant mother to two brave warrior sons¹⁰. Thus, Joymoti, having fulfilled all her duties as the “good woman” of the patriarchal home and the nation, is considered a Virangana (Gohain Barua 67, 73-4). Gohain Barua’s Joymoti embodies Ratneswar Mahanta’s construct of the ideal “Assamese” woman.

In this context, as the play depicts, Joymoti’s father declares to his army how Joymoti’s sacrifice would not go in vain; they would battle to defend their nation-goddess Kamakhya’s abode (67). It may be noted that with the mention of the goddess Kamakhya, Baruah further emphasises the dominant Hindu nation and nationalism.

Although the goddess Kamakhya refers to Shaivite Hinduism, Gohain Barua’s play has overt tones of Vaishnavite Hinduism. When Sulikpha goes wholly berserk and hallucinates, his ministers fear that he will be punished for tormenting a *sati*. They call out to the *Mahaprabhu*, a reference to Krishna (from Vaishnavite Hinduism), to save all (68). The third and closing act of the play opens with *bhajangeets*, sacred songs of the Vaishnav tradition. Rajkhowa states that Gohain Barua’s play was influenced by the “prevalent *jatra* aesthetic of Puranic plays, as well as the historical dramas of the Bengali stage.” “Joymoti” was written in *amitrakhyarcaanda*¹¹, derived from the traditional Assamese *pad* verse form used in the Vaishnavite writings. He used metrical language for the upper-class and royal characters as opposed to vernacular language for the characters belonging to the common mass (112).

Although using the two different forms of the Assamese language reflects the social hierarchy of seventeenth-century Ahom society, Gohain Barua also adheres to the elitist ideology of the royal Ahoms as more sophisticated and “civilised” than the common masses. The protagonists Joymoti and Gadapani are also raised on a pedestal, the former as the deified mother/nation and the latter as the heroic warrior. The inclusion of metrical language in the play,

which colours it in the Puranic tradition, romanticises the performance on stage. However, it limited the play to only privileged sections of the Assamese-speaking society, which was well-versed in that form. Thus, ironically, the play does not agree with Gohain Barua's intention to open Assamese literature to the common masses.

An afflicted Gadapani, in the play, loses all interest in his nationalist ambitions after his wife's death. A female ascetic reminds Gadapani that his wife is not a mere mortal. With *satitwa*, she is considered similar to Sita, Savitri and Damayanti—the epitome of the Hindu *sati* and *pativrata*. Thus, instead of being remorseful, Gadapani should revere his once mortal wife-turned nation-goddess and fight for the nationalist cause. In his fight for the nation, he wishes to find his wife, who is now the nation personified (75-77). Gohain Barua's play *Gadapani* was published after *Joymoti* and depicted the aftermath of Joymoti's death. It is interesting to note that while *Joymoti*, which centres around a woman, is tragic, *Gadapani*, centring on a male warrior, is heroic.

Gohain Barua's Play, Joymoti Utsav and the Rising Feminist Consciousness in Assam

Gohain Barua's play was published before an active feminist consciousness began in Assam. In fact, in the push for the necessity of modern education by Indian reformers and Western modes of learning, one may consider Gohain Barua's play a pivotal text in inspiring the "Assamese" women to embody the qualities of the "new Indian woman." Ratneswar Mahanta's article raised Joymoti on such a larger-than-life scale that a festival, Joymoti Utsav, took place "on 6th April 1914¹² on the banks of the Joysagar, a large artificial tank near Sibsagar" (A. Mahanta 60).

An account published in a 1915 issue of *Banhi*¹³ describes the festival's organisation through an anonymous observer's eyes. The observer notes there was an invited male speaker at

the ceremony. In his speech, which he delivered to almost three to four hundred women and girls (A. Mahanta 60) he said:

Sisters! Like Joymoti you too must be bhaktas of your husband; you too must be concerned about their well-being. If need be, you, must be willing to sacrifice your lives for them. Such a death brings bliss and peace to the soul. Such acts can even contribute to the good of society and nation. (Rajkhowa 114)

The sub-divisional officer had declared “a half-holiday in the girls’ schools of the town so that the girls could attend.” It was an “unusual sight” for hundreds of “Assamese” women to gather in a public meeting, generally an all-male space. Interestingly, the festival’s genesis occurred in the “Sibsagar Club,” which comprised “a group of educated young men.” The mastermind behind the organisation of the festival was a “schoolmaster at the Government Boys School in Sibsagar,” Radhika Nath Sarma, who was also “an enthusiastic supporter” and “an organiser” of “progressive causes” and the founder of “the Phuleswari Institution, the first co-educational school in Sibsagar” (A. Mahanta 60-1). However, the chief organiser of this opening celebration was “Tara Prasad Chaliha, a planter returned from England” (J. Sharma 228).

The site for the festival was chosen near the Joydol (the temple dedicated to Joymoti) and Joysagar (a tank named after her). These were historical relics considered to have been built by Rudra Singha, Joymoti’s son (A. Mahanta 62). The report in *Banhi* further states that the people present observed how “the sky piercing temple and the sea touching the underworld...stood for the greatness of Joymati’s character and the depth of her heart” (A. Mahanta 71). A painting of Joymoti was unveiled, “which represented her as bound to the stake, surrounded by her torturers with her husband drawn by conflicting pulls of love (for his wife) and duty (to his country) looking on” (A. Mahanta 71). The very organisation of the festival, celebrating a woman for her chastity and

loyalty and idolised as the nation-goddess, pulled hundreds of women. The unveiling of the painting was the tipping point of a political meeting turned religious:

[It] was greeted with auspicious ululations and obeisance from the ladies along with comments on Joymoti being a ‘*sati*’¹⁴ and a ‘*devi*.’¹⁵ Rows of girls chanting a prayer strewed flowers in the tank and the ladies sipped the water and put the flowers in the hair as if it was the sacred ‘Santijal’ (holy water) and ‘nirmal’...The only woman speaker on the occasion thanked the men for enlightening them. (A. Mahanta 70-1)

After the religious rituals, a formal meeting followed where the men delivered speeches. After the day’s events, “in the evening, as was customary during the annual Durga Puja celebration a play was staged in the ‘club house.’” The play was Gohain Barua’s *Joymoti*, acted by only men (A. Mahanta 71).

It is noteworthy how the men plan, organise and speak in the Utsav, celebrating a deified flesh-and-blood woman. The women who transcend the hegemonic threshold to come to the festival are subjects ideologically indoctrinated with the patriarchal and dominant national discourse. Thus, the fact that the women, consciously or ideologically, transform a political meeting into a Hindu religious affair only reflects deep-rooted structures. While the men play active roles, even acting the part of Joymoti in the play, the women are merely subjects and consumers.

It was “in 1919 the Sibsagar Mahila Sanmilani, a newly formed organisation of ladies took over the responsibility of organising [the Utsav] and continued right up to the nineteen thirties.” The festival “became an all Assam event” in 1923 and hence has been celebrated in places other than Sibsagar, even by the Assamese Students Literary Club in Calcutta in 1928. Unlike the first

festival held in Sibsagar, the consequent Joymoti Utsav saw more active participation by women. The “Assam Mahila Samiti” was the most successful of all the later organisations in celebrating the Utsav. J. Sharma notes that “from the 1920s the [Joymoti] theme became the main topic for writings by a newly literate generation of [elite] women” and the Utsav “inspired many of their works.” These annual fetes were minutely described in “the nationalist paper *Asomiya*” which “carried appeals for women’s participation, speeches, editorials, and letters.” Women participated widely in these celebrations, conspicuously or otherwise, though the primary organisers were mostly the educated male elites. This is exemplified during the first commemoration of the Utsav when Nikunjalata and Kamalaloya, respectively the wife and daughter of the organiser Tara Prasad Chaliha also actively helped in the process. The women “edited a woman’s magazine, *Ghar Jeuti*, which published many essays and poems on [Joymoti].” This magazine “ran an annual writing competition for women” on the Joymoti theme. “Unlike the writings of their male counterparts,” all the entries which were by “the first generation of educated women in South Asia,” were fundamentally simple and “prescriptive” (229-30). However, one may note that since “women received little formal schooling,” the significance of such writings lay not in their literary competence but in their very existence. J. Sharma rightly agrees with Tanika Sarkar, who argues that “the weight of this [first phase of women-written] literature lay in the dullness of constant repetition” (230).

Thus, one may argue that though the hundreds of women who thronged the first Utsav were ideal patriarchal subjects and *pativrata*, their participation in a public meeting initiated the women of Assam to later actively join the anti-colonial nationalist struggles like the Gandhian non-cooperation movement and the women-specific reform movements (A. Mahanta 72, 74, 82). One such evident case is:

The Chaliha women [in Sibsagar] organised a range of Gandhian initiatives. They opened a weaving centre and trained village women in handicrafts, as did two schoolteachers in Dibrugarh, Hemprabha Das and Rajabala Das. British observers disapprovingly noted that many Congress leaders encouraged women to take a prominent part in anti-government demonstrations. Assam's women formed political associations, attended, sang at, and spoke at political meetings, and volunteered for picketing and boycotts. (J. Sharma 230)

However, the participation of women in such Gandhian initiatives “largely limited [them] to domestic and nurturing concerns” (J. Sharma 230). Moreover, the invited female speakers in the Joymoti Utsav only prescriptively spoke for *pativrata dharma* and *satitwa*. Thus, “female participation in the political public often remained conditional and restricted, even while the Mahila Samitis...in Assam acquired a strength of mobilisation which they retain to the present day.” Nevertheless, the festival still provided transgression to the women, albeit transitory, for they could gather together in “a feast of sisterhood” (J. Sharma 30; A. Mahanta 82).

Lakshminath Bezbaruah's *Joymoti Kunwori* (1915)

Nineteenth-century Assamese poet, playwright and novelist Lakshminath Bezbaruah continued the linguistic nationalist intentions of the ABUSS and wrote the play *Joymoti Kunwori*, published in 1915. Like most other fictional representations, Bezbaruah's play relied primarily on Ratneswar Mahanta's article. Unlike Gohain Barua's play, however, Bezbaruah's play was written in the commonly spoken Assamese language (“sarbojonin language”), thus opening it to the masses proper of the state (Rajkhowa 112-13). Therefore, in Bezbaruah's play, Gadapani and Joymoti become “Assamese national” icons.

Bezbaruah discusses the historicity of his play in the preface and asserts that his narrative is woven with historical and fictional elements. Unlike Ratneswar Mahanta's article, where he states that Lora Raja alone was responsible for Joymoti's death (Bhuyan 195), Bezbarua's play portrays a scheming Laluksola Burhagohain as the king's mentor; the boy-king merely acting as a puppet in the Burhagohain's hands. While a few historical chronicles, such as Harakanta Barua and Sadar-Amin's revised version of the *Assam Buranji*, depict how Joymoti and the twin sons accompanied their father, Gadapani, to the Naga hills, Bezbaruah chooses to portray otherwise. In Bezbarua's play, Gadapani's sons do not accompany their father and are left with Joymoti. This is probably to accentuate the tragedy of Joymoti, as a mother, who was dying a painful death with the knowledge that her sons would be left bereft of their father and mother. Despite her helplessness as a "good mother," she chooses not to reveal the whereabouts of her husband—her wifely duties towards her husband are paramount to her. Her image as a "good wife" is then highlighted with more emphasis against her helplessness as a "good mother."

Bezbaruah's fine-tuning of the historical description of Joymoti's narrative can also be seen in his portrayal of Joymoti in his play. She is portrayed as an ideal woman—a *Lakhimi tirota* (a woman with the qualities of the Hindu goddess Lakshmi). She tells Gadapani, "You must know that besides your happiness and welfare, Joymoti is not concerned about happiness"¹⁶ (8). Bezbaruah's Joymoti is layered; she expresses herself with humour. Gadapani seeks Joymoti's advice when he learns that Lora Raja has sent his emissaries to capture and kill Gadapani. This may suggest that some degree of political agency is being given to a woman, but Bezbaruah uses comedy to disguise the same eventually. Joymoti is seen teasing her husband about such an important issue, and she sings and playfully avoids answering her husband for a significant length of time. An irritated Gadapani finally cries, "It is useless discussing important matters such as

these with a woman” (Bezbaruah 5). It indicates Bezbaruah’s use of fine yet implicit comedy to disguise and simultaneously reveal the necessity of providing political agency to a woman in that socio-historical location. Gadapani eventually listens to her advice and flees to a Naga village. Thus, Bezbaruah finally shows that Joymoti is capable of making critical political decisions.

Knowing her son’s decision to summon Joymoti to the men’s assembly, Rajmau (the king’s mother) expresses her disagreement. She reminds her son of *Mahabharata*’s Draupadi, who had been similarly dragged to the men’s assembly by Duhsashana. According to the Rajmau, this act kindled the battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Bhima avenged Draupadi’s molestation by killing Duhsashana. So, the Rajmau warns her son not to commit a similar mistake (Bezbaruah 21). It is noteworthy how the Rajmau deems the decision to demean a woman by summoning her to a masculine political space as catastrophic. The Rajmau is a subject of the patriarchal Ahom society portrayed in the play. She conforms to gendered spaces. Women are not permitted direct access to the political spheres or provided agency to active decision-making. Thus, Joymoti’s participation in political matters is circumstantial and limited to her husband’s welfare and, by extension, her nation.

Bezbarua’s play portrays Burhagohain as a misogynist who cannot accept a loss in the face of a forbearing woman’s will. When Joymoti is determined in her silence, Burhagohain remarks:

One can make an ordinary woman like [Joymoti] dance like a monkey to one’s tunes. One needs to slap, punch or whip her. (48)

If a Burhagohain like me has to bow down to a woman, nothing is as demeaning¹⁷. (49)

It is not only Burhagohain but also other male officials like Borpatrogohain who feel similar emotions. The latter says that in the case of a loss against a mere woman, the men would have to

don *mekhela* (attire worn by women in Assam) (71). This loss would effeminise them. Thus, though Joymoti in Bezbaruah's play is a patriarchal subject/object, she threatens the masculinity and misogyny of the authorities by resisting it with silence.

Conforming to Ratneswar Mahanta's article, Bezbaruah's play shows a metaphorical *sati* who willingly suffers pain and sacrifices her life for her husband and nation. She is called a *sati* before her literal death (37). Joymoti's father considers that she has purified his and her father-in-law's lineages of their sins with her forbearance. Joymoti is the fine differential point between a *sati/pativrata* and an ordinary woman (50, 65). Thus, a hierarchy is established between both. The goddess-like *sati*, in this case, is also a privileged woman. Thus, one arrives at an important question: does Bezbaruah seem to believe that similar misogynist treatment towards a common, underprivileged woman is justified?

Act 2, Scene 3 of Gohain Barua's *Joymoti* shows Gadapani finding refuge in a Naga village. Jinu, a young Naga girl, falls in love with Gadapani. Jinu is patronised; she is depicted as naïve, stubborn, and one who obstinately wishes to be married to Gadapani. The play shows that he does not reciprocate Jinu's feelings and advances. However, as a chivalrous and caring man, he lovingly tries to explain to her his circumstances (53). Much like Gohain Barua's play, Bezbaruah also portrays another teenage Naga girl, Dalimi.

Dalimi is shown as a happy, frolicking girl singing and dancing amidst the lush natural surroundings of her village in the hills. Gadapani takes shelter at their place, as he is friends with her father. Bezbaruah's play portrays a very affectionate and romantic relationship between Gadapani and Dalimi. The latter's love for Gadapani is evident in her dialogues and verses. She refers to Gadapani as "mur kesa xon" ("my pure gold."¹⁸ It is an Assamese phrase used to refer to an affectionate loved one). The play does not show Gadapani explicitly discouraging Dalimi's

romantic attention towards him. He spends a fair amount of time with her. In one instance, he wishes he would stay with a companion like Dalimi in the picturesque hills forever, away from the worries of the political matters of the Ahom kingdom (Bezbaruah 32-3).

However, he is immediately guilty of his desires and curses himself for such thoughts. The same scene closes, showcasing Dalimi saving Gadapani's life from Lora Raja's emissaries, who find him on the hills. Following this, Gadapani sees the same Dalimi, for whom he momentarily develops romantic desires, as a goddess who saves him (Bezbaruah 32-3).

Both plays do not show Gadapani as a disloyal husband, nor is Jinu/Dalimi Othered as the Whore to the dichotomous Madonna, in this case, characterised by Joymoti. Like Jinu, Dalimi represents the "naïve" and "primitive" Nagas, a marginalised tribal community. Such a portrayal is telling of the racist stereotypes of not only the playwrights but also of the dominant "Assamese" society. In a discussion of Gadapani's treatment of Bezbaruah's Dalimi, Rajkhowa argues that Gadapani "env[ies] [Dalimi's] carefree innocence even as he is vexed by the guilt of abandoning his wife at the hands of the merciless Lora Raja, and of having fled from his duty of defending the legitimacy of the Ahom throne" (113). To justify Gadapani's behaviour with Jinu/Dalimi as stemming from his envy towards her "carefree innocence" Rajkhowa absolves him of any guilt whatsoever in encouraging the young girl's romantic pursuit.

In Bezbaruah's play, Dalimi's love for nature is replicated in her passion for Gadapani. On learning about his wife Joymoti's torture, Gadapani leaves the hills in disguise to see her. Dalimi jumps off a cliff when she realises, he left her for his wife. The Other woman's love cannot be brought to fruition. The play instead romanticises her and her death. Her parents consider her an unearthly creature who had only come to the world for a fleeting moment (77). Her sacrifice for the realisation of love between a married heterosexual couple (Joymoti and Gadapani) is, thus,

deified. In this case, though, the wife within the marital bond also sacrifices her life for her husband. Therefore, she is also raised to the pedestal of a deity. While Dalimi's sacrifice is necessary for the possible meeting of Gadapani and Joymoti, the latter's sacrifice is essential for her husband's welfare and the nation. Her husband and the nation converge after a certain point for Joymoti. Gadapani is seen as the only Ahom prince left to restore the kingdom to its earlier glory. Thus, Gadapani and the Ahom nation are seen as a single entity, and for its establishment, Joymoti and a Jinu/Dalimi must be sacrificed.

Bezbaruah's play shows Dalimi inquiring about the *Luit* (the Brahmaputra) from Gadapani. She eventually expresses her wish to meet with the *Luit* and flow along with it. Similarly, Joymoti, through her narrative, also flows with the *Luit*. Hence, Bezbaruah's play portrays not one but two *devis* (goddesses) whose sacrifice deifies them and raises Gadapani to the kingdom's throne. Their sacrifice is shown to take place in the more considerable interest of the nation and its "rightful" male ruler.

It is interesting to note how the women, although portrayed by Bezbaruah as significant characters in the play, are only catalysts in making Gadapani the hero and the anti-colonial "Assamese nationalist" subject. The women's sacrifices remind Gadapani of his duties. Rajkhowa states:

By the time Gadapani returns to the plains, he is no longer the same. With his doubts and frailties, Gadapani now becomes fallible and all too human. This is a key moment in the representational politics of this text as it makes Gadapani amenable to an imaginary identification that was not possible as long as he was cast in the conventional heroic light.

After his descent, Gadapani's sense of "duty" too has shifted. (114)

Rajkhowa claims that Joymoti's sacrifice humanises Gadapani, but Rajkhowa perhaps does not consider this humanising momentary. The shifting sense of Gadapani's duty only pushes him to realise his heroic capacities brought forth by the inevitable sacrifice of two women in the patriarchal nationalist structure.

Bezbaruah's play closes as Joymoti, after her death, appears as a goddess, encouraging Gadapani to restore order in the kingdom and march onwards to Guwahati. This apparition is destructive and to be feared, symbolic of the Hindu goddess Kali, an embodiment of devastation (84). Two points maybe noted here: (a) the covert comparison of Joymoti with Kali in the play perhaps betrays Bezbaruah's overarching inclinations towards the Mahapurushiya sect of Vaishnavism in Assam¹⁹, and (b) the symbolic restoration of the marital couple (Gadapani and Joymoti) still takes place through the restoration of the "right" king, thus restoring the hegemonic structure. Joymoti's sacrifice transcends mortality, and she becomes an "Assamese" national icon. Rajkhowa states that even though Gadapani fails in his task to save Joymoti, he symbolically still saves "her as representative of the order that is restored [in the kingdom] through [his] efforts" (114). Moreover, Bezbaruah perhaps paints Joymoti's pleas to Gadapani to fight for the kingdom as a plea to all "Assamese" to uphold their nationalism.

Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti* (1935)

The 1930s witnessed a considerable influence of Gandhian nationalism in Assam. Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who belonged to an "Assamese Marwari business family," was one of the "many cultural figures" of this time who were believers in Gandhian ideologies of non-violence and non-cooperation. They were also "fascinated by socialism...[practised] through cultural activism." The figure of Joymoti brought to life in Bezbaruah's play proved to be the "perfect *satyagrahi* (truth seeker)" for Agarwala. Influenced by international filmmakers like Sergei

Eisenstein who had a huge impact on Agarwala, he felt cinema was a significant cultural medium through which he could portray “both the glory of Assamese culture and the political ideals of Gandhi” (J. Sharma 230-31).

Agarwala’s *Joymoti* is the first feature film in Assamese, released in 1935. It is based on Bezbaruah’s play *Joymoti Kunwori*. The film opens with a set full of typical “Assamese” cultural symbols—*japi*, *Bihu*, folk songs, *bhaona*—which emphasise “Assamese nationalism.” Unlike Bezbaruah’s play, which confers on Joymoti the agency to make political decisions, Agarwala’s film denies her this small autonomy. In the film, Borgohain sends his man to order Joymoti to convince her husband Gadapani to leave for the Naga village to save his own life so that later he could rise against Lora Raja to restore peace and glory in the Ahom kingdom. Borgohain considers Joymoti a “wise girl” who would understand the nation’s needs and act accordingly. Thus, she is expected to be ‘wise’ in sacrificing her life for that of her husband and the nation.

Agarwala’s film may have denied political agency to Joymoti, but it portrays Joymoti’s friend, Seuti, in a more progressive light than in Bezbaruah’s play. While Bezbaruah’s play does not describe Seuti’s identity, Agarwala’s film emphasises Seuti’s presence and significance. Seuti is portrayed warrior-like—she dresses like a warrior and leaves with her heterosexual lover to save Joymoti. However, the king’s men meet them halfway and injure Seuti’s lover. She fights these men with a sword and drives them away. She helps her injured lover onto the horse and rides him to safety. Thus, compared to Joymoti, Seuti is depicted as a physically stronger woman, capable of using brute force to save her lover. This is unlike the case of Joymoti, who needs to suffer physical forces inflicted upon her to safeguard her husband. However, both women only demonstrate their physical or mental prowess, as the case may be, to protect their male consorts.

The film deploys visual aesthetics to portray the image of Joymoti, the goddess. When the king's men take Joymoti as a captive to Lora Raja's court, she is donned in white bridal attire. Moreover, the women lament while Joymoti is brought in a palanquin from her husband's home, and a *biya naam* (wedding song) plays in the background. The scenes are suggestive of the woman's integral connection to the nation. Gadapani, her mortal husband, plays the father's role in the second stage when she is given in marriage to her greater spiritual husband, the nation. The women crying also indicates that Joymoti's fate has already been decided by the (male) leaders of the nation. Her death is predestined.

The film mentions a historical figure, Gathi Hazarika (known as Gidagathi Hazarika in Dr Surya Kumar Bhuyan's *Tungkhungiya Buranji*), who leads the king's emissaries in finding Gadapani. He is responsible for torturing Joymoti and procuring Gadapani's whereabouts from her. However, Joymoti refuses to reveal anything regarding her husband. Gathi is furious with Joymoti for threatening his "masculinity." He is humiliated by the idea that he would lose his prowess and pride if defeated at a woman's hands. Gathi's "masculine" ego fumes so much that he brutally kills Joymoti towards the film's closure. The last scene shows that Joymoti is dead, and Gathi leaves the place with the setting sun in the backdrop, thus suggesting death. The scene also indicates Joymoti's sacrificial death as a culmination of her bravery; a patriarchal nation asks for her death. This death is not only Joymoti's but also symbolical of the "Assamese nation's" death at the imposition and circulation of the Bengali language in administrative and educational institutions in Assam by the British Raj. Agarawala's film closes with the song "*Luitore Pani Jabi o Boi*"²⁰. The song urges the Brahmaputra to carry the narrative of Joymoti's feminine virtue and patriotism, especially to the girls and women of Assam. This nationalist call for "Assamese"

women indicates a society in which Gandhi's nationalist values flowed, especially after he visited Assam.

The "bhakti" that the speaker talks about is similar to Bezbaruah's sense of "bhakti" that Joymoti shows towards her husband and the nation. The Mahapurushiya Vaishnavite ethos can be seen to have influenced Bezbaruah's definition of "bhakti." In Bezbaruah's play, Joymoti's devotion towards her husband/the nation/god is probably the same. Thus, the husband, the nation, and god are seen as her patriarchal male guardians.

Bezbaruah's play and Agarwala's film both show Dalimi inquiring about the Luit from Gadapani. She eventually expresses her wish to meet with the Luit and flow along with it. Similarly, Joymoti, through her narrative, also flows with the Luit. Hence, staying true to Bezbaruah's play in this context, Agarwala's film portrays two *devis* who sacrifice themselves to make Gadapani the king. One may also note that the Luit will carry forth Joymoti's patriotic pleas across the state of Assam, thus invoking "Assamese nationalism" in the hearts of the youth.

However, Agarwala's Joymoti is a more silent woman than the one depicted by Bezbarua. Agarwala's film portrays Joymoti as a woman whose political agency can be seen in her silent suffering, which in a way, was aligned with the times. She is only shown praying in bhakti to the Vaishnavite god. Moreover, in one particular scene, Joymoti is depicted as "surrounded by armed guards in the king's court," thus characterising her as a silent Virangana who is "a solitary satyagrahi" (Rajkhowa 120). This is perhaps exemplary of the Gandhian influence in Agarwala's film.

Before Agarwala's film, the preceding fictional representations of Joymoti, like the plays by Gohain Barua and Bezbaruah, had a male-all cast (A. Mahanta 84). Agarwala's "Joymoti" is

not only the first Assamese film but also the first popular representation to use a female actor, Aideu Handique, to play the role of Joymoti. Bobbeeta Sharma, in her book *The Moving Image and Assamese Culture: Joymoti, Jyotiprasad Agarwala, and Assamese Cinema* (2014), discusses the initial process of making the film. She states, “Advertisements for actors and actresses were made in newspapers. It was with great difficulty that Agarwala managed to get Aideu Handique.” A thirteen-year-old girl from Panidihingia village in Golaghat, Handique, was smuggled from her home on a ship, without her parent’s knowledge, to Agarwala’s studio in Tezpur. Her maternal uncle Dimba Gohain, Agarwala’s acquaintance, fooled a young Handique “on the pretext that she would be taken on a ship ride.” Although later her parents were informed of Agarwala’s orders, Handique was to become the first Assamese actress (50-1).

In the context of Handique’s later status, B. Sharma states:

Although *Joymoti* got her heroine, Assamese cinema, its first actress, and Aideu became immortal in the annals of the history of Assamese cinema, this act of treachery left a permanent scar on the young girl. After her return, Aideu was socially ostracised for three years by the villagers for acting in a film—a fact the late actress lamented in many of her interviews. She was compelled to live in seclusion in the compound of her father’s house. She remained unmarried. (52).

Thus, it is noteworthy how the first Assamese actress who carved a path for her successors, a woman who played the role of the Virangana Sati Joymoti, was not empowered by the process of becoming an actor. Instead, she was speechless; the men decided for her and pushed her into the life she had to live later, she lamented. So, one may argue that the men involved in the making of the film did not intend women’s empowerment. Thus, *Joymoti* is only an expression of a

patriarchal, educated male elite idea of “Assamese” nationalist discourse wherein women, in general, are marginalised.

This biased patriarchal, sub-nationalist perspective is also evident in the casting of Dalimi, the foil to the Ahom princess. Jayeeta Sharma notes, “Casting Dalimi seemed much simpler since any attractive young girl would suffice. Unlike the all-important [Joymoti], there was no necessity to cast an authentic Naga girl in this role. Primitivity, it would appear, could be enacted, Ahom regality could not” (231). Thus, the film showcases the juxtaposed images of “a nubile Dalimi dancing against a lush forest background while clad in a scanty tribal costume” against the “sober visage” of a devout Joymoti who was “shrouded from head to foot” (231). Agarwala’s distinct depictions of the Hinduised Ahom princess as opposed to the “savage” Naga girl probably reiterates the regionalist convictions of historians like Surya Kumar Bhuyan and further bolsters them.

It is ironic that due to “the absence of modern infrastructural and technical obstacles,” the film could not be screened in Assam and was instead screened in the theatres in Calcutta. Therefore, most people in Assam did not get an opportunity to see the film. However, the film gained wide recognition, albeit only in Assam, through the popularity of its songs played by All India Radio. Both Agarwala and his film, thus, “retained [their] hold over the Assamese public imagination as a landmark of national commemoration and cultural assertion” (J. Sharma 232).

Juri Borah Borgohain’s *Naang-Faa* (2015)

A more recent representation of the figure of Joymoti is by a contemporary woman writer. Juri Borah Borgohain’s historical novel in Assamese, *Naang-Faa* was published in 2015. This

novel is possibly influenced by the seminal works on Joymoti ranging from Ratneswar Mahanta's article to the primary texts discussed in this chapter; all authored by men.

The novel portrays a patriarchal seventeenth-century Ahom society. There are pre-puberty marriage rituals depicted in the novel. Joymoti, who has been a spirited young child, is domesticated after attaining puberty. The daughters of the royal family are prepared for their future roles as dutiful wives and doting mothers. The older women educate Joymoti in various arts, such as spinning and weaving (Borgohain 21-2, 24). Jahnabi Gogoi Nath states, "In Aassam [sic] under the Ahoms all women irrespective of their caste or tribe background engaged in weaving and supplied cloths [sic] needed by the family" (379).

The novel also presents an array of women like Sengna Aideu, who are treated as prizes of war or given in marriage at an early age to establish political alliances and economic transactions. Polygamy is considered royal and elite, thus marking a privileged social power. S. L Baruah, in his book *A Comprehensive History of Assam* (1995), states that polygamy was a common practice in "the medieval Assamese society...especially by the members of the royal family" (184). Although Borgohain's novel states that Ahom women were reduced to insignificant beings by their husbands' polygamous marriages, it also celebrates how such women as Chandradaru, Joymoti's mother, exude exceptional patience and forbearance. Witnessing these anecdotal narratives of women around her, Joymoti is scared to enter the polygamous marital institution. Moreover, in a marital structure such as this, the first wife is considered privileged in the hierarchy. It is a high honour that a husband can bestow upon a young bride. Likewise, Joymoti is celebrated as the *Kunwori*, Gadapani's first wife (Borgohain 39-43, 93).

A newly married Joymoti enters the bedroom assigned to her after the wedding ceremony. Exhausted from the daylong rituals, she finds the jewellery on her neck very heavy and suffocating

(Borgohain 92). This imagery could be an ironic representation of the yoke of the hegemonic institution of marriage. The jewellery gifted to the bride by her parents and in-laws burdens and stifles her, much like the fictional Rani Lakshmibai represented in Jaishree Misra's *Rani*, who similarly finds her wedding jewellery heavy (as discussed in the third chapter). Despite Joymoti's anxieties, she practices the duties of the "good wife" as taught by her aunts. She "bows down" to her husband and touches his feet, thus accepting the hegemonic gendered roles in a marital institution (Borgohain 93). After showing reverence to her husband on their wedding night, Joymoti waits for the sexually intimate session, which is how her aunts have prepared her. This anecdote may be explored from two perspectives: (a) performing her duties as a passive sexual object in a marriage is considered to be a "good wife's" characteristic quality, and (b) on the contrary, Joymoti, who is earlier shown as sexually attracted towards the muscular Gadapani, may also express sexual freedom through her desires that night. In the latter case, she does exercise some agency in sexual expression. However, such female desire is thwarted when the novel shows Gadapani, instead of reciprocating his wife's approaches, spending the night praising his father-in-law as an able political leader (Borgohain 95). Perhaps, the novel suggests how marriages are performed more for political motives by and for men than for emotional intimacy with women. Similarly, Joymoti, in this marriage, is also a mere medium for ulterior political arrangements settled between men.

Far into the night, Gadapani narrates the history of their valiant Ahom ancestors, thus inspiring Joymoti's patriotism. The patriotic spirit her husband portrays enthralls her (Borgohain 99). With this illustration, perhaps the novel intends to show how the nation is considered more significant than marriage or sexual desire. The nation is put on a divine pedestal as the sacred in contrast to base physical love and desire that seem profane. However, by depicting the man as the

narrator of the sacred institution as opposed to the woman's physical desires, the man is associated with divinity, purity and the nation; the woman is the debased, impure object in whom patriotism needs to be instilled by a male agency, and only then she is purified.

Additionally, the lens Borgohain uses for portraying Joymoti in the novel is probably unclear. While Joymoti is an obedient subject of patriarchy in the novel, she is also expressive of her sexuality in more instances like the one already mentioned. Moreover, in the scene of the wedding night seen above, Joymoti is described as “a soft flower” whose beauty Gadapani should not have been able to resist. However, he ignores her and discusses Joymoti's father, a quality in Gadapani which is celebrated later. Thus, Borgohain herself probably seems to regard Joymoti as an object to be deflowered by the husband. Simone de Beauvoir, in *Second Sex* (1949), while discussing the female virgin, states that the lack of sexual freedom she has had renders the first penetration she encounters as an invasion of her body wherein the penis “[strikes] deep within her vitals” to deflower her (384). If Borgohain's language usage is examined using Beauvoir's ideas, it does appear that this writer reiterates the gendered language advocating men's sexual violence against women.

While painting the marital institution, the novel depicts how the new bride, Joymoti, is prepared for her role as a loyal and caring wife by her mother-in-law, Siddheswari Kunwori. An obedient Joymoti stops pursuing all her political and personal interests and hobbies. Instead, she starts performing her duties towards the family and, more so, her husband, Gadapani. He is lauded as “childlike” by his mother. Joymoti's primary duty is to appease her husband and cater to all his whims and fancies. The mother-in-law states:

You have to take special care of Gadapani's diet. He has an impeccable palate. He loves *kumol saul*, *xandoh* and *hurum*²¹. He will not ask for anything else if he gets ripe jackfruit

to be mashed with his breakfast. He cannot do without a bowl of meat with his rice. So, pork and chicken must be cooked. Keep aside your weaving and instead pay attention to Gadapani's needs ... Love him. He has a temper. Owing to his physical strength, he does not fear anyone. However, he gets angry only if people's actions do not comply with his wishes ... A wife significantly impacts a man's life ... Pay attention to his tasks. If the need arises, you would need to stop him from acting. A man considers himself all-powerful with the *hengdang* in his hand²². So, a wife has a role to play. He loves as immensely as he rages. So, it is your duty henceforth to take good care of him²³. (Borgohain 104).

Thus, Joymoti's mother-in-law, in this context, is a capillary of patriarchal power²⁴. She attempts to impose the hegemonic archetype of the "good wife" on her daughter-in-law. To uphold the man's superior status, Joymoti needs to negate her individuality. Her husband patronises her and considers her a "tiny loveable bird" who needs to be protected. However, the novel seems to speak of this approvingly as Gadapani's loyalty and love towards his wife (Borgohain 106). She is forced to be the faceless peacemaker, whereas the husband epitomises brute strength.

Borgohain's novel depicts its royal women as active participants in political decision-making. The two eldest wives of Laithepena Solal Gohain, Joymoti's father, are said to be not only engaged in household duties but also in political matters along with their husband (19). Historians like Gait, Bhuyan and Baruah mention royal women participating in matters of the state in the medieval society of Assam; a few of these royal ladies are seen as "evil women" in Ratneswar Mahanta's article, as discussed in an earlier section of this chapter. Borgohain's novel also hints at how Joymoti and a few other married royal women are exposed to the political space because they belong to a privileged socio-economic class. On the contrary, at Joymoti's young age, ordinary women only learn "feminine arts" like weaving, spinning and culinary skills (25). It is

noteworthy, however, how marriage to a man of a higher rank curtails Joymoti's access to the political space in Borgohain's novel. Her mother-in-law restrains her from entering the male assembly within the household. She is limited indoors and cannot independently venture into the public (108-9). Only later does she engage in political matters, which are purely the result of circumstantial developments.

Moreover, Laithepena is shown to be a progressive father and husband who encourages his wives and an only daughter to engage in matters of the state. He imparts equal education to his sons and only daughter. The novel justifies Laithepena's polygamous relationship as a political necessity in order to sustain his progressive outlook across the narrative (Borgohain 25). The younger wives are perhaps not allowed to enter the men's assembly. However, women like Alaka and Amaravati do show interest towards matters of the state, though they cannot actively participate. Joymoti relays all significant political discussions to these women in the inner quarters. One may take note of the female solidarity between women across ages and relationships and note that this friendship is forged on the foundations of political participation, an otherwise male space (26-27).

Joymoti's social privileges due to her royal pedigree cannot be denied. Owing to her identity as an Ahom official's daughter, she also has access to the masculine spaces of her home. However, as a subject of a patriarchal society, she cannot escape her tutelage but strives to become the "good woman." Joymoti's interest in state political matters, which surpasses that of her brothers', is not condemned but it is received with a degree of surprise. A woman's political intellect, a deviation from the normative, is deemed a masculine trait. Joymoti's father wonders if Joymoti, with her political interests, should have been born as his son. Her father, fascinated by her, still encourages her to engage in "feminine arts" equally, thus reminding her of inevitable

womanly duties. Thus, Borgohain's novel perhaps celebrates Joymoti as the ideal "Assamese" Virangana for her abilities to engage in political matters along with her conventional role of a "good wife/mother" (28, 66, 67).

In Borgohain's novel, women's roles during warfare are limited to weaving talismans for their warrior men. The novel portrays the women's hard work and patience in weaving these talismans during a sleepless night as holding a special significance to the actions of the warrior men (28). It illustrates how the valour and patience that the Ahom male warriors exhibit on the battlefield are influenced by the same qualities shown by their wives and mothers while weaving their war clothes in one night. Thus, ritually, the women left behind support their men, who are the active agents venturing out into the war front (Borgohain 25, 28). The novel, in the process, perhaps demarcates the gendered spaces of the home and the world. It shows how women are limited to their roles in the home. They participate in nation-building and exude patriotism by playing a secondary position to the men without flouting the hegemonic threshold.

The marriage between Joymoti and Gadapani, organised according to Ahom rituals, demonstrates how Joymoti, as a wife to an Ahom warrior, hands the *hengdang*, the much-prized Ahom sword. While doing so, she says, "May you safeguard your nation, sons, family, wealth, and so forth with this sword."²⁵ She also hands over her woven talisman to Gadapani in a similar manner. Consequently, swearing on these symbols, Gadapani vows to protect his nation, sons, family and wealth (Borgohain 86). What is noteworthy are the rituals which illustrate a woman's symbolic status concerning wars and the nation, in particular, and the society, in general. Although the novel emphasises women's role in the masculine enterprise of wars and conflicts, the exact depiction also limits their role to the inner quarters of the home. Moreover, a woman's patriotism is measured by the virtues of her loyalty towards her husband, hard work, patience and forbearance.

Borgohain's novel perhaps intends to portray the Ahom women as enjoying relatively more freedom than their counterparts in most of the country. The novel claims that Ahom women are not married off at an early age. Joymoti, an epitome of Ahom women, is expected to peruse her political intellect when and if she is married into a royal family. Joymoti can then assist her husband in political matters (36). Borgohain's intention seems to falter in parts because marriage was still an inevitable destiny for Ahom women; even if they were married at a later age than usual, they were still given in marriage. It is problematic to mention Joymoti as a representative of the Ahom women owing to her social privileges. The other Ahom women mentioned in the novel do not enjoy such advantages. Moreover, Joymoti's political knowledge and intellect do not offer her an active decision-making role in matters of the state; her political calling is limited to her subordinate role as a wife and, hence, an assistant to her would-be royal husband. Only through her husband can she dare to contribute to political matters of the state.

She must also produce brave male warriors to safeguard the family lineage and the nation. Thus, a pregnant Joymoti is showered with utmost attention—she is not only fed healthy food for her to-be sons, but the mother-in-law narrates stories of brave warriors to Joymoti to inculcate courage, bravery and patriotism to the male heirs in Joymoti's womb (Borgohain 115, 122). Joymoti gives birth to twin sons, satiating all hegemonic expectations. In a post-birth ritual, in which only women participate, the women offer three arrows to each of the baby boys—the first arrow is believed to be for the nation's defence, the second for the tribe's defence, and the third for self-defence (Borgohain 129). Conventionally, for Joymoti, these rituals are the only passage for passive participation in political matters. One may also note how it is the women who are expected to be tradition bearers.

However, complying with historical facts, Borgohain's novel does portray Joymoti's political participation even after marriage. When Gadapani's father is assassinated, he fumes with rage, ready to pounce upon the nation's enemies. Joymoti, as expected in her role as the peacemaker, calms him down. Borgohain's novel perhaps mentions this incident to characterise Joymoti as the "good wife," but the incident also showcases Joymoti's intelligence and deft diplomatic abilities. She asks her husband not to lose his patience. Any rushed response would benefit the traitors. Thus, she shows her competence in political scheming. Eventually, Gadapani and a widowed Siddheswari Kunwori depend on Joymoti's political skills (139, 144, 158).

Furthermore, the novel shows how Gadapani eventually considers an intelligent Joymoti not only as his wife but, on certain occasions, as a caring mother, a guardian who guides him, an able strategist and a patient woman (Borgohain 195-6). On learning of Laluksula Borphukan's plan to maim Gadapani to calcify the former's claim to the throne, Joymoti asks her husband to flee to the forests and remain incognito till the opportune moment to protest arrives. Like Gohain Barua's play, Borgohain's novel also portrays a hypermasculine Gadapani who initially dismisses Joymoti's advice to escape, as fleeing the battlefield emasculates a warrior. Joymoti reaffirms that she does not doubt her husband's masculinity and bravery, but taking any hasty decision against the authorities would ruin their chances of victory against Laluksula. Ultimately, Gadapani respects Joymoti's far-sightedness and agrees to her plan. The novel states that Gadapani's brawn bows down to his wife's brains (201-3). It is noteworthy that although the novel depicts how Joymoti earns respect from her husband and mother-in-law, the novel justifies this by portraying that it is Joymoti's privilege to be a wife to a man who loves her, respects her decisions, and most importantly, has not taken any other wife. In the process, the courage and shrewdness Joymoti shows are owed to the virtues of her husband (Borgohain 204-5).

Thus, one cannot negate that marriage curtails Joymoti's access to matters of the state; her significance in political decision-making after her marriage is only circumstantial. Borgohain's novel shows a change of heart in the mother-in-law. It intends to paint a progressive Siddheswari Kunwori who supports her daughter-in-law to gain political knowledge. However, it may be noted that under the threat of her husband's assassination, the mother-in-law only wishes Joymoti to educate herself politically to play second fiddle to "a mighty Gadapani." Joymoti's political empowerment is necessary to tame her husband's brute power and temper (162-3). Nevertheless, the novel depicts how Joymoti acquires a vital position in the political sphere of the Ahom kingdom.

Of course, much like Joymoti's father, the novel also celebrates her as a Virangana because she is the epitome of the traditional, modern woman. Amidst her participation in political matters, she does not neglect her duties towards her husband, sons and mother-in-law. Additionally, she carries out other conventional "feminine" activities like weaving and talking to her female friend Padmavati (Borgohain 149). Moreover, Joymoti is probably carved as the embodied nation, who in turn reminds Gadapani of his duties towards the nation:

Self-interest and love for one's wife and the palace cannot be more significant than one's nation²⁶. (Borgohain 201)

One may note that the woman is a necessary medium to kindle patriotism in the male warrior's heart. However, the same woman is limited to the four walls of the house and the associated duties.

Apart from Joymoti, there are other Ahom royal women capable of making decisions and strategies in matters of the state. They are represented as Joymoti's female friends. Borgohain's novel depicts a Padmavati, perhaps a collective of Joymoti's friends mentioned in the other three

primary texts. While Gohain Barua's play portrays Padma, Seuti is represented in Bezbaruah's play and Agarawala's film. On knowing Laluksula's plan to maim Gadapani, it is Padmavati who rushes to Joymoti and advises her on Gadapani's escape. Moreover, Padmavati counsels Joymoti to keep patience and muster the courage to face the king and the court alone (192-3).

Apart from the political conversation in the female-all spaces of the Ahom household, Borgohain's novel also portrays how Laithepena's wives and the female aides bathe together in the pond. The scenes where some of these women enjoy each other's company, sitting beside the pond on a breezy summer afternoon and some kill lice on each other's heads, are overtly romanticised. Even Joymoti, who had dreamt of a life different from her aunts, seems to lose understanding of her individuality and finds necessary happiness in the festive-like female activities while weaving. Thus, despite the largely heteropatriarchal hold over them, the women seem to find respite and joy in each other in these gendered spaces (60, 108).

None of the other three primary texts portrays sexual abuse of women in the Ahom royal society or otherwise. However, Borgohain's novel shows an unnamed and doubly marginalised lower-class *ligiri*, a female attendant in the male assembly, confessing to Joymoti of experiencing sexual abuse. The *ligiri* warns Joymoti of venturing into those male spaces (228). Thus, one may observe a shared sense of female solidarity in such cases.

As depicted in the novel, the qualities required of a good ruler in the Ahom kingdom are physical strength, maturity, experience and, most significantly, the ability to remain calm and patient in turbulent times. Gadapani is considered an appropriate candidate for exuding these very virtues (Borgohain 72). One may note how masculinity in this context is not simply limited to brute power but also softer qualities like patience and forbearance. The fact that Gadapani, a robust and mighty prince, considers Joymoti his potential wife empowers Joymoti. She is shown attracted

to Gadapani's hypermasculinity. Seeing Gadapani easily remove a heavy stone to make a way to the pond, Joymoti is left in awe. The novel also explores facets of her apparent brazen sexuality. Unlike the conventional modest maiden, Joymoti's gaze is directed outright towards Gadapani, the man of her interest. Gradually, she becomes dependent on Gadapani, a politically powerful man, which is problematic since she appears to lose her self-sufficiency. Moreover, this potential alliance is also significant to Joymoti's father as it would provide him with the ability for upward socio-political mobility (Borgohain 65, 67, 78, 82).

Like the preceding representations, Borgohain's novel also depicts Gadapani escaping to the Naga hills. He considers it demeaning for a royal like him to take refuge in a Naga village (308). It probably reflects the racial hierarchy prevalent in making the "Assamese" subject. Like Jinu in Gohain Barua's play, Dalimi in Bezbaruah's play and Agarawala's film, Borgohain's novel also shows a young Naga girl, Watlung, who is attracted towards Gadapani. She takes care of him under the orders of her father, who is the village headman. The novel stresses her pristine beauty, which "seduces" Gadapani. Thus, it is Watlung who has the sexual agency here; Gadapani is referred to as a passive receptor. However, the novel immediately shifts its description. It says that Watlung's beauty reminds Gadapani of his wife, Joymoti.

Nevertheless, Gadapani claims that he likes to spend time with Watlung. Like the previous narratives, Borgohain's novel also absolves Gadapani of all responsibilities for the romantic/ and physical tension which develops between him and Watlung. Denying Gadapani's overt desire for the girl, the novel justifies the relationship as a "naïve" and innocent Naga girl's infatuation (330-3). After his dramatic realisation of Joymoti's torture and his estranged sons, Gadapani gathers his willpower and abstains from all desire for Watlung. Despite her pleas, he leaves her to go back to his wife. When she follows him downhill, he undergoes a change of heart and refers to Watlung

as his sister. He requests her to return home while expressing gratitude for all the love and hospitality. He remarks that under different circumstances perhaps, he would have married her, but in this life, he *must*²⁷ leave her (339-43). Apart from a Naga woman being patronised and marginalised as the Other, one may also note Gadapani's altered definition of his desires from sexual to familial. Perhaps, Borgohain wishes to absolve him of all his previous frivolity. Furthermore, Gadapani's obligation to leave the Other woman to unite with his conjugal wife is probably associated with his union with the nation.

The point to be noted is how not only Borgohain's novel but also the other primary texts represent Gadapani as a loyal husband to Joymoti, which has already been discussed. The Naga girl is depicted as an otherworldly nymph whose romantic advances are dismissed by Gadapani. However, this he does not do it at the very initial stage. Instead, he seems to enjoy the attention and, most times, also reciprocates. However, the texts portray Gadapani's reciprocation of the girl's desires as his royal Ahom chivalry, which is also similarly depicted in the popular imagination.

S. Rajguru, in his book *Medieval Assamese Society* (1988), also states that polygamy was common in Ahom society. All Ahom kings practised polygamy. Parbatia Kunwari and Raidangia Kunwari were two principal consorts. Apart from these, the kings also had many subordinate consorts, known as Chamua Kunwari. The ministers and nobles had at least three wives (196). This fact then raises questions regarding Gadapani's popular loyalty and chivalry. It is only probable that in a polygamous society where marriages also happened as political alliances, Gadapani could unquestionably take more than one wife. However, "Assamese" popular imagination does not represent Gadapani as polygamous, most probably to interpellate the

“Assamese nationalist” subject as a heteropatriarchal man for whom loyalty towards his family translates to his dedication towards his nation.

Moreover, one should also consider that the prominent authors of the popular representations of the Joymoti story discussed above: from Mahanta to Agarwala, were exposed to Western education in Bengal; a few, like Agarwala, also went abroad for further studies. The rise of the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Assam inspired them to return home. Thus, the chivalry they introduce in their works may have been influenced by the Western White supremacist trope. Revathi Krishnaswamy, while discussing effeminism and coloniality, suggests an interesting angle:

The trope of chivalry also constituted a privileged locus of colonial self-image—one whose ideological origins may be traced back to the aristocracy of medieval and Renaissance Europe...The code of chivalry mediated [the] relations of power and dependence by setting up reciprocal bonds of duty and obligation. (18)

In this context, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan also argues that the hierarchical power relation permitted by the conduct of chivalry was also used in the colonial discourse. According to her, the White Western conduct of chivalry legitimised colonialism in India. It was considered that the chivalrous colonisers rescued the “hapless victims of a barbaric Indian patriarchy” from the clutches of the “effeminate” Indian men (qtd. in Krishnaswamy 18).

Looking at the prominent popular representations of Gadapani using Krishnaswamy and Sunder Rajan’s propositions, it is interesting to note that the discourse of “Assamese nationalism” produced by the Western-educated, West-returned, Assamese-speaking men may have been exposed to the Western White coloniser’s code of chivalry. Consciously or subconsciously, this

code percolates into their “Assamese nationalist” writings. Moreover, from a postcolonial lens, the Naga girl is a subaltern woman exoticised and patronised by the superior Ahom noble from the plains. This depiction seems to be characterised by the dichotomous framework of the chivalrous coloniser as opposed to the effeminate colonised.

Borgohain’s novel portrays several hypermasculine characters. Unlike Gadapani’s hypermasculinity which accentuates his heroic abilities, Laluksola Borphukan, in her novel, is shown as a misogynist megalomaniac. Despite his minor daughter’s cries and protests, he forcefully marries her to the underaged king. Unlike Joymoti’s father, who permits his daughter to access political discussions, Laluksola Borphukan strictly prohibits even his daughter’s presence (who is essentially the queen) while discussing matters of the state. Moreover, while scheming his plans to overthrow Gadapani’s potential claim to the throne, Laluksola orders in Lora Roja’s name, for Joymoti to be brought to the assembly. Laluksola believes that confronted with the humiliation of being presented before a male-all assembly, Joymoti would reveal her husband’s whereabouts, or Gadapani would come to rescue his wife. Laluksola considers women weak creatures whom he uses as pawns for greater political ambitions (119, 120, 167, 168, 178, 195).

It is interesting to note how Borgohain treats masculinity differently in different male characters. A crude and ruthless Laluksola is portrayed in opposition to a heroic Gadapani to establish the dichotomy of the evil and good (male) rulers. This justifies Gadapani’s political intentions and creates an “Assamese national” hero.

The examination of the primary texts reveals how, historically and culturally, Joymoti is celebrated as a Virangana for her suffering and her silence against great odds to protect her husband. Thus, she safeguards not only her husband but the Ahom nation as well. Through the

primary texts, this chapter explores a pertinent question regarding Joymoti's status as a Virangana. Without a sword and little agency to fight on the battlefield, Joymoti would probably not be characterised as a Virangana in the conventional sense that Kathryn Hansen defines the term, (as discussed in the earlier chapters). However, she is remembered as a Virangana in Assam's popular history and culture. Does she attain this status because she is said to have sacrificed her life for her husband and the nation, and has thus become a *sati*? Perhaps. The chapter, however, intends to examine if the virtues of silence and forbearance, which make Joymoti a *sati*, can be weaponised by a woman to write an alternative narrative of resistance against the hegemonic structures of power.

Since, Joymoti, as a national allegory, moves far beyond historical veracity, it will only be wise to problematise her silence as popularly represented. It is noteworthy that Dr Bhuyan argues the following:

It was perhaps not possible for Jaimati to know about Gadapani's precise whereabouts as he had left home a long time ago; and therefore, when questioned about Gadapani she pleaded her ignorance of his movements. Gidagathi Hazarika was not satisfied with the answer, and he inflicted tortures on Jaimati to elicit from her information about her husband. The princess stuck to her old plea of ignorance, and she replied to the increasing tortures by silence and patient forbearance. (120)

Thus, it is possible that Joymoti perhaps did not honestly know her husband's whereabouts. Borgohain's novel also mentions this possibility (258), although largely, her novel hinges on the narrative of willed silence. All four texts in this chapter show Joymoti's strength in her determination and unswerving political stand. She refuses to reveal information about her husband and agrees to accompany the messenger to the king's court despite knowing that she will be

stigmatised for this appearance. Borgohain's novel describes Joymoti's fierce determination to remain silent about her husband's whereabouts thus:

Your efforts (to coerce me to reveal the whereabouts of my husband) are useless, usher. My word is unalterable. Tell the *Saufa* that the Himalayas may move, but not my word. (225)

On hearing this, the usher was scared, his gaze downward. He was perhaps wondering if the *Saufa*'s orders to bring Joymoti to the assembly, in case she does not speak, would force her to reveal the whereabouts of her husband. Perhaps, she would be enraged with the orders too. But Joymoti was silent.²⁸ (225)

Texts like Bezbaruah's play and Agarawala's film stress more on Joymoti's self-sacrifice. In the larger context of Gandhian nationalist ideology, "passive resistance" is considered the key to *swaraj*, or home rule. Following this, these texts portray Joymoti as a *pativrata* who is not a blind follower of the hegemonic rule. Instead, she fights against it as a "passive resister." Borgohain's novel also shows how her severely injured body still feels pangs of hunger and thirst. She directs these bodily desires and trains her will to instead pray for her husband's welfare and the nation (290). In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi remarks, "Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms." He further states,

...you will find that whatever extra effort a swordsman needs is due to lack of fearlessness. If he is an embodiment of the latter, the sword will drop from his hand that very moment. (69).

Following Gandhi's ideology, one may argue that popular representation celebrates Joymoti as a fearless woman for her undeterred "passive resistance" through self-sacrifice against Lora Roja

and his emissaries. Moreover, she can be characterised as divine since her self-sacrifice is realised for her husband's welfare. Thus, she is seen as the quintessential "Assamese" Virangana.

Unlike Gandhian ideology of "passive resistance," which considers the mind and the soul to be superior to the body (68), Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak's ideas on "subalterneity" discuss the body's performative silence as a resistance narrative against hegemonic discourse. Silence may or may not pertain to literal language; silence can be performative, and the subaltern woman, Joymoti, in this case, may use her body to express her political voice. Joymoti's silence can thus be interpreted as her choice to refuse patriarchal discourses. Joymoti perhaps cannot speak as a woman, but she does resist vis-à-vis performative silence. The sight of her tied to a tree on a barren field, isolated from human habitation, tortured to death, is performative resistance. This image becomes a patriotic icon and is used to invoke "Assamese nationalism" at different points in time. Two points may be noted here: (a) Using the Foucauldian framework of the nexus between discipline and punishment, it can be seen how the Ahom authorities of her time used Joymoti's body as a site of punishment, a spectacle to be made an example of for the imposition of hegemony in the society. (b) However, the very spectacle can also be seen as a political body that Joymoti uses as both site and medium of performative resistance.

Another significant point which may arise is that no historical or popular representation has ever mentioned any form of sexual abuse on Joymoti when she is tortured by the king's emissaries away on a lonely, barren field. On the contrary, a few popular representations show how the emissaries respect her as a *sati*. Realistically though, if these hypermasculine men inflict physical pain on a helpless pregnant woman, there are possibilities that they could also sexually abuse her. Interestingly, no such details, however probable, figure in hegemonic discourse. Thus, the Ahoms and, by extension, the "Assamese" are portrayed as respectful of their women.

Ironically, even misogynists like Laluksola Borgohain and Gidagathi Hazarika are said to constitute the same ethnic/national identity.

If sexual violence, as an alternative possibility, is considered, Joymoti using her body to write a narrative of resistance holds more power. As Gita Hariharan, in her article “When Bodies Speak” (2017) says:

When a woman’s naked body speaks, its language can turn the victimized body into a speaking, fighting one. Her body is no longer only for the powerful male to inscribe upon; her body turns her into an inscriber. (4)

The woman weaponising her naked, marginalised body to resist the authoritative powers also appears in Mahasweta Devi’s “Draupadi” (1978) as twenty-seven years old, Dopdi Mejhen. A retelling of the classical and mythological story of *Mahabharata*’s Draupadi, Devi’s Dopdi is rendered silent under the hypermasculine abusive power of Senanayak and his army of men. However, after the men rape her multiple times, a bloodied Dopdi, with torn breasts and a bleeding vagina, refuses to be clothed by the men on Senanayak’s order. Instead, with her “black [bloodied] body,” Dopdi draws closer to Senanayak and,

[She] shakes with an indomitable laughter that [he] simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting, and sharp as her ululation, What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?

She looks around and chooses the front of Senanayak’s white bush shirt to spit a bloody gob at and says, There isn’t a man here that I should be ashamed. I will not let you put my cloth on me. What more can you do? Come on, *counter* me—come on, *counter* me—?

Draupadi pushes Senanayak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid. (Chakravorty Spivak 402)

Both the mythological Draupadi and Devi's Dopdi reclaim their silent victim status they are pushed into and weaponise their positions and their abused bodies to perform a significantly powerful narrative of resistance, which unsettles the normative. Thus, in the slightest probability of sexual torture, Joymoti's bodily resistance may be considered as powerful as these deviant female heroics.

However, texts like Gohain Barua's play and Borgohain's do provide a voice to Joymoti. In the former text, Joymoti claims she will ask the right questions once summoned to the men's assembly. Similarly, the latter text shows her in the men's assembly asking the king and the presumably "honourable" Ahom men in the court why a woman is summoned to an otherwise male space. In both cases, the men remain silent (Gohain Barua 57; Borgohain 245). Apart from these instances, Borgohain's novel provides a detailed and explicit description of the torture scene when significant questions arise in her mind, although she does not articulate them. The novel suggests she waits for her husband or father to come and rescue her, though inevitably, neither does. Perhaps she does not anticipate her resistance would end fatally. She also questions how she becomes a spectacle for the common mass, who, she faintly sees, though grieving her pathetic condition, lack the courage to come forth to protest against the injustice meted out.

One may argue that perhaps, Joymoti, in these texts, is not very unlike *Mahabharata's* Draupadi or even Devi's Dopdi, for that matter. Draupadi is also summoned and dragged to the men's assembly when Yudhishtira loses her at the game of dice. She questions the popularly known *dharmic* (righteous) men of the Kuru lineage: how could Yudhishtira, after losing himself at the game, put her at stake? Following this, she is molested and abused by the Kauravas in front

of everyone present. However, no supposed upholder of *dharma* answers or stands up for her. This unfolds the battle of Kurukshetra (Biutenen). Shalini Shah, in her book *The Making of Womanhood: Gender Relations in the Mahabharata* (1995), opines, “By standing her ground and asking the question, Draupadi is really revealing the dark side of the masculine code of both heroism and chivalry: her questioning of her humiliating treatment ends up exposing them rather than her, as was the Kaurava intent” (47). Women are not permitted into male political spaces, let alone raise their voices. Perhaps Draupadi’s strength lies in her ability to literally question the symbolical patriarchal structure. Similarly, as has been mentioned earlier, Devi’s Dopdi, who initially remains silent about the whereabouts of her fellow resisters, however, is seen laughing and questioning Senanayak as a form of protest against the hegemonic regime.

Interestingly, Joymoti, who is lauded in the cultural memory of “Assamese nationalism” for her silence, is shown to ask questions in the men’s assembly in Borgohain’s novel. Thus, she may also be seen as another Draupadi, unafraid to articulate logical questions when needed. However, Joymoti’s questions cannot surpass her forbearance and self-sacrifice, which sustain her as a “good woman.” Draupadi, on the contrary, is often seen as a “social rebel” or “non-conformist” (Matilal 2) and hence a dangerous example of womanhood who brings down an entire lineage.

One may also note how violating upper-class, upper-caste, royal women like Draupadi and Joymoti are usually portrayed as calamitous (Biutenen; Borgohain 265):

After learning of [Joymoti’s torture], perhaps the Gargaon city, otherwise resonating with gentleman’s palanquins and drummers will come to a standstill. Gargaon’s lanes will be ghosted. Maybe even the birds will forget to sing. The very air will forget to flow. On learning of the *Saufa*’s injustice, all passers-by will stand shellshocked. (Borgohain 265)

It cannot be denied that the concerned women, irrespective of their privileged class (and caste) identities, suffer—however, the apocalyptic consequence presented as their suffering is limited to their privileged social positions. Women of lower class (and caste), such as the maids and attendants, are not treated similarly (Borgohain 264, 293).

While the plays written by Gohain Barua and Bezbarua and the film by Agarawala base their stories on *sati* Joymoti as the nation-goddess in the context of anti-colonial nationalism and “Assamese nationalism,” Borgohain’s twenty-first-century novel is founded in the present-day India where Assam seems to find its way into the mainstream under various socio-politico-economic factors. Borgohain’s Joymoti seems more sprightly suiting present-day understanding of a woman’s position, even as the novel tends to espouse fairly hidebound conventions. Borgohain tries to lend an iota of political and sexual agency to her Joymoti, thus representing contemporary incremental changes in women’s access to rights. The novel perhaps also attempts to cater to the current capitalist market of publication, which seems to have hinged on issues like feminism and “northeast Indian literature” even if characterised by mediocre writing. This novel, however, fails to transgress hegemonic constructs despite its best attempt.

Joymoti’s Other: Watlong²⁹, the Naga Queen

There is no historical record of the Naga girl whom Gadapani meets during his stay on the Naga hills. The first fictional representation to introduce her as Jinu is Gohain Barua’s play. However, it is Bezbarua’s play which presents her as Dalimi in the popular imagination. Through the first Assamese film, Agarawala imprinted Dalimi in the “Assamese national” memory as the young, innocent, light-footed Naga girl who falls in love with Gadapani and sacrifices her life for him. It has been noted above how racial hierarchy is established by the introduction of Dalimi’s

character and how she is used to accentuate Gadapani's chivalry, valour, and loyalty towards his wife and nation.

However, Alban von Stockhausen, a Swiss anthropologist, reveals, as part of his research on the Konyak and other Naga groups, that archaeological evidence of a similar Naga queen does exist. He states:

In 1936–1937 anthropologists Hans-Eberhard Kauffmann and Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf conducted extensive field research among the Nagas of Northeast India, especially among the Konyak, where the latter spent several months in the village of Wakching and its surroundings. Seventy years later, in 2007, I came to the area to identify photographs the two researchers had taken while working on their photographic collections for my dissertation thesis. (353)

He discusses finding oral narratives in the Naga villages of Wanching, Wakching and Tanhai, describing how an Ahom king had taken shelter in their village and married the chief's daughter, Watlong. All the stories are commonly told oral tales about a Naga queen named Watlong who is married to an Ahom king, Gudarhor Hunghu (probably a Naga equivalent of Gadadhar Singha, the Hindu name of Gadapani). In all the oral narratives, which only differ in very few details, a romantic relationship is mentioned between Gadapani and Watlong while he was taking refuge in the hills. He left to ascend the Ahom throne after his wife, Joymoti, died. He was remorseful and reminded of his love for Watlong. He sent soldiers to the Naga hills, who, by force or deceit, brought her to be married to the Ahom king. As bride price, he presented the Nagas with gifts like “a large shovel-shaped metal object” and built “several monuments.” A grief-stricken Watlong asked her villagers to remember her “at the time of the yearly Aoling festival” and “during another

festival in Autumn” by throwing (white) flowers into the Dikhu river. These annual rituals are still followed, commemorating the death of Watlong and her sister Shanglih who had followed her (353-9).

Stockhausen finds evidence of the ritualistic festivals and the oral songs still sung by the villagers. More than that, he finds archaeological evidence of most of the monuments and gifts from the folklore he hears from the villagers. These gifts and monuments have markings inscribed in Tai-Ahom. The legends state that Watlong could not survive her nostalgia for the hills, and this pining and the unfamiliar weather in the plains led to her death. Her sister died trying to find Watlong. It is contested if Watlong’s grave is in Naginimara (“Naga-wife-die”) or Joysagar (357-9, 363-4). Stockhausen mentions other writers like L. L. Yaden, I. Bendangangshi, Lanusashi Longkumer and Jairamdas Daulat Ram, who similarly find the same evidence which cite Watlong’s story.

Although the findings of these researchers do not establish concrete evidence supporting Watlong’s existence and Gadapani’s behaviour, the few pieces of evidence are probably sufficient to problematise the “Assamese nationalist” perspective of the same Naga woman in the primary texts discussed in the chapter. These alternative tellings reveal a hegemonic racist lens in forming the “Assamese nationalist” discourse. They give voice to the subaltern woman, the racial Other, to the national allegory in Assam, the Ahom princess Joymoti. This can be seen in the following verse:

The valley is a land of plenty,

But Watlong is weeping;

Pashangli for her is pining.

It is time for blossoming of Phumtu flower,

The stalk of Phumto is already seen;

All people are thinking of the festival;

The time for it is right;

At this hour of revel and joy

Pashangli sadly remembers her sister. (Stockhausen 363)

Apart from Watlong, one finds an array of fictional women like “Rohdoi of Raha, Bhadoi of Tipam, Aghoni Bai of Salaguri” who help Gadapani in his adventures as he travels incognito (A. Mahanta 68). Thus, it can be observed that these women have also contributed to making the “Assamese” national hero. However, they are excluded from the metanarrative. It can be claimed that in this context, Watlong, who like Joymoti helps Gadapani in her own ways, can also be seen as an alternative Virangana.

Joymoti, who has always been overused in popular representations of the “Assamese” nation, is considered a *sati* and a *pativrata*. However, one cannot simply problematise the impact the figure of Joymoti had on the women of Assam as only serving patriarchal purposes. As stated earlier, the Joymoti Utsav brought together groups of women in the “public” sphere. Moreover, Joymoti’s strengths continued to influence “Assam’s educated women” so much so that they mostly sublimated it into their “potentially subversive actions.” These women “sought to make the best of the limited opportunities on offer.” One such twentieth-century woman pioneer is

Chandraprabha Saikiani³⁰, who was “a lower-caste schoolteacher, nationalist agitator, women’s activist, and a single mother” who claims to have been considerably influenced by Joymoti’s narrative while carrying forth her own “unconventional actions and lifestyle.” Another such example is Rajabala Das, one of the first few “university-educated women” and “the founding principal of the Guwahati Girls’ College from 1939 to 1965” who advocated that Joymoti’s story be an inspiration to all women in Assam “to come out of their homes and seek empowerment through higher education and careers” (J. Sharma 232).

Thus, an exploration of the nuances of the silence and forbearance, exuded by the metahistorical Joymoti and the subtle ways it has impacted women in Assam across time, reveals how these same virtues can be seen as the very tools for challenging the normative structure. In the process, the silent woman can be reclaimed as that Virangana who uses her silence and body to resist the hegemonic constructs of nation and nationalism.

Notes

¹ Such terms refer to the geographical regions

² An ethnic group of the Northeastern region of India

³ A group of people in eighteenth-century Assam who followed the principles of the Mayamara Sattra. For more information on the Moamorias, read S. L. Baruah's *Last Days of Ahom Monarchy: A History of Assam from 1769-1826* (1993).

⁴ Srimanta Sankaradeva's (1449-1568) Vaishnavism emerged in Assam in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It became popular as a religious cult of devotion towards a single deity, in contrast with the complex ritualistic methods of Brahminism. Sankaradeva's religion also challenged the hierarchies of the Hindu caste system. It influenced those sections of society in Assam who felt marginalised by the upper-castes like the Brahmins. Records mention conflicts between the Ahoms following Hinduism and the Vaishnav Sattras.

⁵ Mahapurushiya Vaishnavism was a neo-Vaishnavite religion of the followers of Srimanta Sankaradeva who was revered by the followers as a *Mahapurush* (The Great Man).

⁶ Jenkins was an agent to the Governor General in the North Eastern Frontier.

⁷ Using Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community.

⁸ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ In Hindu mythology, Janaka is father to Sita, a deified form of the *pativrata*.

¹¹ It is "a form of metrical verse that contains syllables to a meter. Deriving from the traditional *payar* (Bengali)/ *pad* (Assamese) verse form but doing away with its rhyme as well as verse-end pause, it draws on the techniques of enjambment found in the Shakespearean iambic pentameter.

Its earliest use has been attributed to Michael Madhusudan Dutt in Bengali and Bholanath Das in Assamese. A ‘broken’ variation on the *amitrakhyarcaanda* with varied line lengths was quite popular in nineteenth century drama “(Rajkhowa 123).

¹² However, Jayeeta Sharma states this year as 1913 in her book *Empire’s Garden: Assam and the Making of India* (2011).

¹³ A magazine in Assamese published by the ABUSS members.

¹⁴ Italics mine (to refer to a non-English word).

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Translation mine.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ Initiated by Mahapurush Sankaradeva.

²⁰ O the waters of the Luit, you flow (translation mine).

²¹ Traditional breakfast in Assam.

²² An Ahom sword.

²³ Translation mine.

²⁴ Using the Foucauldian framework of the nexus between power and knowledge.

²⁵ Translation mine.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Translation mine.

²⁹ Watlong is spelt as Watlung in Borgohain’s novel.

³⁰ For extensive discussions on Chandraprabha Saikiani, refer to Hemjyoti Medhi's *Gendered Publics: Chandraprabha Saikiani and the Mahila Samitis in Colonial Assam* (2023).



Chapter Six

Conclusion

An article published in the regional Assamese language daily, “Asomiya Pratidin,” on 28 March 2023, reported how a memorial function in Sibsagar (Assam) celebrated “*Mahasati Joymoti*.” This function was attended not only by the local Assamese-speaking population but also by a group of people hailing from Nagaland. The people from Nagaland remembered their queen Watlong, who they believed to have been married to Gadapani. Remarkably, they also offered their prayers to Joymoti, who was described as a symbol of courage and self-sacrifice. Thus, they claimed to belong to the same historical roots. The article further refers to the queen Watlong as Dalimi, as she is popularly known in Assam. On that night, the celebratory field was brilliantly illuminated with 344 lamps in commemoration of the “*Mahasati*” (10).

Consequently, another news report, published immediately after and on the same page, mentions another such event celebrated in Maduri, Sibsagar. Offering tribute to Mahasati Joymoti, a high-ranking government official hailed Joymoti as an icon of “*Swadesh-Swajati*” (homeland-home clan) and promised to safeguard Ahom history. In light of the same, several new projects would be considered, like the four hundredth birth anniversary celebration of “*Senanayak Lachit Barphukan*,” a total sum of four crores and twenty lakhs were released for the conservation of Ahom history and its symbols, and so forth (10).

Recognising a community’s existence and the necessity to protect its history is indeed a significant act. However, what is notable is (a) the usage of the epithet *Mahasati* to refer to Joymoti and (b) the allusion to Dalimi as a historical woman who was married to Gadapani. The pervasive usage of metahistorical ideas to refer to historical narratives is not the matter at hand here but erroneously presenting metahistoricity as established historical fact is indeed problematic. The

transmogrification of a seventeenth-century flesh-and-blood Ahom princess to a twenty-first-century *Mahasati* and Virangana in a land where *sati* was never a common ritual practice is, in fact, quite remarkable. Thus, one may note how Joymoti is once again reused as a politico-cultural symbol to establish the ideal Hindu “Assamese” icon and to uphold hegemonic tropes of the self-sacrificing woman of the nation. Joymoti is only one of the many patriarchal productions and reproductions of the Virangana.

This study has been designed to explore how, although the figure of the Virangana as a signifier of gendered nationalism has been prevalent since ancient India, its hegemonic understanding is intricately predicated upon anti-colonial nationalism and, later, caste Hindu nationalism. The myth of the Virangana has been sustained through varied socio-politico-historical and economic times. However, its constituent characteristics, aspects and perceptions have undergone myriad alterations through different spatio-temporal contexts in India. The figure of the Virangana and her representations are, therefore, very prevalent in current contexts. This is the reason the Virangana is deployed for upholding the narratives of not only dominant heteropatriarchal, caste Hindu nationalism but also in counter-narratives and sub-narratives of feminism and postcolonial subaltern nationalism. This study has attempted to reassess the figure and myth of the Virangana within the ambit of such social contexts and changes, thus examining the apparent absoluteness of history and memory.

Discussing the relationship between memory and history, Pierre Nora states:

Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the

reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present; history is a representation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it; it nourishes recollections that may be out of focus or telescopic, global or detached, particular or symbolic-responsive to each avenue of conveyance or phenomenal screen, to every censorship or projection...Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive the relative. (8-9)

It is tricky to regard the objectivity of history as an absolute fact. Time has been a witness to dynamic power narratives contesting each other, which precipitate a cultural nation, nationalism and sub-nationalism. Memory sustains it through a rigorous process of forgetting and remembering. What is perhaps constant is power politics, which peruses the changing nature of the history of a culture to meet its own ends. In a similar vein, Jan Assman opines regarding cultural memory:

Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance). We call these “figures of memory.” (129)

Thus, following these ideological frameworks, this thesis has attempted to look at one such “figure of memory”: the Virangana, and examine its politics of production and reproduction.

The thesis acknowledges how the Virangana, as a representative warrior woman in India, is perhaps not as immersed in the challenging debates of hegemonic binaries of masculinity and femininity as her Western cohorts. Kathryn Hansen's definition of a Virangana, which is probably the first scholarly work on the figure, accommodates possibilities of gender fluidity. The Virangana seems to float seamlessly within varied manifestations of masculinity and femininity. However, this ideology has also been critically scrutinised.

The popularly represented Virangana, a metaphor for the new Indian woman, still adheres to the conventional gendered spaces of the traditional "public"/ "private" and Home/World dichotomy. Through an analysis of selected texts in this study, it was possible to discern the depiction of a Virangana's masculinity in hegemonic narratives vis-à-vis her engagement on the battlefield. The narratives portray her confrontations with the enemy either through her martial prowess or her forbearance and steely resolve. As a woman safeguarding her home, she embodies the roles of a dutiful wife and mother. Although much of her conventional femininity is displayed in her choices to save her husband, son and nation on the battlefield, not much of her traditional masculinity is depicted in her "private" space. Instead, her voice and agency are little seen in the "private" space of her home.

Through a critical engagement with selected cultural texts, this study has attempted to unsettle the hegemonic construct of the Virangana and reassess this figure across various contexts. This study has tried to unpack the politics of her formation and redeployment, thus focusing on her subjectivity, voice and agency entrapped within the larger than life myth of her depiction as Virangana. This thesis, therefore, has tried to broaden the scope of the Virangana metaphor, rendering it more inclusive of intersectional identities.

While trying to locate the figure of the Virangana in the long traditions of dominant Indian mythology, culture and history, **Chapter Two** has tried to explore how the Virangana, as a heroic woman, has functioned as one of the most deployed female figures to refer to the Indian nation and its different kinds of nationalism. While exploring mythology in India, it has been noticed how the figure of the Mother goddess was once an assertive pre-Aryan formation but gradually evolved into a domesticated Brahmanical metaphor for the ideal woman. However, across changing socio-political landscapes, especially during the anti-colonial nationalist struggle, quintessential motherhood came to be stressed more than an archetypal *pativrata* in nationalist associations. Nevertheless, the nation, which is deified as the (Hindu) Mother, still coexists with erotic representations, thus creating a paradox in the portrayal of the gendered nation. Although physical female bodies are sexualised and commodified in the process, the grand narrative of the gendered nation is desexualised.

The chapter has explored how the Indian nation is deeply rooted in the Revolt of 1857. This pivotal historical event reflected anti-colonial nationalist sentiments, which marked the emergence of the idea of a united nation against colonial rule. However, gender stereotypes and sexuality were drastically influenced by Victorian British ideals. Unlike ancient traditions in India, the British colonial administration imposed Christian and Victorian binary standards of aggressive masculinity and passive femininity on Indian society. Thus, traditional Indian masculinity, which was nonetheless patriarchal but perhaps also accommodated fluid gender norms, was challenged by rigid Victorian ideals. Therefore, to challenge this, conventional ideas of masculinity were revived through figures like Virangana, an associate of Bharatmata, which embodied both masculinity and femininity. However, such fluidity was also founded on patriarchal and masculine nationalist limits. Within the Home/World dichotomy, the new Indian woman's roles were

redefined to accommodate modernity as well as patriarchal Indian traditions. Thus, the ideal (Hindu) Mother goddess, biological mother, Bharatmata and Virangana all emerged to be the paradoxical personification of power and warmth; she ventures into the World but returns to the familial Home.

Moreover, the hegemonic myths of the Indian nation are reproduced and sustained by narratives of the Viranganas, the latter usually representing historical heroic women. This discourse indubitably contains dominant and deviant voices, contesting erasures, silences, and suppressed and repressed narratives. These narratives have evolved on socio-political temporal variables, prompting questions about the figure of the Virangana and its complexities.

The thesis has acknowledged the popularity of Rani Lakshmibai as perhaps the prototypical Virangana in the hegemonic Indian nation. However, in **Chapter Three**, the nature of the Virangana status, which Lakshmibai has dominantly attained in history, culture and memory, is scrutinised. Archival and few historical records which state how Lakshmibai perhaps avoided the Revolt of 1857 problematises the very foundations on which the divine “Jhansi ki Rani” is built. Thus, its formation reveals patriarchal and caste Hindu nationalist discourse at play.

However, the primary women-authored texts which the chapter has examined also throw light on aspects which are perhaps more personal to the physical Lakshmibai than the symbolical one. The chapter has explored Lakshmibai’s military strategies, leadership skills both on and off the battlefield, her complicated relationships with King Gangadhar, who is her marital partner, her expressions of desire and sexuality, and her nuanced camaraderie with her female accompaniments. The different female friends Lakshmibai is depicted to have in the referred primary narratives are underlined. Such women are shown with characteristics of physical prowess and martial abilities, as well as military and political strategic capacities. Thus, these primary

narratives in the chapter elaborate the possibilities for similar contemporary women belonging to the subaltern, lower caste and lower class sections of society, those with deviant sexualities, and non-Hindu identities to also be considered Viranganas. Although these texts can be further problematised based on their retreat to the normative, the fact that these narratives do unsettle the jingoist, gendered heteropatriarchal nationalist grounds is noteworthy. Thus, the popular Virangana of the nation, who has dominantly been drawn as an epitome of the new Indian woman, can also be reclaimed as a subaltern feminist, postcolonial flesh-and-blood woman.

Chapter Four has explored the figure of the Muslim courtesan in the same context of anti-colonial nationalism and caste Hindu nationalism. The fictional narratives explored in this chapter highlight two marginalised historical courtesans who took part in the Revolt and were erased from the hegemonic discourse. These fictional narratives representing erased history attempt, to a certain extent, to relocate the courtesans in the socio-politico-historical context of the nation. The chapter has tried to look at the courtesans not only from the sole perspective of their military role in the Revolt but also in the light of their everyday politics. The conventional “fallen women” also exercise agency in their lifestyle, profession and passion. The courtesans, as the narratives reveal, are excellent artists as well as able businesswomen. The ways through which the courtesans reappropriate hegemonic stereotypes are also explored in the chapter. The courtesan’s political role is discussed and interrogated. Exploring Begum Hazrat Mahal’s character as portrayed in the narratives, the chapter has attempted to debunk the trope of the ideal warrior-mother Virangana. It posits how women, who may not necessarily engage in combat fighting but offer resistance in implicit ways, can also be considered Viranganas.

On the other hand, the chapter has examined another Muslim courtesan, Azizun Nisa, who participates in warfare actively, to the extent of being a ferocious and relentless fighter and is

considered “dangerous.” Her combat fighting, which the normative structure cannot domesticate, is deemed fearful and threatening. The chapter has tried to explore whether this “battle-crazy woman” can be considered a re-imagined Virangana. Moreover, the courtesans who are obliterated from history and misrepresented by different power structures at different points in time, are viewed vis-à-vis the primary historical fiction. The chapter has also attempted to examine whether such courtesans can be considered the epitome of female independence from a postcolonial, subaltern feminist perspective.

Chapter Five has re-evaluated another popular Virangana of Assam, Sati Joymoti. She has been represented in both written as well as oral narratives. It is challenging to wonder if the discourse of Joymoti has been made popular through history or collective memory. Joymoti, as a “figure of memory,” has come a long way from cursory references and footnotes to be used as a popular “Assamese national” icon, a Virangana, a *sati* and a *pativrata* deployed to enforce different kinds of nationalism at different points in time. Just like (Hindu) “Assamese national” symbols like Lachit Barphukan, revived recently on a grand scale for ulterior political intentions, Joymoti has also been in easy and constant use by the hegemonic structures to enforce a certain sense of nationalism in the collective memory of society.

However, these are caste Hindu, patriarchal nationalist constructs. Unlike Lakshmibai, Begum Hazrat Mahal, or Azizun Nisa Bai, Joymoti does not take arms nor uses her sexuality as a weapon. She comes across as an ideal woman of patriarchy: silent and forbearing. However, after exploring the primary texts, it may be argued that the virtues she exudes, attributed to her by society, can be seen as the same tools she uses to defy the same socio-political structures. Suffering silently, she turns the hegemonic discourse on its head. In the dominant narratives, she is not portrayed thus. This chapter has attempted to look at Joymoti’s narrative from a contrarian lens

and consider her a Virangana, albeit in an alternative, non-conformist sense. In an attempt to excavate Joymoti from the dominant “Assamese” memory, the chapter finds the Other subalterns: like the Naga queen Watlong and Dalimi. The chapter has further tried to examine them as reclaimed Viranganas.

It is interesting to note how memory narratives are dis-membered and re-membered selectively, thus forming, dis-forming and re-forming historical narratives. Moreover, the process of history writing is conventionally a male domain. The Virangana, as she is popularly known in India, lies within this male domain to reproduce narratives of patriarchy and the patriarchal nation. Moreover, metahistorical narratives constitute oral folklore and storytelling, an otherwise “female-centred popular tradition.” The privileged, educated male authors and publicists “[claim] historical veracity for their literary productions while concealing their appropriation” of this woman-dominant tradition (Sharma 224). Thus, men not only write women but also appropriate narratives by women to make them their own. To reiterate Walter Duval Penrose’s idea in this context, it thus becomes “a media of male ventriloquism” (16).

In the process of selecting the primary texts for this thesis, one noteworthy discovery was the prevalence of women-authored narratives. Therefore, this thesis has tried to focus on the significance of and the nuances involved in women writing women. As Helene Cixous notes:

“It is by writing, from and toward women, and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, that women will confirm women in a place other than that which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence. They shouldn’t be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem” (881).

Aligning with Cixous' philosophy, this study also sets out on the belief that by writing about other women, women writers tend to rewrite history and challenge hegemonic domains, like the gendered nation, in the context of this study. Through primary texts, this study has noted how the selected women writers refer to different female characters, historical and fictional, as retellings of the dominant narrative, thus challenging the paradigm of the Virangana as we know it.

However, questions which arise are: to what extent are the women writers considered in this thesis ideologically free and liberated from the heteropatriarchal, upper-caste, Hindu nationalist social constructs? Or do they fall back into the traps of these rigid structures? Perhaps they do, to some degree. It may be noted that all the women-authored narratives depict the redefined Virangana as only a "temporary transgressor" to evoke Annette Weber's term. According to Weber, even feminist icons such as "bloodthirsty deities, warrior queens, ancient goddesses and female fighters...the Homeric as well as the Dahomean Amazons" are usually portrayed as only temporarily transgressing the set boundaries of society (7). Thus, the Viranganas represented in the narratives question the normative only to be subsumed under the broader dominant socio-political structure. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan discusses the necessity to recognise the differences within the broader category of women. She says:

The challenge to and of feminist writing lies in negotiating women's identity defined in these terms ... women are classed, caste, and communal subjects ... at the same time, in the interests of a transformative politics, difference must be managed, if not transcended.

(1-16)

Thus, the women authors may have managed to maintain and not transcend the identity differences vis-à-vis their writings. However, even when these narratives marginally challenge hegemonic social norms, they adopt a postcolonial feminist perspective in their approach. And these narratives

need to be recognised for creating such ripples. Furthermore, the very act of women writing women in an otherwise heteropatriarchal socio-cultural and literary world can be itself seen as a protest narrative, one that reiterates the subaltern woman's voice time and again.

Another significant aspect this thesis has managed to encounter is the dichotomy of the "public"/ "private." As has been discussed in the thesis, these demarcated gendered spaces, which are also correlatively used as the Home and the World, limit the woman's position in society. The hegemonic Virangana is a metaphor for the new Indian woman who is, however, not expected to transcend the dichotomous spaces. The primary texts examined in this study have, sometimes marginally and sometimes dominantly, explored the Virangana's participation in both "public" and "private" spaces. In the process, one may argue that perhaps these narratives have managed to look at the figures of the claimed Viranganas from a feminist perspective for politicising the "private" spheres of the symbolic women, thus attempting to flesh out the corporeal women from the hegemonic constructs.

However, this thesis proposes to problematise the very dichotomy of the "private"/ "public." Birgitte Bargetz, in her article "The Politics of the Everyday: A Feminist Revision of the Public/Private Frame" (2009), argues against this dichotomy in particular and says that a dichotomous relation is founded on power relations. From "androcentric and Eurocentric assumptions," the hierarchy of the "private" and the "public" celebrates the latter and denigrates the former. Women, especially black women and women of colour, fail to be included in the superior sphere of the Eurocentric space of the "public." Bargetz further states that although feminists dissent against these power relations and inherent gender oppression, even the politicisation of the "private" perhaps does so still adhering to the normative power binary. Thus, Bargetz advocates for the usage of the "everyday" instead and hence, explores its problematics (2,

5)¹. The everyday consists of issues which are, to borrow Michael E. Gardiner's term, "polydimensional" (6). The everyday breaks away from the dominant power relations inherent in a dichotomy. Thus, the everyday is perhaps more liberal and subversive, especially for the doubly marginalised women discussed in the thesis.

Following Bargetz's framework of argument, this thesis reevaluates the narratives on the Virangana constituting her within the everyday. Thus, the Virangana's life incorporates the multifaceted issues of her participation in all spaces: in the home, the court, the all-men's assembly, the *kotha*, the *zenana*, or on the battlefield. This thesis has attempted to dismantle the hyperboles of the gendered incarnate of the nation and the different kinds of nationalism she is associated with. Furthermore, the thesis has tried to reclaim the Virangana as an everyday woman and for the everyday choices she makes in her life.

The next aspect which this study has stumbled upon and then explored is female solidarity amongst women and the all-female spaces they temporarily occupy in the societies portrayed in the narratives. In a quest to explore the alternate Viranganas, this study came across references to many more women directly or indirectly responsible for the making of the dominantly known Virangana. The chapters have intensively explored the relations between such women like the Durgavasis in Michelle Moran's *Rebel Queen*, Chandraki and Lakshmibai in Moupia Basu's *The Queen's Last Salute*, Hazrat Mahal and Mumtaz in Kenize Mourad's *In the City of Gold and Silver*, Azizun and Adila in Tripurari Sharma's *San Sattavan Ka Kissa: Azizun Nisa*, Joymoti and Seuti in Jyoti Prasad Agarawala's *Joymoti*, to name a few. Apart from these, the small groups of women constituting the courtesans, widows, *sakhis*, *ligiris* and so forth are also common depictions in the texts. This thesis has tried to explore the nuanced relationships these women share. The Viranganas explored here seem to create all-female spaces, albeit temporary, as utopias nestled in an otherwise

hegemonic society. They occupy and share such transient spaces while bathing with each other (discussed in Chapter One) or while spending their afternoons leisurely in the backyards of their homes, talking, laughing, killing lice off each other's heads and weaving talismans for their husbands (discussed in Chapter Five), for instance. These shared tasks, from the Western, neo-imperial capitalist and patriarchal perspectives, would be perceived as unproductive, wherein the idea of productivity rests on a patriarchal and capitalist base. However, this thesis has attempted to refute this dominant construct by stressing the relations and the camaraderie the women share during these spatio-temporal utopias.

As discussed in Chapter Three, Luce Irigaray's feminist idea of an all-female utopia proposes maintaining all forms of transactions only between women "for free enjoyment, well-being without suffering, pleasure without possession" (106, 113). This study has portrayed a community of women who seem to actualize Irigaray's idea of solidarity among themselves. In a society championing gendered concepts of nation, nationalism and capitalism, these women, marginalised at many levels, become "goods" of transactions between men. This study has examined how in such situations, the community of women depicted in the chosen texts help each other survive. They support each other (Mumtaz looking after Hazrat Mahal's son while the latter attends to political matters of the state), they work together to make a living (the courtesans and the Durgavasis running all-female institutions), they warn each other of looming dangers (the *ligiri* warning Joymoti of the lascivious men in the assembly), they protect each other from troubles (Seuti safeguarding Joymoti from the Saufa's men) and so forth. It is noteworthy that these transient utopias the community of women create perhaps transcend heteronormativity, which is reflected in the nuanced homoeroticism of a few of the relationships discussed in the chapters.

One may note that these all-female spaces and places the narratives portray are perhaps shown as alternate realms to the normative society. Similar to Irigaray, Simone de Beauvoir also talks of such realms as “distinct alternatives to the patriarchal world” (567). However, Cath Stowers, in her article “‘No Legitimate Place, No Land, No Fatherland’: Communities of Women in the Fictions of Robert and Winterson” (2016), argues that no space or place created is entirely a transcendental realm (69). Following Stowers’ argument, the all-female realms discussed in this thesis cannot be seen as closed compartments because these women are socio-politico-historical subjects and are not suspended in time and space. The deviant women who transcended the thresholds entirely are either killed or deemed “bad” or “mad” in their representations. Thus, to survive in the hegemonic society, the alternate spaces the band of women create for themselves are rendered temporary and fluid.

In this context, Stowers further suggests that “to escape man’s urge to colonise and annihilate, woman ‘must conserve some space for herself’, ‘a sort of no man’s land’” (3). However, these spaces do not need to be established on an alternate plane. Stowers argues that “we need not...abandon the real world to enter imaginary ones, for it is out of the first that the second are always coming” (77). Nonetheless, the female spaces are necessary, and the fact that the chosen narratives portray them, even implicitly, is commendable and radical in their approach.

This thesis has attempted a discursive study of the historical, cultural and memory representations of the popular Virangana figure in India. It has, in the process, problematised the popular representations and its politics and tried to weave out a reclaimed and a re-imagined Virangana, who is located not in the hegemonic constructs of the Hindu nation and sub-nationalist anxieties but in the everyday. This study has perhaps kindled certain pertinent questions about one of the most overused gendered metaphors for sustaining and reproducing the nation. However, due

to paucity of time and space, it could not incorporate several other silent, under-represented and misrepresented Viranganas from different parts of India like Karnataka's Kittur Chennamma and Onake Obavva, Nagaland's Rani Gaidinliu, Chutia kingdom's Sati Sadhani and the lower-caste Santi Radhika from Assam, and the Assamese Muslim Sati Rahima, to name a few. Thus, there is ample scope for further research on this subject which can explore more such alternate and re-imagined Viranganas of India and the politics of their silences, erasures or misrepresentations.

In the process of legitimising memory and history as dominant narratives in the Indian nation, perhaps when nothing else seems plausible, the nation's colonised past is used as the most comfortable symbolic refuge. As bearers of the rather heavy, turbulent, and often contesting history and tradition, the figure of the Virangana is recurrently chosen in a dominant god-fearing Hindu nation. Although dominantly, the Virangana has been produced and reproduced across different spatio-temporal contexts, the figure has not undergone essential alterations. The Virangana changes but remains a palimpsest, which, when searched for, is still fundamentally found amidst anti-colonial Hindu nationalism. This thesis has tried to unsettle the palimpsest and re-examine it, challenging its foundational politics. The study has not denied the powerful Virangana but reclaimed her and re-imagined her in various everyday forms. Thus, to reiterate Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak's idea about the subaltern dissenting woman, the reclaimed Virangana this study talks about is "at once a palimpsest and a contradiction" (388).

Note

¹ Theorists like Michel de Certeau, Agnes Heller, Antonio Gramsci, Dorothy Smith and Henri Lefebvre have rigorously discussed the everyday and its politics.



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